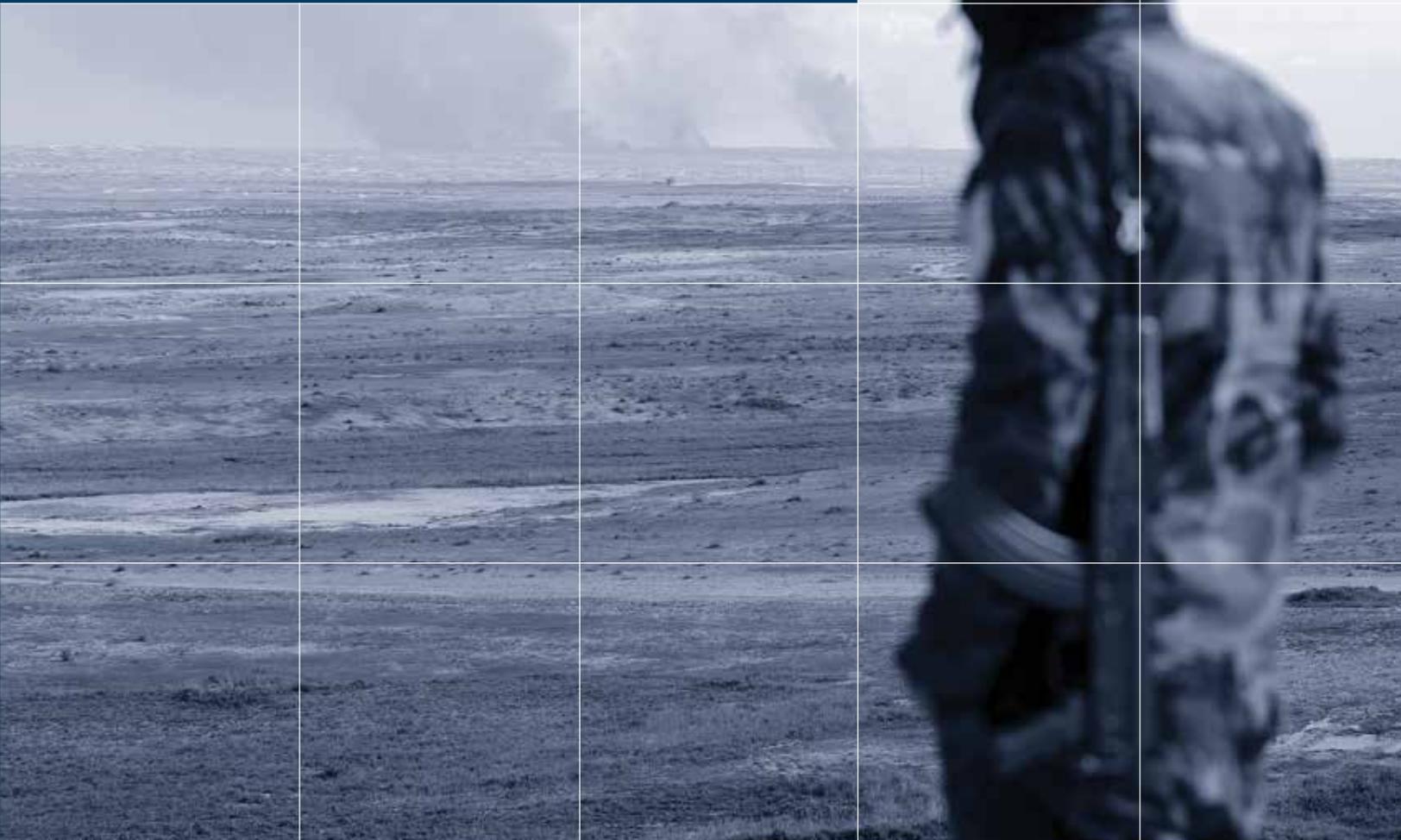




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THE SUNNI PREDICAMENT IN IRAQ

Renad Mansour

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About the Author

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Summary

In Iraq, the self-declared Islamic State's occupation of territory has lasted longer than most analysts and officials initially predicted. The solution, according to many Western policymakers, is to empower Iraq's Sunnis to reengage with the central government—akin to the Sunni Awakening that flushed the Islamic State's predecessor, al-Qaeda in Iraq, out of the same areas. Understanding why, as of 2016, such a strategy is not working requires a nuanced look at the internal and external dynamics of the far-from-monolithic Iraqi Sunni community.

Understanding Iraqi Sunni Estrangement

- Prime Minister Haider al-Abadi has not convinced many Iraqi Sunnis that he can offer something different from his predecessor, Nouri al-Maliki, whose policies contributed to Sunni estrangement from the state and the political process.
- Iraqi Sunnis are disillusioned by the monopolization of power by a few Shia elite and the impunity of perceived sectarian Shia militias that are part of the Popular Mobilization Forces (PMF).
- Some Iraqi Sunnis support the Islamic State and more remain indifferent. For example, a large portion of Mosul's population appears supportive of or indifferent about the group.
- There is no united authority, cause, or identity driving the Sunni movement, which makes it difficult for Iraqi Sunnis to engage with the state and adapt to changing circumstances.
- Further disrupting the community's cohesion are internal political differences (such as over whether to work with Abadi) and ideological disagreements (such as about whether to mobilize as a Sunni party or front).
- Following Mosul's 2014 fall to the Islamic State, much of the Sunni leadership has shifted course and seeks greater local autonomy.

Policy Implications for the United States and Like-Minded Allies

Military force alone cannot defeat the Islamic State. Those who remain supportive of or indifferent to the group need to be convinced that Baghdad is their legitimate representative. Power-sharing guarantees, more local autonomy and paramilitaries under a national guard, limited amnesty tied to peaceful reintegration, and efforts to rein in militias would help.

Knowing who to talk to is crucial. A new generation of political, tribal, and religious leaders has a stronger claim to speak for the Iraqi Sunni population. Continuing to work with the old guard or actors with minimal legitimacy will prolong disengagement.

Choosing partners is a sensitive task. Supporting law-abiding forces while condemning those accused of violations—including with regard to the PMF—will help outside actors reclaim legitimacy.

Strengthening independent commissions will prevent individual leaders from overcentralizing power. De-politicizing the judiciary, bolstering the electoral commission, and better reining in de-Baathification will help the government build trust with Iraq's Sunnis.

Introduction

For two years, the self-proclaimed Islamic State has been governing parts of Iraq where the central government has lost all autonomy. According to various estimates, some 25 percent of Iraq's Sunni Arabs remain supportive of the Islamic State.¹ In Mosul, the country's second-largest city, a majority of the population appears to support the Islamic State or to express indifference about the subject.²

Initially, many analysts thought that the Salafi-jihadi group would be ejected almost as quickly as it entered Iraq's cities and towns; very few imagined that the Islamic State would still be entrenched and that it would continue to enjoy some measure of support. Today many have come to believe that the Islamic State will last, in the words of parliamentary speaker Salim al-Jabouri, a "long time."

Few analysts have been able to provide a satisfactory explanation for the initial misjudgment. To grasp the persistence and potential longevity of the Islamic State in Iraq requires a deeper understanding of the problems of representation and governance that Iraq's Sunni Arab community has faced in the post-Saddam Hussein period and continues to face today.

In a survey in 2015, only 13 percent of Iraq's Sunni Arab population believed that their central government in Baghdad was heading in the right direction.³ But this unsurprising response is not solely a consequence of oppression by the Shia-dominated central government or solely the result of Sunni disengagement from the state and political process. Both processes are intertwined and have had an effect. Moreover, it is the absence of strong institutions for representation—political parties or consistent leadership—combined with an intra-Sunni conflict that created the crisis of representation in the community and consequently facilitated the emergence of the Islamic State.

These problems stem back to at least 2003, when the United States and its allies restructured the system of governance in Iraq. The democratization process was marked by the emergence of identity politics, which grouped the population along sectarian lines.⁴ Success was contingent on representing a sect or ethnicity rather than ideological belief or any other issue-based marker. As Sabhan Mulla Chiad, a former acting governor of Saladin, put it, "Communist leaders were told they were now Sunni leaders."⁵

Under these new realities, the Kurds and the Shia have been quick and effective in politically mobilizing: the Kurds have *qawmiyya*, a strong sense of

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ethno-nationalism driving a secessionist movement under which 95 percent of the constituents demand secession from Iraq, and the Shia have a *marjaiya*, a central religious establishment, driven by a sense of *muthloomiya*, or oppression, that had waited a long time to politically mobilize inside the country.⁶ However, Iraq's Sunni Arab minority, making up some 20 percent of the population, went overnight from rulers to ruled. Unlike their Shia or Kurd rivals, they were neither prepared nor willing to play sectarian politics. Many of them denied the new realities and watched as their communities lost power and privileges.

As a result, the Sunni Arabs in Iraq face a problem of political trust and representation. Their predicament is a product of both inter- and intra-community contestations. Externally, they do not trust the Shia-driven and Kurd-accommodated central government and do not believe that Baghdad represents their interests or welfare. In terms of military power, for instance, they often question why the Shia are allowed to have state-sanctioned paramilitaries, in the form of the Popular Mobilization Forces (al-Hashd al-Shaabi or PMF), and the Kurds are allowed to have the state-sanctioned peshmerga forces, but the state denies Sunni tribal requests for funding and weapons. Internally, various leaders claiming to speak on behalf of the same Sunni Arab population are

The Sunni Arabs in Iraq face a problem of political trust and representation. Their predicament is a product of both inter- and intra-community contestations.

often at odds with each other and with other social actors, namely tribal leaders (sheikhs), clerics, and businesspeople. They lack a reliable political party that can mobilize their interests in the political process.

To better understand the Sunni Arab community's perceived challenges, it is helpful to separately assess the intercommunity contestations (those in relation to the central government) and those that are intracom-

munity (internal power disputes), and to analyze the leadership's new mobilization efforts to overcome the current disengagement. The latter includes an examination of the standpoints on issues such as federalism, executive power and power sharing, the role of the judiciary, parliamentary bylaws, paramilitary actors, and amnesty laws, among other key issues. The analysis is based on individual and group interviews and meetings with the community's leadership and citizens. The nature of the research question necessarily required interpreting the current elites' perceptions of various issues. The way the representatives framed their answers was just as important as the accuracy of their answers. The aim of this approach is to acquire a deep, interpretive understanding—what the twentieth-century German sociologist, philosopher, and political economist Max Weber would call *Verstehen*—of how Sunni Arab leaders perceived their problems and mobilization strategies in post-2003 Iraq. In some cases, interviewees requested anonymity.

The focus is exclusively on the Sunni Arabs in Iraq in an attempt to understand why, in 2016, international governments and the media believe that eliminating the Islamic State requires “arming the Sunnis” or “empowering

the Sunnis,” and yet they cannot isolate the legitimate leaders who represent the so-called Sunnis or identify the problems and demands of this community that is often misunderstood and far from monolithic.

Cycles of Engagement and Disengagement

Post-2003 Sunni Disengagement

Since 2003, the Sunni Arab leadership and population have gone through cycles of engaging and disengaging with the central government, to the detriment of its standing, while the Shia in particular and the Kurds have participated more fully and reaped the benefits.⁷

The main era of engagement, under this pattern, was the so-called *Abna al-Iraq* (Sons of Iraq) or *al-Sahwah al-Sunniyah* (the Sunni Awakening) from late 2007 to 2010. In the Awakening, Sunni tribes and communities, with the backing of the United States and its allies, fought off al-Qaeda in Iraq, which had filled a power vacuum caused by the central government's retreat during the civil war. Tribal sheikhs and religious clerics mobilized their constituents to give up their resistance, disassociate from al-Qaeda, and participate with the central government in the political process.

This was marked by military success that drove al-Qaeda in Iraq into obscurity and electoral success that facilitated victories in the 2009 provincial elections and the 2010 national parliamentary elections. In 2010, the Sunni Arabs' preferred Iraqiya coalition (which has since been dissolved), headed by secularist Ayad Allawi, won the most parliamentary seats, with 91, and defeated the incumbent Nouri al-Maliki's State of Law Coalition, which obtained 89 seats. For the first time after 2003, the Sunni choice was mandated to become prime minister. It was a clear indication of the merits of engaging with the central government and a precedent signifying that political success is possible even for minority populations.

Yet, more often, the Sunni leadership has pursued a policy of disengagement, under which it loses trust in the central government and resorts to alternative or extralegal sources of representation. Disengagement from the central government leads to political and security vacuums, which facilitate the emergence of Salafi-jihadi groups like the Islamic State and its various prior manifestations, such as al-Qaeda.

The initial era of disengagement came immediately after 2003, when a stunned Sunni Arab community rejected the U.S.-led regime change that brought the Shia and Kurds to power in Baghdad. Part of the leadership was barred from political involvement because of allegations of links to the former regime's Baath Party. Other representatives pursued a policy of boycott. Harith al-Dhari, who headed the Association of Muslim Scholars (*Hayat al-Ulema*

al-Muslimin), wanted to emerge as the Sunni leader; in a fatwa, he called for a “national insurgency” and a rejection of the U.S.-led state-building process.

Many Sunni leaders felt compelled to follow Dhari’s fatwa and boycott the political process. This meant that they did not participate in the constitution-drafting process and as such had minimal say in Iraq’s new preeminent and supreme law. Moreover, in 2005, the Sunnis did not participate in two votes, one for parliamentary seats and one to ratify the constitution. In the Sunni-majority Anbar Province, for instance, voter turnout was a paltry 2 percent. This was in sharp contrast to the activism of the Shia community, which was compelled to follow Grand Ayatollah Ali al-Sistani’s ruling that it was a “duty” to participate in the process, and by the Kurd community, which viewed the parliamentary election and constitution ratification vote through the prism of independence. A member of parliament who was on the constitution-drafting committee and requested anonymity told the author, “I tried to help the Sunnis, but the Shia and the Kurds were too strong.”⁸ As a result, the Sunnis were not proportionally represented in either the Iraqi constitution or the transitional national assembly; by opting to sit on the sidelines, they had very little say in the foundations of the new Iraqi state.

From this, then, the blame for the Sunni Arab predicament and the cycles of disengagement in Iraq cannot be placed solely on the Shia-dominated post-2003 central government. Sunni Arab representatives have made strategic choices

and fallen into traps that exacerbate their weakened position in the new Iraq. Many of the leaders who emerged with the chance to represent the Sunni Iraqi community after 2003, and who were not crippled by de-Baathification, were not keen on participation—a fundamental part of representation.

Not only did the Sunnis lack a clear leadership structure but, more critically, they also lacked the necessary sectarian-based identity for successful political

mobilization in post-2003 Iraq. They rejected the newfound *dawlat al-mukawanat* (state of components), and many refused to publicly use the word “Sunni” or “component.” The Kurds and the Shia had fewer problems referring to themselves along sect-centric lines. Whereas they were able to use Kurdish or Shia symbols or myths to mobilize their masses, the Sunni leaders neither had nor wanted to resort to such tactics.⁹ In an identity-based political system, therefore, they fell at the behest of their counterparts, who acquired legitimacy through sectarianism.

The blame for the Sunni Arab predicament and the cycles of disengagement in Iraq cannot be placed solely on the Shia-dominated post-2003 central government.

Maliki’s Second Term (2010–2014) and Sunni Repression

Today’s era of disengagement has enabled the Islamic State to persevere. It is in part a consequence of the failures stemming from Maliki’s second term as

prime minister in 2010, when he lost the election to the Sunni-favored Allawi but managed to remain in power. More critically, he embarked on an overcentralization campaign that silenced his opponents and caused a crisis of representation. During these years, much of the Sunni leadership was sidelined or exiled to the Kurdistan region or abroad or imprisoned. As a result, Sunni Iraqi citizens lost all trust and hope in engaging with the political process. Chiad asserted that because of this, in Iraq, “We do not have a representative state. We do not even have a state.”¹⁰

Paranoid after almost losing his premiership, Maliki wanted to weaken his opponents, especially those who claimed to represent the Sunnis. His first priority was to delegitimize Allawi, who had won the election in part with the Sunni vote. He persuaded Allawi to opt for an imaginary executive position as the head of a national security council, but he never followed through with the plan. In effect, he made Allawi look weak and naive. Then, Maliki delegitimized Saleh al-Mutlaq, an Iraqiya representative of the Sunnis. Maliki invited him to become deputy prime minister, but throughout this tenure, he made the Sunni leader appear weak and unable to stand up to the prime minister.

Paranoid after almost losing his premiership, Maliki wanted to weaken his opponents, especially those who claimed to represent the Sunnis.

At times he even suspended Mutlaq. This was part of a strategy to divide and rule the Sunni leadership: Maliki enticed opponents with government positions and money so that he could bring them under his rule to expose them as subordinate.¹¹ Very quickly, as a result, Iraqiya split into various streams, jeopardizing Allawi’s leadership and destroying the unity that he had built.

Maliki also began legally targeting senior Sunni representatives through his personal influence in the judiciary. In December 2011, he issued an arrest warrant for then vice president Tariq al-Hashimi, who was forced to flee a death sentence. In a similar offensive, Maliki organized a SWAT-style raid of then finance minister Rafi al-Issawi’s home, forcing yet another senior Sunni representative to resign. In 2015, Issawi was sentenced in absentia to seven years in prison. Although this technically occurred during the premiership of Maliki’s successor, Haider al-Abadi, Maliki continues to exert his influence in the judiciary and aggravate the crisis of representation. Today neither Issawi nor Hashimi is in Iraq, and the disgraced former officials find it difficult to regain legitimacy as their people’s representatives.

Early in 2011, a protest movement (al-Harak al-Shaabi) emerged in the Sunni areas with some connection to the Arab Spring that was engulfing the wider Middle East. Sunni Iraqi activists, aggrieved because their leadership was being targeted, wanted better representation in Baghdad. In Iraq, however, the Arab Spring was violently quashed. Maliki deployed the Iraqi Security Forces to oppress the activists. More critically, he labeled them as “terrorists” or “insurgents” linked to al-Qaeda.¹² Many were suspected of terrorism and sent to unknown interrogation centers in Baghdad’s Green Zone, where

Maliki's own son, Ahmed, oversaw the imprisonment and torture campaigns.¹³ Repressing the protest movement exacerbated the crisis of representation that was growing on the Sunni streets.

The centralization campaign also included nullifying the parliament, which is the only institution that can directly voice the concerns of citizens through elected members. A Sunni activist explained to the author that in eight years, Maliki appeared in parliament for questioning only once. During that one instance, moreover, it was Maliki who was asking the questions.¹⁴ Things are no better in that regard under Maliki's successor, Abadi, even though he comes from a parliamentary background. The Sunni representatives are convinced that executive decisions in Iraq are made not by the representative chamber but rather by the National Iraqi Alliance, an electoral list that consists of the major Shia political actors, including the governing Dawa Party.¹⁵

Maliki also targeted the independent institutions and as such further alienated the Sunni Arab population. For instance, in April 2012, he incarcerated the head of the Independent High Electoral Commission, Faraj al-Haidari, for alleged corruption charges. After that, Maliki was able to exert substantial influence on the institution, which is responsible for general elections, including vetting and disqualifying candidates closely tied to the Baath Party. Many Sunni Arabs complain that their representatives are unjustly targeted through this de-Baathification campaign. They believe that the government uses fake "Baath" labels to affect election results. In 2010, for example, eleven seats won by Sunnis were disregarded because of alleged Baathist links. De-Baathification policies hamper Sunni representation and further weaken trust in the central government. Sheikh Mounir Hashim Obeidi, a religious leader well-known for organizing the antigovernment protests during Maliki's second term, posited, "Until there is no more de-Baathification, there will be no reconciliation."¹⁶

The issue of proportional representation begins at elections. Here, too, the Sunni community feels as if election results run contrary to demographic realities. For example, during the 2014 national elections, many Sunni leaders claimed that Sunnis (through the Diyala Is Our Identity coalition and parts of the al-Wataniya coalition) received only about 35 percent of the vote. Yet, they believe that Sunnis make up 70 percent of the governorate's population.¹⁷ Although it is difficult to ascertain the exact demographic figures in any province, leaders from Nineveh and Saladin gave similar accounts of misrepresentation where election results did not correlate with perceived demographic realities.

Sunnis also feel slighted in efforts to legally change governing districts from governorates (provinces) to autonomous regions. Authority to make such a change rests with the Independent High Electoral Commission, but thus far the only region in Iraq is the Kurdish Regional Government, which was granted this status after 2003. Many Sunni leaders recall that Maliki rejected Diyala's attempt to administer a referendum and to begin the legal proceedings to become a region. Not only did he unlawfully reject the bid, in their view, but

he also deployed his forces to the province and established martial law.¹⁸ Today, Sunni Arab representatives are beginning to demand the right to form a region but fear that Baghdad will simply quash the bid.

This perceived lopsidedness between demographics and proportional representation extends to the security sector. A former general in the Iraqi army said that 70 percent of officers are Shia, even though, according to him, they make up less than 60 percent of the population. The general, himself a Sunni, feared that since the emergence of the Islamic State, even fewer Sunnis are being promoted to the rank of general. But a sheikh from Saladin complained to the author that “even a Baath would not have said that the military should be more Sunni.”¹⁹ Although the defense minister, a ground force commander, and a general inspector in the Ministry of Defense are all Sunni Arabs, the perception nonetheless remains that the ministry is Shia-heavy. More critically, the perception is that Sunnis in higher positions are merely figureheads without significant influence. In addition, governorates often complain that their endorsements for officers and generals to the central government are ignored, resulting in an unequal distribution in the Ministry of Defense. The Sunni leadership perceives the situation in the intelligence service to be even worse. According to a Sunni activist from Mosul, there is not one Sunni member.²⁰ Although the accuracy of such numbers is questionable, these types of statements indicate the way in which Iraq’s Sunni Arab community perceives the reality of power sharing.

Many Sunnis believe that these policies instigated Sunni Arab oppression (*muthloomiya*) and caused today’s disengagement, which is based on a lack of trust in the Shia-dominated central government. In just a few years, Maliki undid all the gains that were accomplished during the Sunni Awakening. This overcentralization partly facilitated the perfect storm for the Islamic State to rise from obscurity and seize control of Mosul and other provinces.

The Abadi Regime: No Sign of Sunni Reengagement

Distrust of the Shia-dominated central government in Baghdad and fear of Tehran’s influence in Iraq have kept Sunni Arabs from attempting to combat the Islamic State, even though Sunni Arab leaders remain staunchly against the group. They wonder what the use is of spilling blood in battle if ultimately the Shia will come and take over. This zero-sum mentality plagues initiatives to liberate lands under Islamic State occupation.

It was when Mosul fell to the Islamic State in the summer of 2014 that Maliki’s power and legitimacy was questioned and ultimately crumbled. A parliamentary investigation faulted him, along with dozens of other officials, for the city’s inability to withstand the assault by Islamic State militants. Widespread corruption, including in the country security forces, during Maliki’s reign was thought to have contributed to Mosul’s capture with little resistance.²¹ Maliki was forced to step down and hand the premiership to Haider al-Abadi. Despite

hailing from the same Dawa Party, Abadi very quickly positioned himself as a reformer and part of an anti-Maliki camp in the party. The new prime minister pledged to combat the Islamic State and reengage with the disenfranchised Sunni population. He wanted to move past the phase of Sunni disengagement from the central government that had characterized the preceding four years.

But Abadi's reform efforts have failed to placate Sunnis. After one year of Abadi's rule, the share of Sunnis who think that his government is more inclusive than Maliki's rule dropped from 50 percent in December 2014 to 36 percent in August-September 2015. Moreover, 58 percent of Sunnis believe that they are unfairly represented in Abadi's government.²²

Post-Mosul, the Sunni Arab community continues to face problems in its relationship with the central government. As noted, Sunni leader Saleh al-Mutlaq was enticed to take a high-level position in the regime, as deputy prime minister. But when speaking about the level of his power, Mutlaq conceded, "It is not like we write the bylaws."²³ Under Abadi, then, the perception is that the executive continues to overlook the Sunni voice—even when Sunni representatives are part of the government.

The Sunni Arab community continues to face problems in its relationship with the central government.

Also after Mosul, the emergence of the Popular Mobilization Forces, funded and legitimized by the state, hampers Sunni trust in Abadi's government and decreases the possibility of reengagement. The PMF was established by Maliki and is regarded by Sunnis as made up of Shia militias. To the Sunnis, many of the militias are sectarian agents of Iran. In 2014, Amnesty International, in a report entitled *Absolute Impunity: Militia Rule in Iraq*, drew attention to various crimes attributed to groups under the PMF umbrella.²⁴ In various meetings, the Sunni leadership referred to this report as a justification for its standpoint on the PMF. Similarly, in January 2016, Human Rights Watch released a report claiming that "mostly Shia militias fighting ISIS [the Islamic State], such as [the] Badr Brigades, League of the Righteous, or Imam Ali Battalions, carried out widespread and systematic violations of human rights and international humanitarian law."²⁵

Tribal sheikhs often complain that their homes and properties are being attacked by the PMF because of alleged connections with the pre-2003 regime. Sunni Arab representatives fear that these militias will commit sectarian-driven violence in their areas. After the liberation of Tikrit, for instance, stories emerged of so-called revenge killings. The head of the Saladin Provincial Council, Ahmed al-Karim, said that the Shia fighters continued to loot and burn buildings in the city.²⁶ Similarly, in January 2016, allegations were made that members of the PMF burned Sunni mosques and assaulted Sunni citizens in Muqdadiya, Diyala. Then, after the attacks, stories emerged claiming that the PMF was refusing the parliamentary speaker, Salim al-Jabouri, entrance into Muqdadiya, his hometown.²⁷ Videos that were circulated on social media from this period show

forces insulting and killing unarmed Sunnis. In reaction, Sunni lawmakers and ministers boycotted parliament and government sessions.²⁸

Despite the incident in Muqdadia, a few days later, Hadi al-Amiri, the commander of the Badr Organization (which is closely tied to Iran) and a senior PMF figure, promoted the police chief of Diyala to major general,²⁹ a move that worsened the gulf in trust. Sunni representatives question why Amiri, a paramilitary leader, even has the authority to promote police chiefs. Moreover, they question Abadi's allocation of \$1 billion to Shia militias while the Sunni governorates and forces still struggle to obtain money and weapons.³⁰

They also view Abadi's legitimization of the PMF as troubling. To confirm his recognition of the PMF, Abadi told the United Nations General Assembly in September 2015 that the group is part of the official state.³¹ In response, another local Sunni cleric, speaking on the condition of anonymity, invoked the Islamic State's massacre of more than 1,500 unarmed air force cadets at Camp Speicher in Tikrit in June 2014: "Why are Sunnis terrorists but Shia not? The Shia are committing crimes worse than Speicher!"³² Many Sunnis are convinced that several of the paramilitary groups, such as Asaib Ahl al-Haq, will never give up their arms and will continue to fight, driven by a pan-Shia and anti-Sunni ideology.

Linked to this, Iran's presence and influence in post-Mosul Iraq has become more blatant. On a television program, a presenter pleaded with former Nineveh governor Athil al-Nujaifi to allow the PMF to "at least end" the Islamic State. His reply: "I think all bad comes from Iran."³³ Nujaifi, in other words, is not willing to go on the offensive against the Islamic State if that in any way appears to empower Tehran.

Qassem Suleimani, the commander of the Quds Force, the special forces of Iran's Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps, has been sighted on battlegrounds in Iraqi cities since the downfall of Mosul. In a strange change of course—in the past, he was a mysterious figure in the shadows—Suleimani is even posing for photographs in post-Mosul Iraq. The appearance of an Iranian agent as the top commander in Iraq worries the Sunni Arab community. Moreover, Hadi al-Amiri has become the top military commander in Iraq. That, too, is a source of concern to Sunni Arabs, who recall that Amiri fought against Iraq during the Iran-Iraq War (1980–1988). Iran's influence is strongest in the Ministry of Interior, where Amiri's Badr Organization (the biggest group under the PMF) enjoys almost exclusive power.

Another factor in the post-Mosul environment inhibiting reengagement is the weakness of Abadi as prime minister and conversely the persistence of Maliki as an authority. Maliki continues to hold considerable power, as a senior leader of the Dawa Party and creator of the PMF. He remains close to various militias, such as Asaib Ahl al-Haq, and to Tehran. The former prime minister, for instance, continues to exert influence via the judiciary and to use corruption files as a political tool. Akin to Maliki's policies of targeting opponents

via legal sentencing, in December 2015, the judiciary sentenced former finance minister and Sunni Arab leader Rafi al-Issawi to seven years in prison, causing widespread criticism in his constituency. Many also believe that the prison system continues to unequally incarcerate Sunni Arabs under Abadi. According to an Iraqi Sunni legal expert, who requested anonymity, many prisons in Iraq are illegal because they are administered by the Ministry of Interior rather than the Ministry of Justice, which is mandated by the constitution to oversee prisons.³⁴ In a closed meeting with tribal leaders, a sheikh from the Obeidi tribe noted: “I traveled to five prisons, and I’d say 90 percent of the prisoners are Sunni.” Although there was a change at the top, many Sunni Arabs remain convinced that the power centers in Baghdad did not change.

Also emerging from the post-Mosul environment as a concern is the condition and potential return of internally displaced persons (IDPs). Sunni Arab leaders have begun making allegations that politicians and the PMF are stopping families from returning to their homes following liberations. For instance, Liqaa Wardi, a member of parliament, accused political parties of preventing the return of families to Saladin.³⁵ The issue of returning IDPs has become a principal grievance on the part of the Sunni community.

Finally, the tendency to link Sunnis with the Islamic State continues to be a major struggle for the community and one that contributes to inhibiting reengagement with the central government. To some extent, since Mosul, de-Baathification has now extended to include “de-ISification.” Sunnis fear that the central government will use allegations of connections to the Islamic State to persecute opponents, without due process—just as Maliki did as prime minister—and without amnesty. While Sunnis, as noted, oppose the Islamic State, one would be hard-pressed to find a tribe that has not had members affiliated with the organization.

Intra-Sunni Wrangling

Missing Unity and Political Parties

The Iraqi Sunnis’ predicament of being estranged in their own country is not solely the consequence of the central government’s overcentralization and oppression. Unlike their Shia and Kurd counterparts, who were better able to adapt to changing circumstances, for Sunni Arabs, the lack of a unifying central authority or cause or identity to drive the movement has aggravated internal conflict. Despite general references in the mainstream media to the “Sunnis,” as an all-encompassing group, the community in actuality consists of a plethora of representatives with very different goals even as they claim to speak on behalf of the same constituency.

Yet, internal cohesion is possible, and in fact it has served as a necessary component during times of reengagement. For example, when Allawi's Iraqiya coalition ran as a single bloc in 2010, it represented a united Sunni front and even had accommodation from the tribes, a combination that was successful in gaining the most seats in the elections.

In today's disengagement, however, internal cohesion has again fallen apart and led to multiple actors all claiming to represent the same constituency. For instance, in the 2014 parliamentary elections, 25 electoral blocs participated in the ballot for Anbar's 15 seats. Almost all of these blocs made the claim to speak on behalf of the same Sunni constituency, which represents the majority in the province. Similarly, the Islamist movement has expanded to include not only Dhari's Association of Muslim Scholars, but also the Council of Iraqi Scholars (Majlis Ulama al-Iraq) and the Fiqh Council of Iraq (al-Majma al Faqahi al-Iraqi). The latter two groups have some link to the Iraqi Islamic Party, an offshoot of the Muslim Brotherhood. Nonetheless, this raises the question of why so many different groups emerged to claim representation over the same constituency.

Since Mosul, there have been multiple efforts by the Iraqi Sunni leadership to bring various Sunni political leaders together in conferences to find common ground and produce a united front. Conferences have been held in Baghdad, Erbil, Amman, Doha, Beirut, and elsewhere in the region. However, disagreements continue to hamper the establishment of a united front. In a conference in Baghdad, most strikingly, a disagreement drove participants to throw chairs at each other.

Besides unity, the Sunnis lack political parties, an important institutional mechanism to achieve greater representation. Unlike their Kurd or Shia counterparts, who benefit from party functions (recruiting candidates, mobilizing support, and so on) through long-established political parties, the Sunnis have only the Iraqi Islamic Party. Although it, too, is long established, it existed in obscurity for many years. It reemerged as a key actor during the anti-Maliki protest movement (al-Harak al-Shaabi) that swept the Sunni regions of Iraq beginning in 2011. However, today, individuals hailing from the party are stronger than the party itself. As such, the Islamic Party remains elusive and struggles to make claims to legitimately speak on behalf of the Sunni population. Without any strong and enduring political parties, the Sunni community is at a disadvantage. During each election cycle, new parties and coalitions emerge making the claim to speak on behalf of Sunnis—but they lack the institutional memory or legacies needed to advance. In the absence of unity or formal political parties, representation is confined to the ad hoc individual initiatives of certain leaders.

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Who Represents Iraq's Sunnis Today?

Abadi's government (at the executive level) proudly boasts that it includes Sunni representatives. For instance, Minister of Defense Khalid al-Obeidi has become a prominent face in the government's fight against the Islamic State and has a good working relationship with Abadi. Qasim al-Fahdawi, the former governor of Anbar, holds some sway as minister of electricity. Because the appointment of Sunni Arab leaders in the executive branch are still widely perceived to be symbolic gestures, however, they continue to face difficulty emerging as strong leaders with a substantial constituency.

A new guard of leaders has emerged that is making claims to speak on behalf of the Sunni constituency.

Many of the old guard, such as former vice president Tariq al-Hashimi and former finance minister Rafi al-Issawi, are no longer effective representatives.

Some of these former leaders have been forced to live in exile. Others have been discredited for past failures. Nonetheless, a new guard of leaders has emerged that is making claims to speak on behalf of the Sunni constituency.

A small number of leaders are making such claims in the parliament. Salim al-Jabouri is one of the most active representatives today. As speaker of the parliament, he has developed a reputation for being a collected leader and representative of the younger generation with considerable support in parliament. More critically, he enjoys good relations with Abadi. Jabouri has ties to the Islamic Party, which he claims remains the only official Sunni political party in Iraq.

In parliament, several blocs have emerged. Tahaluf al-Quaa (the Alliance of Power) is a parliamentary bloc consisting of outspoken members such as Jabouri and Dhafir al-Ani. Another parliamentary bloc is al-Hal (the Solution), which is led in parliament by Mohammed al-Karbouli.

Outside of governmental institutions, Osama al-Nujaifi, who is no longer vice president because of Abadi's reform package, has been trying to bring the Sunnis together under his leadership. Nujaifi led the largest Sunni electoral bloc, al-Muttahidoon, during the 2014 parliamentary elections and obtained 23 seats. The Islamic Party participated in this bloc. Although the coalition has since fallen apart, with Jabouri and the Islamic Party siding closer with the government, Osama al-Nujaifi and his brother Athil, the former Nineveh governor, remain influential personalities attempting to represent the Iraqi Sunni constituency. For instance, in November 2015, Osama convened a conference in Amman and in a rare sign of success announced a negotiated settlement in the form of a High Coordination Committee.³⁶ The council included several members of parliament and senior Sunni officials. The celebration, however, was short-lived. Almost immediately, various tribal leaders came out against the new committee claiming that it did not represent the tribes.³⁷ Then, political actors, such as the parliamentary al-Hal bloc, joined in and claimed that the committee was not legitimate and had "sectarian" members.³⁸ On the

peripheries, leaders include, for example, Mudhar Shawkat, who heads the National Salvation Front. His activities, however, are not widely covered, and some in the Sunni leadership claim that his support base is mainly external.

Based in Erbil, Athil al-Nujaifi, too, has become active in bringing together Sunni leaders and fighters for a post-Islamic State Mosul. He told the author that the idea of a national guard (al-Haras al-Watani), to be made up of tribal forces, is not a new one and that he is planning on mobilizing regional armies to defend Nineveh from the Islamic State. All he is looking for is regional support, which is coming mainly from Turkey.³⁹ As such, Osama and Athil al-Nujaifi remain strong actors claiming to represent the Sunnis. They are supported by wealthy businessmen such as Khamis al-Khanjar and academics such as Yahya al-Kubaisi.

Ayad Allawi continues to represent the secularist movement. After his inability to form a government in 2010, Allawi changed the name of the group from *Iraqiya* to the National Coalition (*Italaf al-Watani*) and won 21 seats in the 2014 election (a far cry from his 91-seat victory as leader of *Iraqiya*). Allawi is criticized, however, for his failures at the hands of Maliki, who had made him appear weak by accepting the imaginary appointment as the head of a national security council. Nonetheless, his group of both Sunni and Shia lawmakers remains staunchly secular and resistant to sect-based mobilization.

Some representatives have emerged at the provincial level. Among them is Suhaib al-Rawi, the governor of Anbar Province, who has become active in the fight against the Islamic State. He technically hails from the Islamic Party and enjoys a strong relationship with Abadi. In Saladin Province, former governor Raed al-Jabouri emerged as a potential leader and was courted by Abadi into becoming a minister—for a post that was then removed as part of the reforms.

Islamists also remain influential. Although not the force it once was, the Association of Muslim Scholars benefits from support. Its founding father, Harith al-Dhari, died in 2015, and the group is now run by Harith's son, Muthanna al-Dhari. Its ideology remains Salafi. There is a split in the association, with Muthanna's cousin, Jamal al-Dhari, asserting that he represents the group. His claim, however, is contested by others in the association. The Council of Iraqi Scholars and the Fiqh Council of Iraq, as mentioned, have emerged to represent the Sunnis based on an Islamist mandate. Both of these groups share good relations with the Islamic Party. The Council of Iraqi Scholars, for example, claims that it tends to side with the Islamic Party on parliamentary matters.⁴⁰

Remnants of the former Baath Party are still active. Today, the party is divided along two strands. The first group includes supporters of Izzat Ibrahim al-Douri, formerly vice chairman of Saddam's Iraqi Revolutionary Command Council, and the Naqshbandi order, a Sufi sect of Sunni Islam prominent in northern Iraq. The second group is led by Mohammed Younis al-Ahmed, who leads al-Awda, an underground Baath movement inside Iraq. Both groups,

which have shared relations with the Islamic State, are wanted by the central government and as such operate via clandestine networks.

Finally, moving away from the political element, a vast number of tribal leaders remain influential in Iraqi society. Each political leader comes from a tribe and at times is at the behest of sheikhs. However, inter- and intra-tribal conflict remains a problematic reality in Iraq, prohibiting the emergence of a united confederation of tribes that can speak with a pan-tribal Sunni voice.

Persuading all political, tribal, and religious blocs to work together on a united Sunni position in Iraq is proving to be a tall order. With neither a central authority nor a strong political party system, representation of the Sunnis is not institutional but contingent on individuals, who swap back and forth between committees and coalition blocs as they see fit.

To Engage or Not Engage With Baghdad

Numerous internal disputes persist in keeping Iraq's Sunni Arabs divided. The single biggest internal dispute revolves around whether to engage or disengage with the central government. In Diyala and Saladin, for example, the governors have decided that it is best to work with the Abadi administration—an approach that leaders in Anbar reject. Parliamentary speaker Salim al-Jabouri has also decided to work with Abadi, for which he has drawn criticism.⁴¹ In a similar sense, many complain that the Islamic Party, which was once the leader of the 2011 protest movement, is now an ally of the Abadi government. From the standpoint of rejectionist Sunni Arab leaders, working with the government signifies a weak and corrupt leader. Some believe that the central govern-

ment in Baghdad is in fact a negative force working to divide and conquer the Sunni community and suggest that the international community is needed to help push Sunnis for unity.⁴²

A Sunni Arab leader who engages with the central government risks losing face if the outcome fails, as was the case with Ayad Allawi and Saleh al-Mutlaq. Similarly, against the advice of many Sunni leaders

who warned against trusting Baghdad, Ahmed Abdullah al-Jubouri, the popular governor of Saladin, agreed to become a minister in the Abadi cabinet. Less than a year later, Abadi abolished Jubouri's position as part of the government reform package. Many used the opportunity to call Jubouri naive for having accepted a position with the administration in the first place.

Indeed, any sign of favoritism, whether through power or money, that is bestowed on Sunni leaders by the state often turns out to be to the detriment of the recipients, who lose wide-scale support and are subsequently tainted as illegitimate, if not corrupt. Some argue that "representation by post" (*tamtheel bil mansib*)—that is, the granting of legitimacy and elite status to certain leaders by the government through post rather than by the people or party leadership

A Sunni Arab leader who engages with the central government risks losing face if the outcome fails.

through voting—is inherently inappropriate and exacerbates intertribal conflict. For instance, the Sunni Awakening was led by Ahmed Abu Risha from the Albu Risha tribe. The state provided the tribe with money, weapons, and land to successfully fight off al-Qaeda in Iraq. Today, the Albu Risha tribe has lost its legitimacy as a leader among the tribes. Critics say it never should have been anointed because the tribe is so small. In a roundtable discussion, most of the Sunni leaders agreed that the tribe has no more than 2,000 members, compared with upward of 6 million members in the Jabour tribe or 3 million in the Shammar and 3 million in the Dulaim tribes.⁴³ In deciding to back Abu Risha—a move supported by the United States—the state had critically overlooked the extent of the tribe’s legitimacy. Complaints today include that Risha used the money to build thirteen villas and that half the tribe is now associated with the Islamic State.⁴⁴ The general opinion, therefore, is that leaders from the original Sunni Awakening have no legitimacy and should not be considered for another Awakening in the wake of the Islamic State.

Money figures into the delegitimization of individuals as well as tribes. Tribal leaders who financially (and politically) benefited from Maliki’s regime are known as al-Malikiyen. One activist characterized the practice as Maliki paying off sheikhs with a *daftar* (the equivalent of \$10,000) in exchange for political support. Today, from the perspective of rivals, many of these sheikhs have lost their legitimacy for having sold out. In effect, anyone associated with the former regime or who has benefited financially from the government has a tarnished reputation.

Other Points of Disputes

Who speaks for Sunni Arabs and whether to engage with the central government are not the only internal disputes in the Sunni Arab community. At least four other recurrent disputes contribute to the splits in the community and hamper unity.

The first internal dispute has to do with the question of identity politics and whether political mobilization should operate along sectarian lines, that is, representing Sunnis, or whether it should operate along national lines. Although the Sunni community was late to the identity-politics game because it was initially unable and unwilling to mobilize based on sect, some leaders have changed their opinions since the downfall of Mosul.

Today, Islamists, for example, are increasingly using Sunni-centric discourse and symbols to make claims to representation. They view their problems as the consequence of pan-Shiism stemming from Iran, and as such they call for a Sunni response. Some of them have even expressed interest in the idea of a Sunni region. This idea is backed by other nationalist figures such as Mudhar Shawkat, who spoke of the idea of a Sunni Regional Government akin to the Kurdistan Regional Government.⁴⁵ However, some secularists continue to despise resorting to sectarianism. For example, an Iraqiya member of

parliament complained on several occasions about the organization of a workshop based solely on “Sunni representation.” Using sectarian categorizations, she said, only complicates the problems in Iraq. A secular Sunni member of parliament observed, “This is how the U.S. wanted it . . . divisions based on social components of society.”⁴⁶ He, like many other secularists, complained about the new sectarian splits that were militarized in post-2003 Iraq and the emergence of identity politics. These two schools do not see eye to eye and continue to clash over how to collectively mobilize. Sectarianism constitutes one of the most frequent internal Sunni disputes.

A second dispute is over de-Baathification. Although the effort to purge the influence of the former ruling party is perceived to be largely part of the government’s attempt to eliminate their representatives, the Sunnis are also divided on the issue. As discussed, the Baath Party is still to some extent active. However, it resorts to violence and has had links with the Islamic State. For many Sunni leaders, these “sectarian” members have no place in their political movements. They do not wish to include the Baath voice. Yet, increasingly, other leaders argue that the Baathists should be part of the dialogue because they are Iraqi citizens who are being singled out by a perceived sectarian-driven central government.⁴⁷

A third dispute is over the role of external actors. Leaders often criticize others for their relationship with a foreign power. For instance, one emerging dispute surrounds the role of the United States in eliminating the Islamic State. Increasingly and due mainly to fears about Iran, some Iraqi Sunni leaders are beginning to advocate an increased American role. However, others remain adamant that cooperating with Washington—even on an issue they agree must be resolved—is still problematic.

Moreover, certain leaders are backed by regional actors and to some extent serve regional interests. This leads to further disputes and delegitimization attempts. For instance, some Sunni leaders criticize Osama and Athil al-Nujaifi for their close relations with the Turkish government. When Ankara’s troops entered Iraqi territory in December 2015 to counter threats from the Islamic State, the Nujaifi brothers were quick to defend the incursion. Athil, for example, argued that the central government had sanctioned the move. Salim al-Jabouri, however, condemned the act as a violation of Iraq’s sovereignty and criticized the Nujaifis for their response.⁴⁸ Many Sunni leaders remain wary of Turkey’s role in the country. The Islamic Party, which is traditionally closer to Qatar, has stood against Turkey. In addition, some Iraqi Sunni leaders accuse Jabouri of being too close to Iran. A sheikh from Tikrit told the author, “That is why he became speaker of the parliament . . . because he has strong relations with Iran.” In an effort to delegitimize rivals, Sunni Arab leaders accuse each other of loyalty to various external support networks rather than support from the ground. Therefore, the internal divisions are part of disagreements over each leader’s regional partnerships.

A fourth common dispute centers on the legitimacy of an exiled leader. As many Sunni Arab leaders have become IDPs, they risk losing popular support among their constituents, many of whom remain in conflict areas. In the game of exiled destinations, as prominent writer from Mosul Ghanim al-Abid explained, Erbil is considered more legitimate than Amman, which in turn is more legitimate than Ankara. As he put it, “If I don’t know you, how will the citizens know you?”⁴⁹ Internal Sunni Arab conversations are often constrained because of arguments over where a leader is based and how that affects his or her legitimacy. Members of parliament commonly point out that in contrast to exiled Sunni leaders, they at least are in Baghdad.⁵⁰ IDPs who come back, moreover, are often considered to be disloyal for having fled in the first place.

Internal Sunni divisions are part of disagreements over each leader’s regional partnerships.

The Tribes

Tribes in Iraq have enjoyed a long history of semi-independence, during which sheikhs have been governed by different considerations from the rest of the country, including the provision of weapons, money, and land.⁵¹ But that status has changed in recent years, and the loss of resources has created internal strife, including mistrust of the central government and even discontent with their own Sunni political representatives and questions about who actually is a tribal leader. The Islamic State, meanwhile, has inserted itself into tribal life, recruiting members to its organization, committing atrocities, and causing pro- and anti-Islamic State splits within tribal ranks.

The relationship between sheikhs and politicians is typically fraught with tension because, as social anthropologist Richard Tapper pointed out, tribal groups have historically been opponents of the state.⁵² In the past, however, empires tended to find greater success by working around the tribes than by attempting to control them.⁵³ In Iraq, that amounted to special treatment to the extent that many Iraqis perceived Saddam’s regime, for instance, as a tribal regime. “Everyone knows that the sheikhs have independence,” said Sheikh Ibrahim Nayef Mshhan al-Hardan, who is not only the tribal leader of the Albu Dhiyab and Albu Aitha clans but also an academic specializing in the tribes of Iraq, “The government knows this.”⁵⁴

During the Saddam Hussein era, for example, the Baath regime provided sheikhs with weapons, land, money, and power. This continued even after the overthrow of Saddam Hussein when, during an era of reengagement, U.S. General David Petraeus administered a policy of paying and arming the tribes as part of the Sunni Awakening. However, after the U.S. combat troop withdrawal from Iraq, and amid Maliki’s emergence as an authoritarian leader, many of these funding streams died out. This disruption of the resource distribution network impaired the semi-independence that sheikhs had enjoyed.

Today, with the central government ceasing to provide weapons, money, and land, tribal sheikhs have lost their trust in the government and feel isolated.

Internally, tribal sheikhs do not even trust Sunni political leaders, who show little respect for tribal accommodation. The sheikhs contend that the political leadership is corrupt and ineffective. To them, the so-called Sunni leaders in Baghdad fight each other for a post and a slice of the pie; worse, they do not use the tribal networks to redistribute the resources. For their part, many Sunni leaders would prefer not to provide tribute to the tribes for fear of empowering alternative actors. They recognize that tribes are everywhere in Iraq. But they also complain that the tribes do not tell them what they are doing.⁵⁵

In the immediate post-Saddam period, the institution of the tribe was seen in a negative light because of its relationship with the regime. At the same time, a crisis of legitimacy emerged after 2003 over who constituted an actual tribal leader. Many sheikhs who naturally held senior positions in the former regime's security or political apparatus were now considered enemies of the new state. As such, they were forced to flee their lands and thus their tribes. Settled in Erbil, Amman, or elsewhere for years, these leaders are losing legitimacy as new, younger leaders are emerging to fill the vacuum. Today, the older sheikhs accuse the young pretenders of being fake. For instance, some accuse Ali Hatem al-Suleiman, who emerged as a loud Anbari voice against Maliki, as not being a principal sheikh, as per the tribal code.⁵⁶

Similarly, since the Islamic State, also known by its Arabic acronym Daesh, has swept into power over large swaths of Iraq territory, a range of new actors is now purporting to be tribal leaders. The competing claims to legitimacy cause intra-tribal conflict over where the leadership of the various tribes rests. The Islamic State took advantage of the fact that Maliki's government did not adequately compensate the tribes and thus did not maintain tribal distribution networks. As such, it was able to infiltrate tribes by providing members with money, land, and weapons. The tribal leaders were unable to keep command of their tribes, as the Islamic State attracted tribesmen with better compensation. As a tribal adviser in Ramadi lamented, Daesh "presented better funding opportunities."⁵⁷

Affiliation with the Islamic State—whether real or implied—is also a way to delegitimize rival sheikhs. For example, Faris Mullah Chiad, a sheikh from the Janabeen tribe, claimed that "my house is not Daesh, but they say it is." To him, they are saying this in an attempt to delegitimize his tribe and his status as tribal leader.

Today, there is not one tribe that does not have or has not had members affiliated with or supportive of the Islamic State. Many tribes have been split into pro- and anti-Daesh memberships. Tribes affiliated with the Islamic State have committed offenses against opposition tribes. For instance, after the Islamic State takeover of Ramadi, tribal forces executed Sheikh Majid Ali al-Suleiman and twelve of his relatives, including a two-year-old girl.⁵⁸

Mobilization Efforts

Activities

Despite all of their disputes—with the central government, the Islamic State, and even each other—Sunni Arab leaders are mobilizing to pull their communities out of the current vacuum. Thinking ahead to its role in a post-Islamic State Iraq, the leadership seems confident that the group is a temporary phenomenon and that its constituents can once again move past this part of the cycle to reengage.

As noted, some parts of the leadership are pursuing this goal by working with the Abadi regime. Salim al-Jabouri, who has met with Abadi on a number of occasions, has issued calls for the Sunni community to work with the prime minister. Both he and Abadi have a parliamentarian background and as such value the rule of the legislature. Similarly, Iraq's minister of defense, Khalid al-Obeidi, is advocating security mobilization through working with the government. From his perspective, and that of Abadi, it is important that all paramilitary groups, including the national guard, when it takes form, be under the state's command and control.

On another front, Sunni Arab representatives are working to reassert their legitimacy and to use the parliament, as the official body of representation, to lobby and bring relief to their constituents. Members of the Tahaluf al-Qaaa (the Alliance of Power) parliamentary bloc, for example, submitted a list of seven demands in November 2015 that includes financial relief and support for the return of displaced Sunnis, the release of innocent political prisoners, the ethno-sectarian balancing of special government posts in the ministries, and an appeal to include Sunni tribal forces as part of the Popular Mobilization Forces.⁵⁹

Others Sunni Arab leaders are working with foreign capitals to seek support. In addition to Athil al-Nujaifi lobbying Ankara to build a military force that can combat the Islamic State in Mosul, Athil and Osama al-Nujaifi and prominent Sunni businessman Khamis al-Khanjar have been meeting with U.S. officials in an attempt to find support on the ground, perhaps even establishing a lobbying operation for Sunni Arabs in Washington. They are seeking to improve their community's external representation in strategic foreign capitals—especially Washington.

As for intra-Sunni conflicts, the leadership is active in organizing and attending conferences, inside and outside Iraq, to try to find solutions. In September 2015, for instance, a wide range of Sunni representatives from the parliament, the Islamists, and the Baath Party participated in a conference in Doha. The conference ultimately failed, however, due to internal disputes and Baghdad's objection to Baathist attendance.

Despite all of their disputes, Sunni Arab leaders are mobilizing to pull their communities out of the current vacuum.

What is missing, however, is an organized protest movement, in that the ability to mobilize in protest is an important function for reengagement. Although the Shia are demonstrating against their leaders in Baghdad and the Kurds are doing likewise in Erbil, the Sunni collective voice remains quiet—a far cry from 2011, when Sunni Arabs were actively protesting the Maliki government. Today they are protesting neither the central government nor their own fading leadership. When asked why al-Harak al-Shaabi is relatively quiet, most of its former activists pointed to bigger problems—fighting the Islamic State, defending against PMF atrocities, or addressing the displacement crisis.

Beyond political attempts for mobilization, the leadership is beginning to mobilize militarily, even when weapons and funding are in short supply. Part of this includes joining the Shia-dominated PMF. For instance, in October 2015, Abadi authorized the appointment of 40,000 Sunni fighters under the PMF umbrella.⁶⁰ Despite controversies over this number—many Sunni officials claim that it was closer to 16,000—there nonetheless is an element of Sunnis fighting side-by-side with Shia in the PMF.

Outside the PMF, various Sunni tribes are sending fighters to combat the Islamic State. Mohammed al-Karbouli, a member of parliament from Anbar Province, claims that some 2,200 fighters from the tribes in Anbar are fighting, even though they have not received funding or arms from the central government for some time.⁶¹ In January 2016, Athil al-Nujaifi announced the emergence of the National Mobilization (al-Hashd al-Watani), which he had been working on for some time with Turkish support, to fight for the liberation of Nineveh. The force includes some 6,000 fighters.⁶²

Finally, there is still an element of the Sunni population that remains adamantly anti-state. Those affiliated with the Islamic State continue to attack the government and government-sanctioned paramilitaries, such as the PMF or the peshmerga forces. The persona non grata Baathists, aligned with Douri or Younis, continue to call for a boycott of the state. As long as the Sunni community remains divided and the central government remains antagonistic, this group of actors will continue to exist.

Conclusion

In November 2015, the Obama administration admitted that its Sunni Awakening 2.0 strategy has gone more slowly than it had hoped. This came after more than a year of pleas to arm the Sunnis or empower the Sunnis after the Islamic State takeover of swaths of Iraqi land. The miscalculation was due to a fundamental misunderstanding of the diverse and divided Sunni Arab community in Iraq today.

For regional and international actors, the choice of who to engage with is a sensitive consideration that will affect any potential reengagement. Iraqi Sunnis view the Obama administration's decision to support Maliki's second

term, although he had lost the 2010 elections, for the sake of stability as problematic. Similarly, support for Abadi's recognition of the PMF has to be more nuanced—although there are paramilitary groups under the umbrella that are respectful of Iraqi law, there are also groups that international organizations like Human Rights Watch accuse of violations. To the Iraqi Sunni community, actors working with or alongside others who are committing offenses further worsens the crisis of trust.

There is no monolithic Sunni group. On the contrary, this so-called group consists of diverse political actors (with different ideologies), tribal sheikhs, religious clerics, and businesspeople. Any hope for reengagement, or a Sunni Awakening 2.0, is contingent on uniting these actors—akin to Iraqiya's unity in 2010. More critically, the Awakening should not depend on a one-size-fits-all model but should be specific to each governorate. After all, Nineveh, which is a Sunni province yet is very multiethnic and includes many religions, has completely different considerations than Anbar, which is more of a Sunni-dominated and homogeneous governorate. In addition, rather than an overreliance on the same old guard, there must be a better understanding of the legitimate actors on the ground who can make an effective claim to speak on behalf of a big portion of the population.

More important, it is necessary to understand the changing demands of this dynamic community. Post-Mosul, for instance, there has been a 180-degree turn on the issue of federalism. Many Sunni Arab representatives who used to call it the “gift of division” (*hadiat al-taqsim*) are now embracing the concept. One leader told the author, “I remember on one occasion in 2004, during the constitutional negotiations, I was the only one in the room who thought federalism was not a bad idea. But the idea then was a taboo.”⁶³ Many of these representatives now want to even legally change their provinces into regions—the debate is about whether such a region will be based on geography (that is, each province becomes a region) or identity (that is, a Sunni region is formed that could span existing provinces).

Difficult for the Sunni leadership, moreover, is convincing its constituents, who have little trust that they would be given immunity for any relationship with or expressed indifference at any rate to the Islamic State, to turn on the Islamic State and reengage in Iraq. A tribal leader explained to the author, “The problem is if we fight [the Islamic State], then they [the Iraqi government] will tell us later ‘you have killed so and so.’ We will not allow this.”⁶⁴ The fear is that reintegration could lead to prosecution by a politicized judiciary. As such, the leadership would benefit from some form of amnesty tied to peaceful reintegration, to move away from the crisis of trust and convince its constituents that the conditions for reengagement are ripe.

There is no monolithic Sunni group. On the contrary, this so-called group consists of diverse political actors, tribal sheikhs, religious clerics, and businesspeople.

Although Abadi's emergence as prime minister was initially celebrated as an end to Maliki's overcentralizing regime, the new prime minister has been unable to deliver satisfactory results. This is partly because the old centers of power, namely Maliki and other Iran-linked officials such as Hadi al-Amiri, remain active. As a result, support for Abadi among Sunni Arabs is dwindling—explaining the Obama administration's disappointment in the slow process of reengagement. Nothing short of real change in the central government and the emergence of a united leadership to represent the Sunni voice can help bring about another Sunni Awakening.

Notes

- 1 These figures are a rough amalgamation from various conversations with tribal leaders and activists, Erbil, November 2015.
- 2 This estimate is based on information from a diplomatic source that was corroborated by various tribal sources and activists from Mosul who were interviewed by the author.
- 3 Greenberg Quinlan Rosner Research, “Lack of Responsiveness Impacts Mood: August–September 2015 Survey Findings,” November 23, 2015, https://www.ndi.org/files/August%202015%20Survey_NDI%20Website.pdf.
- 4 See, for example, Ali Allawi, *The Occupation of Iraq: Winning the War, Losing the Peace* (London: Yale University Press, 2013).
- 5 Interview with Sabhan Mulla Chiad, Erbil, December 2015.
- 6 Fanar Haddad, *Sectarianism in Iraq: Antagonistic Visions of Unity* (London: Hurst Publishers, 2011).
- 7 See also Stephen Wicken, *Iraq’s Sunnis in Crisis*, Middle East Security Report 11 (Washington: Institute for the Study of War, 2013).
- 8 Interview with a former member of parliament, Beirut, January 2016.
- 9 Fanar Haddad, “A Sectarian Awakening: Reinventing Sunni Identity in Iraq After 2003,” Hudson Institute, August 4, 2014.
- 10 Interview with Sabhan Mulla Chiad, Erbil, December 2015.
- 11 Faleh A. Jabar, Renad Mansour, and Abir Khaddaj, *Maliki and the Rest: A Crisis Within a Crisis*, Iraq Crisis Report 2012 (London: Iraq Institute for Strategic Studies, June 2012), 9–11.
- 12 See for example: Priyanka Boghani, “In Their Own Words: Sunnis on Their Treatment in Maliki’s Iraq,” PBS *Frontline*, October 28, 2014, accessed February 11, 2016, <http://www.pbs.org/wgbh/frontline/article/in-their-own-words-sunnis-on-their-treatment-in-malikis-iraq/>.
- 13 Jabar et al., “Maliki and the Rest,” 13.
- 14 Interview with a former Iraqi MP, Erbil, November 2015.
- 15 Roundtable meeting with Sunni officials, Erbil, December 2014.
- 16 Interview with a member of the Islamic Party, Erbil, December 2014.
- 17 Roundtable meeting with Sunni officials, Beirut, January 2016.
- 18 Roundtable meeting with Sunni officials, Erbil, December 2014.
- 19 Interview with a tribal leader from Saladin, Erbil, November 2015.
- 20 Interview with an activist from Mosul, Erbil, November 2015.
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