

THE SUNNI PREDICAMENT IN IRAQ

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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.

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