**ANALYSIS**

**ISPI**

# THE END OF IRAQ. AGAIN?

Andrea Plebani

Eleven years after the toppling of the Saddam Hussein regime, the prospects of a "new Iraq" able to become a beacon of prosperity, stability and democracy for the whole Middle East crumbled under a series of centripetal and centrifugal forces that threaten the very idea of an Iraqi state. How did the country fall into the current spiral of violence and hatred? Who bears the responsibility? And, even more important, is the Iraqi polity doomed to fail or is it possible to reverse the course of history? If so, which are the measures the Iraqi leaders and the international system should implement to prevent the definitive sundering of Iraq?

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In 1933 Faysal ibn Husein, the scion of the Hashemite family that ascended to the Iraqi throne in 1921, described Iraq as "one of those countries that lack religious, communal, and cultural unity, and as such it is divided upon itself"[1]. The monarch, who would have died a few months later, went on delineating the fractures dividing Iraqi society and especially the nature and the origins of the gulf separating the Arab Sunni, the Arab Shia and the Kurdish communities. He then concluded with a statement that has been widely used by academics and decision-makers alike to substantiate the assumed artificiality, and inner unsustainability, of the Iraqi state: "in addition, there is the tribal mindset, plus the influence exercised by the sheikhs over the tribesmen, and the fear that [this influence] would wane in the face of enhanced governmental authority [...]. All these schisms, ambitions and particularism [...] undermine the peace and stability of the country, and only through material and judicious power could these dislocations disappear over time, and a true nationalism could replace religious and sectarian fanaticism [...] [But] in conclusion, and I say that with a heart full of sadness, there is in Iraq still no unified Iraqi nation. [Instead] there are various human groups, devoid of any patriotic idea, imbued with religious traditions and absurdities, connected by no common tie, giving ear to evil, prone to anarchy, and perpetually ready to rise against any government. Out of those masses we want to fashion a people which we would train, educate and refine. But because the creation and fashioning of a nation is such a difficult endeavour in these circumstances, the immenseness of the effort to achieve these goals can only be imagined"[2].

Eighty-one years later, the 'land of the two rivers' seems no closer to the objectives set by the first Iraqi king than it was in 1933. Eleven years after the toppling of the Saddam Hussein regime, the prospects of a 'new Iraq' able to rise from the ashes of one of the cruellest dictatorships history has ever known and to become a beacon of prosperity, stability and democracy for the whole Middle East crumbled under a series of centripetal and centrifugal forces that came to threaten the very idea of an Iraqi state. On the one hand, the militants fighting under the black banner of the self-proclaimed Caliph Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi have spread their influence and message of terror over most of north-eastern Syria and north-western Iraq, *de facto* succeeding in erasing the borders between the two countriesand in carving out a proto-state that both Abu Musab al-Zarqawi (the late founder and leader of *al-Qaʿida* in Iraq) and Ayman al-Zawahiri

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[1] A. DAWISHA, *Iraq. A political history from independence to occupation*, Princeton University Press, Princeton, New Jersey 2009, p. 75.
[2] Ibid.

(the current leader of *al-Qa'ida*) longed for years. On the other hand, the new Iraqi prime minister, Haider al-Abadi, has to cope with a legacy of polarization and hatred that risks tearing the country apart along sectarian lines. While al-Abadi succeeded in co-opting important Arab Sunni political and tribal leaders, the policies adopted by the previous administration increased popular mistrust towards democratic institutions and means, weakening Arab Sunni identification with the Iraqi state. A phenomenon that was unthinkable until a few years ago when Sunnis were proud to consider themselves the custodians of the Iraqi nation[3]. Particularly critical also are the relations between Baghdad and Erbil, whose pleas for greater autonomy and for the definition of disputed areas' status[4] were harshly condemned by the previous administration, which accused the Kurdistan Regional Government (KRG) of moving towards a masked independence. While relations improved with the appointment of the new cabinet, KRG leaders made it clear that a return to the *status quo ante* is simply out of discussion. With the fall of most of north-western Iraq into Da'ish[5] hands and the entrance of peshmerga forces into Kirkuk the equilibriums between Baghdad and Erbil changed significantly and Kurdistani leaders seem ready to hold the areas they secured with all the means at their disposal. Put simply, as KRG prime minister Nechirvan Barzani stated, there was "an Iraq before Mosul and an Iraq after Mosul"[6].

How is possible then that a country that only a couple of years ago was considered to be ready to stand on its own feet[7] suddenly fell into a spiral of violence and hatred that seems to increase day by day? Who bears the

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[3] See P. MARR, *Who are Iraq's new leaders? What do they want?*, USIP Special Report, n. 160, March 2006.

[4] The term refers to a series of territories claimed both by the Iraqi Federal Government and by the Kurdistan Regional Government. The Iraqi Constitution set a series of steps aimed at solving the status of these areas which are mainly located in the governatorates of Niniveh, Salahaddin, Diyala, Tamim and Wasit. After more than 9 years, these measures have not been implemented yet. See P. BARTU, *Wrestling with the integrity of a nation: the disputed internal boundaries in Iraq*, International Affairs, 86:6, 2010 and Sean Kane, *Iraq's disputed territories. A view of the political horizon and implications for U.S. policy*, United States Institute of Peace Peaceworks, 69, 2011.

[5] The term is used to indicate the Islamic State of Iraq and al-Sham, whose acronym in Arabic reads as daesh or da'ish.

[6] BBC, *Iraq conflict: Kurds 'will not help retake Mosul'*, 17 June 2014, http://www.bbc.com/news/world-middle-east-27883997.

[7] US president Barack Obama described Iraq in December 2011 as "not a perfect place [and as a country with] many challenges ahead. But […] sovereign, stable and self-reliant, with a representative government that was elected by its people". BBC, *Transcript: President Obama Iraq speech*, 15 December 2011, http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-us-canada-16191394.

responsibility for this failure? And, even more important, is the Iraqi polity doomed to fail or is it possible to reverse the course of history? If so, which are the measures the Iraqi leaders and the international system should implement to prevent the definitive sundering of a state whose very existence has been under constant threat since its foundation in 1921?

### The roots of the current instability

Iraq returned to the spotlight in June 2014, when Mosul fell into the hands of the troops of the so-called Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS) – the latest spawn of the Iraqi *al-Qaʻida* branch that in 2010 was considered by experts and officials alike to be in its death throes. In less than three days Daʻish forces (at that time estimated at a few thousand) succeeded in crushing four divisions of the Iraqi army tasked with the protection of the city and of the governorate of Niniveh. In this way, Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi, the leader of the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria, extended his grip over the second biggest city in Iraq (home to a population of around 1.5 million people), as well as on the more than $US 400 million stored in its banks, the huge military deposits abandoned by the army and on 49 Turkish citizens, including the Consul, his staff and their families[8]. All of a sudden, the international community rediscovered the importance of a state that after the 2011 withdrawal of US troops was *de facto* forgotten, except for its special relationship with Teheran and for its growing contribution to the global oil market. And, once again, this renewed interest followed a surge of violence able to match levels unseen at least since the end of the civil war in 2008.

While no one could have imagined Mosul would have fallen so easily into Daʻish hands, the Iraqi crisis was neither sudden nor impossible to foresee. With the completion of the US pull-out the frail equilibriums dominating the Iraqi polity began to crumble under the heightening pressure exerted by the worsening regional scenario and by the authoritarian and sectarian shift effected by former prime minister al-Maliki during his third term[9]. This latter element proved particularly critical, favouring the further polarization of the Iraqi socio-political system along sectarian lines.

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[8] A. PLEBANI, *The unfolding legacy of al-Qaʻida in Iraq*, in A. Plebani (ed.), *New (and old) patterns of jihadism: al-Qaʻida, the Islamic State and beyond*, ISPI, October 2014, p. 18.

[9] See T. DODGE, *State and society in Iraq ten years after regime change: the rise of a new authoritarianism*, International Affairs, vol. 89, no. 2, 2013 and A. PLEBANI, *Iraq towards 2014 elections: a socio-political perspective*, ISPI Analysis, no. 196, September 2013.

Baghdad-Erbil relations hit a new low and even intra-Shia dynamics worsened dramatically, as attested to by Muqtada al-Sadr's failed attempt to gain a no-confidence vote against the prime minister[10] as well as by the growing discontent shown by the *hawza* of Najaf towards the cabinet presided by Nuri al-Maliki. But it was on the (Arab) Sunni-Shia axis that the depth of the fractures pervading the Iraqi polity emerged in all their intensity. Fuelled by policies perceived as clearly discriminatory, by the marginalization of the *Iraqiyya* movement, as well as by a series of restrictive measures issued against key Arab-Sunni political leaders[11], huge waves of protests in 2013 hit growing swaths of central-western Iraq, paralyzing most of the Iraqi 'Arab Sunni heartland' for over a year. The iron-fist policy adopted by prime minister al-Maliki did not limit the escalation of the crisis and contributed to prompting a series of clashes that culminated in the April 2013 battle of Hawija[12]. It was the occasion Abu Musab al-Zarqawi's heirs had long been waiting for: building on the growing gulf between Baghdad and the Arab Sunni community, Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi succeeded in gradually re-establishing significant in-roads in the same Arab Sunni domains from which his predecessors were expelled a few years before[13] and in making an important come-back over an arc stretching from al-Anbar and Niniveh in the north-west, to Diyala in the east. The support Da'ish forces gave the insurgents that succeeded in expelling Iraqi security units from growing swaths of the al-Anbar governorate – Ramadi and Fallujah included – represented the first demonstration of such a realignment, even if the black flags widely associated with the movement led by al-Baghdadi had made their appearance even before, especially during the protests that swept most of central-western Iraq in 2013[14].

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[10] M. SULLIVAN, *Maliki's authoritarian regime*, Institute for the Study of War, Middle East Security Report, April 2013.

[11] A. PLEBANI, *Iraq towards 2014 elections*, op. cit.

[12] The crisis was the result of an operation led by the Iraqi security forces to evacuate a protestors camp accused of sheltering ISI affiliates. The clashes left over 50 people dead and spurred a new wave of violence that hit most of the Arab-Sunni majority parts of the country. International Crisis Group, "Make or Break: Iraq's Sunnis and the State", *Middle East Report*, no. 144, August 2013, http://www.crisisgroup.org/~/media/Files/Middle%20East%20North%20Africa/Iraq%20Syria%20Lebanon/Iraq/144-make-or-break-iraq-s-sunnis-and-the-state.pdf.

[13] A. PLEBANI, *The unfolding legacy of al-Qa'ida in Iraq*, op. cit.

[14] B. MCGURK, *Al-Qaeda's resurgence in Iraq: a threat to U.S. interests*, Testimony, House Foreign Affairs Committee, 5 February 2014, http://www.state.gov/p/nea/rls/rm/221274.htm.

But not all the blame can be put on Nuri al-Maliki alone. Iraqi institutions suffered since the beginning of the "post-Saddam era" from a lack of legitimacy and coherence rooted in an institution-building process that proved unable to respect the intricacies of the Iraqi system. While it is true that Washington and its allies recuperated Iraq from the spiral of violence and terror it fell into and that they left a country that at the end of 2011 could have been considered as moderately stable, the mistakes made especially during the first years of Operation Iraqi Freedom (OIF) produced consequences threatening to haunt Iraq for several years to come. The ill-conceived policies adopted by Ambassador Paul Bremer III during his tenure at the head of the Coalition Provisional Authority (the de-baathification process and disbandment of the army above all) are clear examples of such a *modus operandi*[15]. Equally wrong was the decision of the first Bush administration to dispatch to Iraq a number of troops considerably lower than what Gen. Eric Shinseki, former Chief of Staff of the US army, considered necessary to guarantee the success of the operation and  control of Iraqi territory[16]. A choice that allowed thousands of foreign fighters to illicitly cross unguarded Iraqi borders and contributed to diffusing a climate of widespread insecurity favouring the mushrooming of hundreds of militias over the whole country. But even the 2005 constitution, hailed as the symbol of the social pact uniting the multiple souls of the 'new Iraq', proved far from being a panacea for all Iraq's evils. Written under huge international pressures, marred by the absence of a fairly-representative 'Arab-Sunni' delegation, and drafted at a 'microwave oven's pace'[17], the document reflected all the flaws of a process rejected by a significant part of the Iraqi population[18]. Furthermore, despite its symbolic importance and the fact that it represented a step forward towards a much-longed-for normalization process, the constitution contained several obscure and often contradictory articles that contributed to generating further instability, as the endless debate over the definition of the status of the disputed areas,

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[15] See P. MARR, *The modern history of Iraq*, Boulder 2012, pp. 267-268.

[16] See P. GALBRAITH, *The end of Iraq,* New York, 2006, pp. 89-90, and L. DIAMOND, *Squandered victory. The American occupation and the bungled effort to bring democracy to Iraq*, New York, 2005, pp. 281- 287.

[17] I. AL-MARASHI, "Iraq Constitutional Debate", *Meria - The Middle East Review of International Affairs*, vol. IX, no. 3, 2005, pp. 1-2.

[18] The referendum held in October 2005 fell short of resulting in a rejection of the constitution. Of 18 provinces, only two (al-Anbar and Salahaddin, two overwhelmingly Arab Sunni majority governments) registered "no" votes greater than two-thirds – one province short of a veto. Diyala and Niniveh recorded "no" votes close to 50% of the preferences expressed.

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the relations between the federal government, the regions and the provinces, and the management and the allocation of the oil revenues demonstrated[19].

### From diagnosis to policy recommendations

Is Iraq then destined to be torn apart and IS to become a reality we will have to become accustomed to? No one can say. But the Iraqi people demonstrated in the past to have the capabilities and the will to reverse the course of events. In this framework, which are the priorities the Iraqi leadership and its international allies should focus on? The following is a list of actions that, while far from being exhaustive and adequately defined, aims to contribute to the formation of a stable and sustainable Iraqi polity through a long-term process that will require local commitment and adequate international backing for years to come.

### IS: from containment to eradication

Defeating IS will be neither easy nor fast. Iraqi forces are still recovering from the setbacks suffered in Niniveh and al-Anbar and continue to be widely perceived as Shia-dominated. This perception is further strengthened by their cooperation with several Shia militias not formally responding to the formal ISF command and control chain. As the battle of Amerli showed, these groups can represent an important asset in the fight against Da'ish forces, but they lack discipline and have already been accused of atrocities against enemies and civilians alike[20]. On the KRG side, peshmerga units proved their capabilities and valour on multiple occasions, but they cannot be asked to defeat al-Baghdadi's forces by themselves. The enlisting of Arab Sunni forces in National Guards units is meant to replicate the success *sahwa* councils obtained in their fight against *al-Qa'ida* forces, as well as to limit the deployment of several Shia-majority ISF units in areas deeply hostile to their presence, but their possible contribution should not be overestimated[21]. On the one hand IS is much stronger than AQI/ISI was at the height of the civil war; on the other,

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[19] See J. MORROW, *Weak viability. The Iraqi federal state and the constitutional amendment process*, United States Institute of Peace Special Report, no. 168, July 2006, http://www.usip.org/publications/weak-viability-iraqi-federal-state-and-constitutional-amendment-process.

[20] Amnesty International, *Absolute impunity: militia rule in Iraq*, October 2014, http://www.amnesty.org/en/library/asset/MDE14/015/2014/en/17cbb7ef-7ca4-4b5a-963e-661f256fddb0/mde140152014en.pdf.

[21] M. HABIB, "Why Iraq's new National Guard has nothing left to lose", *Niqash*, 25 September 2014, http://www.niqash.org/articles/?id=3546.

local Arab Sunni forces are much more fragmented and weak than in 2006-2008. Most of these actors also do not fully trust the federal government and then have few incentives in committing all their resources to a struggle that will pit them against fellow Arab Sunnis.

In this context, while international aerial support proved useful to breaking the momentum of the IS offensive, it cannot be considered the silver bullet able to eliminate the IS monster. That we like it or not, 'international boots on the ground' led by US forces are essential to defeat IS, both due to their military capabilities (that cannot be matched by ISF, peshmergas, Shia militias and national guards units) and due to the role they could play as mediators between the different interests and agendas of the various Iraqi members of the local anti-Da'ish coalition – an element that proved to be crucial to the success of the *sahwa* initiative in Iraq[22].

A new national dialogue and an effective reconciliation process

The fragmentation of the Iraqi polity has been one of the main drivers of the successes Da'ish forces obtained in the land of the two rivers. Inter- and intra-sectarian rivalries, al-Maliki's controversial policies and deep political infighting contributed enormously to the nightmare scenario Iraq has to cope with in this very moment. But these factors were also the result of an 'original sin' that affected post-2003 Iraq since its inception: the lack of a shared vision of the future and of a system ruled by dynamics accepted by all its actors. Without these conditions the Iraqi system will continue to be dominated by a zero-sum-game logic that will keep sowing the seeds of political exclusion, resentment and opposition. And, despite all the resources and the sacrifices that will be committed, 'new Islamic States' will emerge.

In order to break this self-fulfilling prophecy it will be fundamental to launch a debate over what Iraq wants to become and how it intends to manage the cleavages that pervade the country. A second national pact – after the one that took place in 2005 – has to be forged through a long-term process able to recognize and involve all the multiple souls of the Iraqi polity. This process will require years (and not a few months, as happened in 2005) but never as before do Iraqis need to believe in the possibility of building a country able to fulfil its huge potential and to

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[22] M. EISENSTADT, "Tribal Engagement: Lessons Learned", *Military Review*, September-October 2007.

respect the rights, the aspirations and the diversity of its citizens. It is of a new 'Iraqi dream' that the land of the two rivers is desperately in need of if we want to suffocate the fire that nurtures Da'ish aspirations. Otherwise the partition of Iraq that has for long haunted the future of the country will become a reality, albeit not in the soft version presented by its Iraqi and international supporters[23].

In the meantime, a true reconciliation process has to be launched, especially towards the Arab-Sunni community that has to be granted the opportunity to become part of a system it could believe in. While al-Abadi succeeded in obtaining the support of most of the Arab-Sunni political élite (whose members have been awarded important positions in state institutions), he needs to reach out to the bulk of the Arab-Sunni constituency, bridging the gap that came to separate it from state institutions. The creation of National Guard units goes in the right direction, but more needs to be done, especially concerning the redefinition of controversial policies perceived as clearly discriminatory (like the much-contested de-baathification process and anti-terrorism law), the re-engagement of insurgents willing to cooperate with state institutions and the allocation of significant resources to the areas most affected by recent instability. ISF too will have to undergo a significant reshuffling in order to return to being perceived as a symbol of unity and not as a sectarian army supporting one of the main socio-political groupings. While these measures will take long to be properly implemented it is fundamental to begin the process as soon as possible because, contrary to what several analysts and officials assume, time is not on our side. While it is true that the backing given IS by parts of the Arab Sunni community has to be read more as the result of widespread opposition to the al-Maliki government than as the consequence of shared long-term goals, Da'ish forces strengthen their hold on the ground day by day and have been able to dramatically alter the equilibriums of the local society, marginalizing traditional elites (who tended to espouse more secular and nationalist mindsets and whose incidence on the ground has been significantly hindered) and co-opting rural supporters lured by the opportunities the association with IS can bring.

Much has to be done also concerning Baghdad-Erbil relations. Disputed areas' status (Kirkuk *in primis*), allocation of national budgets,

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[23] See A. PLEBANI, *Iraq, Saudi Arabia and Kuwait: post-2003 challenges, opportunities and positions on the Iraqi federal architecture*, in A. Plebani – O. Al-Ubaydli (eds.), *GCC relations with post-war Iraq: a strategic perspective*, Gulf Research Center, October 2014.

coordination of security forces and management of hydrocarbon resources are all hot spots that need to be defined if Iraq is to remain united.

## Conclusion

While the fate of the Iraqi polity will ultimately be defined by its citizens, the battle they are fighting is not only their own. The international community has the duty to assist a people that lived for more than three decades in the midst of a spiral of endless violence and that is fighting against an enemy violating principles we declare to honour and protect. But it is not just a moral responsibility. Iraq, with all its huge human and economic potential, cannot be left in extremists' hands nor can it be allowed to become another failed state because it bears a symbolic, cultural, religious, geopolitical and economic weight that makes it unique in the Middle Eastern region: a victory or a defeat there will have huge implications for the region and for the whole international community. Furthermore, the presence of thousands of foreign fighters coming from Western countries represents a threat we will have to cope with and that makes Iraq (together with Syria) and Europe much closer than generally assumed. But Western support will never be sufficient unless the main regional players (Saudi Arabia, Turkey and Iran above all) decide to abandon the *divide et impera* and zero-sum-game approaches adopted till now. A *modus operandi* that has contributed enormously to the current crisis and that threatens, after Syria and Iraq, to involve their own borders. While no one expects them to set aside their differences and their competing agendas, the flames of war that are engulfing the Levant and Mesopotamia require a coordinated effort that can be realized only through the official and direct involvement of all of them.

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