

# NOREF Report

## Risk and violence in Iraq's new sectarian balance

David Gairdner

### Executive summary

In the wake of the violence that followed the 2003 invasion, Iraq appears to have achieved a modicum of stability. U.S. troops have withdrawn and, with the help of rising oil production, the state has financial resources and growing clout in the region. With a new constitution in place and with various parties competing for power in a federal system, it might be considered that the country is on its way to consolidating a democracy.

However, Iraq has been profoundly traumatised by its years of civil war. Sectarian parties now dominate the institutions of the state and the battle lines of politics, generating eruptions of targeted violence. Political equilibrium is likely to be achieved around a Shia-dominated central government, which may occur after the scheduled 2014 elections, but this is likely to come at the cost of constant tensions with local powers and the autonomous Kurdish north, exposing the country to the risk of political brinkmanship.

Far from resolving concerns over economic development and youth unemployment, oil wealth is reinforcing the drift towards enhanced central power, intensifying the stakes of political competition and extinguishing small-business growth. The losers include Iraqi youth, who formed part of the country's own "Arab Spring" – the "Days of Rage" in 2011. Social indicators are likely to remain stagnant as rampant corruption prevents Iraq from transforming its resource wealth into development outcomes for its citizens.

Iraq certainly appears set to re-emerge as a regional force and an international energy power. But sectarian tensions across the Syrian border, Kurdish unrest, and the evolving Shia-Sunni split across the region will fan the instability and divisiveness that currently stand at the heart of post-2003 Iraqi politics. The risks of a contested authoritarian drift or a further bout of conflict remain very real.

**David Gairdner** is a senior researcher with the Fafo Institute for Applied International Studies in Oslo.

This report is part of a series that analyses the future of the state. The series is coordinated and co-published by NOREF and the Conflict Research Unit of the Netherlands Institute of International Relations Clingendael, with support from the Ford Foundation.



### Acknowledgements

It is a pleasure to acknowledge comments received on early drafts of this report from Ginger Cruz, while Dr Riadh Al Allaf has provided guidance on Iraq for many years, patiently explaining the "reality on the ground". Axel Martin-Aronsson provided research on water issues.

## Introduction: Iraq's three statebuilding challenges

The U.S. left behind a gestational state when its last troops departed Iraq on December 18th 2011.<sup>1</sup> The characteristics of an emerging Iraqi nation, above all its internal political equilibrium and its place in the region, are still being defined after decades of violent conflict and international isolation, first under Ba'athist dictatorship, then foreign occupation from 2003 to 2011.

Three challenges stand out as defining efforts to consolidate an Iraqi state since the period of the British Mandate (Dawisha, 2009). These are the consolidation of the state and its governing institutions; the legitimisation of the state through the democratic process and the delivery of basic public goods and services; and the formation of a unifying national identity.<sup>2</sup> To these may be added the need for economic diversification to reduce dependence on oil and the integration of Iraq into an increasingly volatile Middle East region.

Pre-2003 Iraq was able to deliver the existential qualities of a state, providing central authority with the capacity to impose the rule of law, manage sub-state dynamics and economic activity, and deliver basic public goods and services, albeit with declining legitimacy and effectiveness over the Saddam period. Furthermore, ethno-sectarian boundaries were not the primary basis for organising state and society. Rather, Iraqis lived with multiple identifiers, subsumed within an over-arching nationalism, and diversity was supported by government policy, including a secular education system. Coexistence among neighbours is a condition that Iraqis remember and to which most still aspire.

1 The term "gestational" refers to a state that is under formation, where institutions are still being created, and the basic rules and agreements among political actors are being determined. The term is paraphrased from Zogby et al. (2011).

2 To be more precise, Iraq has ethnic Arabs that are both Sunni and Shia. Iraq's ethnic Kurds are both Sunni and Shia, but affiliation with different sects has not been as great a source of tension among Kurds as it has among Arabs. Other ethnic minorities, such as Iraqi Turkmen, have both Sunni and Shia communities. Sectarian divisions, therefore, run through and among Iraq's ethnically diverse populations. However, the report focuses mainly on the divisions among Arab Sunnis, Arab Shias, and the ethnic Kurds of both the Sunni and Shia faiths, as Iraq's main ethno-sectarian fault line. Other minorities are excluded and have been targeted for repression. However, they are too small in number to influence national political dynamics.

However, the Iraq of 2012 is a divided nation. There is de facto separation of the country's main communities (Sunni, Shia and Kurd), while other minorities are marginalised. In Arab Iraq, the post-2003 order has overturned the historical dominance of the Sunni minority and replaced it with government by the Shia majority. In the north the Kurdish region has never been fully integrated into Arab Iraq. The Kurds achieved de facto autonomy after the 1991 Gulf war. Their special status was recognised in Iraq's 2005 constitution and the Kurds are pushing for greater autonomy, using Iraq's federal arrangements and their oil revenues. Iraq's diverse ethnic and religious minorities (Christian sects, Jews and non-Abrahamic religions) made up only 5% of the population prior to 2003. Their numbers have been reduced dramatically, with many either internally displaced or pushed out of the country after being targeted for violence by extremist groups.<sup>3</sup>

The collapse of the Iraqi state in 2003 left a vacuum where previously there was uncontested authority. The vacuum was not only in political and security terms, but was also marked by the absence of a bridging identity to unify Iraq's ethno-sectarian groups. It has been filled by a different kind of state and society based on narrow ethno-sectarian identities and interests. Iraq's polity today is highly fragmented, with competing centres of power and no consensus on the rules of the political game. The political process is not oriented towards broad-based inclusion and the state struggles to deliver essential services. Improved security after 2008 was not followed by reconciliation.

Looking towards 2017, the key challenges facing Iraq's gestational state relate to reconciling ethno-sectarian divisions, building an inclusive polity and clarifying the division of power within its federal system. Within this process, Iraq must address the issue of its economic dependence

3 Iraq's Christian population is estimated at 400,000, down from 1.4 million in 2003. Many Christians fled to Syria, where they are currently again the target of sectarian violence. Some have been forced to return to a still-unstable Iraq to escape the conflict in Syria. The Turkmen population declined from 800,000 to approximately 200,000 in 2011, and Iraq's populations of Sabians, Yazidis, Shabaks and others have experienced similar declines. Most of Iraq's Jewish population fled during the 1948 conflict and have not returned.

on oil. Movement towards a more diversified economy and the deconcentration of economic power from the state to the private sector will have a significant impact on both future politics and the livelihood opportunities available to Iraqis.

After a long period of isolation, Iraq must also manage its reintegration into an increasingly volatile region, where external tensions mirror and reinforce the country's own internal divisions, notably in terms of competition between Sunnis and Shias, and the Kurds' place in the region. In particular, spillover from the Syrian conflict is an immediate threat. At the same time, Iraq's re-emergence as a regional power will require it to balance regional Shia-Sunni dynamics and learn to manage its status as a global energy power, and the political and economic influence that go with it. Achieving a regional water-sharing agreement with Iran, Turkey and Syria will be critical to resolving Iraq's growing environmental crisis.

## **Background: occupation, violence and Iraq's ethno-sectarian divide**

Iraq was already under stress by 2003, with limited capacity to cope with the security, political, economic and humanitarian consequences of the invasion. The country had experienced an extended period of decline, the result of the Iran-Iraq war (1980-88), the first Gulf war (1990-91), 13 years of isolation under UN sanctions (1990-2003), and poor governance and public resource use under the Saddam regime (1979-2003). As a result, Iraq's economy; productive, physical and social infrastructure; institutions of state; and public services have been significantly degraded and are insufficient to meet the demands of a growing population.

The Iraqi state collapsed in 2003 as the Ba'athist order was swept away by foreign military intervention. U.S. and coalition policy aimed to create a democratic, Western-friendly system enshrining political and civil rights. But this goal was undermined by debilitating mistakes made early on: not sending enough troops to secure the country, the absence of a nation-building doctrine

or transition plan, dissolving the Iraqi armed forces and purging the civil service of mid-level Ba'ath party members, among others (SIGIR, 2009).

State institutions ceased to deliver basic goods and services after senior management was dismissed, having already been weakened to breaking point under sanctions. Public security, health, water, sanitation and education services collapsed, as did the generation and distribution of electricity.<sup>4</sup> From being the arbiter of daily life, the state effectively disappeared. With collapse, few national institutions remained through which the U.S.-led Coalition Provisional Authority or other international entities could carry out early relief and reconstruction efforts.

Ethno-sectarian divisions were later institutionalised in the political structure of the post-2003 state. These divisions had not historically been central to organising the Iraqi state and society. However, Shias, Kurds and minority groups were gradually marginalised from power by Saddam and subjected to repression. In response, opposition to Saddam was organised along ethno-sectarian lines, although not exclusively. The Saddam-period trend was reinforced during the post-2003 transition process back to Iraqi self-government. Representation on the 25-member Iraqi Interim Governing Council (2003-04) was allocated along ethno-sectarian lines: 13 seats went to Shias, five to Kurds, five to Sunnis, and one each to Assyrian Christians and Turkmen.<sup>5</sup> This system of representation was created in the absence of functioning political parties: the core of several parties existed, but they were still largely exile movements in 2004.

<sup>4</sup> As one example, Iraq's electrical power system was already in crisis by 2003, the result of long-term degradation of infrastructure, conflict-related damage, looting, and the lack of institutional capacity and resources to maintain the grid. As of 2004 the grid was meeting approximately 25% of total national demand. The overall trend in the electrical power sector by 2102 is one of improvement, based on significant investments into the sector during recent years by government and, increasingly, the private sector. Nevertheless, production still met only about 40-50% of estimated demand in 2011, with real suppressed demand unknown. Power supply remains a significant constraint to Iraq's economic development, and a source of political sensitivity and social tension.

<sup>5</sup> The Iraqi Governing Council was the provisional government of Iraq from July 13th 2003 to June 1st 2004. It was established by and served under the Coalition Provisional Authority. It existed until the June 2004 transfer of sovereignty to the Iraqi Interim Government, which was replaced in May 2005 by the Iraqi Transitional Government and subsequently by the first elected government in January 2006.

The Interim Governing Council institutionalised a model for political organisation that is still in place. As yet, no single political party successfully represents Iraqis across the ethno-sectarian divide. Rather, a large number of identity-based parties and alliances drive the political process. Both voting patterns and party affiliation are fixed on sectarian lines: a voter with one sectarian affiliation is not likely to cross the divide and become the supporter of a party with a different sectarian base. These affiliations have become deeply rooted over time and are likely to remain in place for many years.

Meanwhile, violence escalated in the vacuum created by state collapse and the ineffectiveness of the occupation administration. Between 2005 and 2008 Iraq convulsed under the combination of national resistance to foreign military occupation, Sunnis' resistance to their loss of political power, sectarian violence and the presence of international irregular forces, broadly affiliated to al-Qaeda. Violence was fuelled by Iraq's neighbours, many of whom intervened in the country's internal conflict to suit their own interests. The sheer scale of the incidents between 2005 and 2008 often masked other underlying dynamics: the settling of political, tribal and personal scores; intra-sectarian fighting for power and resources; and growing criminal activity (Khazai & Cordesman, 2012: 7).

An estimated 160,000 Iraqis died in the violence between 2003 and 2011.<sup>6</sup> Some 15% of fatalities were directly attributed to the actions of the U.S.-led coalition force. The remaining deaths and injuries occurred in the violence generated by the political and security vacuum created by the occupation. Up to 2.5 million persons were internally displaced or left Iraq as refugees. While an estimated 800,000 persons were registered as returnees between 2008 and 2011, anywhere from 1.3 to 1.7 million Iraqis were still displaced by the end of 2012.<sup>7</sup> Of this number, nearly half of Iraq's minority groups have been forced from

the country since 2003 as a result of both general and targeted violence.

The consequence of multiple, simultaneous and interacting conflicts was to fragment Iraqi society. Early optimism that an inclusive civil society might develop did not survive the escalation of violence during 2006. From being relatively cosmopolitan, Iraqi society was broken down into basic identity units of extended familial, tribal and sectarian affiliations. Communities were physically and psychologically separated by concrete barriers and the breakdown of social bonds. The violence effectively "cleansed" the sectarian diversity from much of Iraq and shattered relations among former neighbours.<sup>8</sup> This is a deep trauma that has not yet begun to heal. It also reinforces the conditions through which ethno-sectarian divisions in society can be articulated into sectarian political competition.

The state suffered in equal measure with Iraqi society, as escalating violence devastated public institutions and services. Some progress was made during 2004 and 2005 in rebuilding state capacity, funded largely by the international community. However, gains were largely wiped out as violence escalated during 2006. After the bombing of the Samarra shrine in February 2006, ministries were emptied because officials could not travel to work. Public servants and infrastructure became the targets of attack, especially when affiliated with international humanitarian and reconstruction assistance. State oversight agencies, still in a formative stage, were forced to curtail their operations, leaving institutions without effective safeguards against corruption.

In this context, reconstruction projects were delayed or abandoned. The state was not able to recover its basic functions, even as its annual budget steadily increased with oil revenues. Extreme insecurity, instability within

<sup>6</sup> An estimate of 115,589 deaths is cited by Iraq Body Count (IBC, 2012). This figure is based on recorded deaths where IBC has verifying data, and likely underestimates the actual number of people killed. Using other data, including estimates of combatant deaths, IBC places the estimate closer to 160,000 people killed.

<sup>7</sup> Iraq also experienced a significant drain of professionals, mainly well-educated, affluent, secular or non-Muslim Iraqis who saw no future for themselves in the country.

<sup>8</sup> A 2009 report on Iraqi NGOs and civil society organisations provides an illustration. Field research found "the profile of [local] NGOs [(LNGOs)] was determined by the dynamics of violence .... As Iraqi society fragmented after 2005 along sectarian lines, LNGOs were required to adopt the identities of their host communities. Some ... adopted religious names while previously they were secular, as a strategy for gaining acceptance and protection, and their scope of operations was often reduced to focus on a single secular community, where previously they may have served several. Many LNGOs are now affiliated with the local authorities, religious and/or tribal, that filled the power vacuum left by the collapsing central government" (Gardner, 2010).



state institutions and corruption became the key factors hindering international assistance to Iraq's recovery. The state's paralysis also contributed to the growth of criminal elements and vested interests within the bureaucracy. Ministries became heavily politicised, with partisan appointments made down to junior levels, embedding sectarian dysfunction deep in state institutions. The process continued after the 2010 elections, when control of ministries went to the winning factions and affiliates of other factions were purged.

## Flaws and grey areas in the political transition

These conditions meant that the U.S. and the international community were unable to orchestrate a quick return of power to Iraqi authorities. The complex transition to self-rule began in January 2005, with elections for a Transitional National Assembly reversing the pre-occupation political domination of Iraq's Sunnis, who largely boycotted the voting. A Shia coalition with broad support among clerics won a plurality, in alliance with the Kurds, who had sufficient strength to act as "kingmakers". Iraq's new constitution was ratified by referendum in October 2005, with parliamentary elections in December 2005 completing the transition to Iraqi authority.

The transition process has not produced a coherent constitutional or political framework with broad-based support. The constitutional proposal was rejected by a clear majority of Sunni voters, but gained sufficient support from Shia and Kurdish voters for ratification. It was intended to produce a form of asymmetrical federalism that was intended to ensure strong central rule in Arab Iraq, while accommodating Kurdish aspirations. However, competing interpretations of its provisions abound, clouding legal and procedural discussions. Iraq's constitution, therefore, provides an uncertain political, legal and procedural framework.

One example is the discussion on the division of powers within Iraq's federal arrangements. Sunni-dominated governorates have used the constitution's provisions on regional autonomy

to distance themselves from the Shia-dominated federal government. This dynamic has transformed the debate on decentralisation into a symbol of Sunni resistance. At the same time, the Kurds have sought greater control over natural resources as the means to strengthen their autonomy. The response of the federal government has been an effort to further centralise its authority. Federal-governorate tensions add a new dimension to the fragmentation within the country's polity by integrating the governorates into national ethno-sectarian competition and creating new centres of power and interest.

The 2010 elections were highly contentious and produced a dysfunctional "national unity" government. Former interim prime minister Ayad Allawi's (2004-05) Al-Iraqiya (Iraqi List) alliance won the most seats, with a two-seat margin of victory over incumbent prime minister Nouri al-Maliki's State of Law List. While Sunni led, the alliance ran on a non-sectarian platform, featured cross-sectarian and secular representation, and enjoyed some success in Shia-dominated areas, winning 12 seats there. The Iraqi List also had strong support among Iraq's diminished secular middle class.

Al-Iraqiya, therefore, offered a multi-sectarian alternative. However, nine months of political manoeuvring and Kurdish-mediated negotiations produced a fragile Shia-led government of national unity and returned Prime Minister al-Maliki to a second term under the December 2010 Erbil Agreement. Al-Iraqiya was undermined by its own political miscalculations and lack of internal coherence. Erbil Agreement provisions on power sharing were subsequently ignored, as Al-Iraqiya weakened and al-Maliki's alliance consolidated power.

During late 2010 and 2011 Al-Iraqiya members were purged from the bureaucracy and hundreds more were arrested in a campaign of political intimidation, which accelerated in the vacuum created by the U.S. withdrawal. The highest-level official charged has been Tareq al-Hashimi, Iraq's vice president and the most senior Sunni official in the unity government. A warrant for his arrest was issued on December 20th 2011 on "terrorism" charges relating to alleged links with the assassination of government officials. As a result

of the warrant, Al-Iraqiya formally suspended its participation in the unity government. Al-Hashemi was subsequently sentenced to death in absentia.<sup>9</sup>

The effects of this political realignment are still playing out in 2012. Ayad Allawi and Al-Iraqiya have lost public support. Allawi has been less engaged in the political process, spending much of his time out of the country. At the same time, some Al-Iraqiya cabinet ministers have remained in office and have productive working relationships with the government. Al-Maliki has enjoyed a surge of support in Shia areas, despite tensions within the Shia alliance. The Sadrists and smaller Shia parties have emerged as brokers and use their votes for political advantage. Sunni Arabs and other minorities have been effectively marginalised from power and are left to make accusations about authoritarian and unconstitutional rule. The Kurds, for their part, remain in the position of brokers, seeking stability in Arab Iraq while sustaining their advantages within the federal system.

As a whole, the current situation is marked by political brinkmanship and highly partisan political behaviour that focuses on narrow sectarian interests at the expense of resolving critical national issues. The extended crisis through 2011 and 2012 has generated political gridlock, and little meaningful national legislation has been passed for several years.

As a result, a number of issues remain critical to the future of the Iraqi state and need to be resolved. The first is the nature of Iraqi federalism, notably the division of powers within the system and the interpretation of the constitution on issues such as regional autonomy and natural resource management. In the absence of clarity on Iraq's constitutional arrangements, there is a continuing centrifugal tension between the proponents of decentralisation and regional autonomy and the Shia-dominated central government, which seeks to concentrate power.

A second issue is the status of the disputed areas along the northern border with the Kurdish governorates. Disagreement around the precise boundaries of the Kurdistan Region are exacerbated by issues surrounding hydrocarbon allocations, land, security responsibility, service delivery, demographic change and the area's historical legacy.

Thirdly, Iraq still does not have a petroleum law, leading to disputes between the federal government and the governorates over the control of oil reserves and the management of revenues. Such a law would require clarification of federal arrangements.

Resolution of these issues now depends on an Iraqi political system that remains deeply divided along ethno-sectarian boundaries. Cleavages and competition based on particularistic interests extend throughout the political process and down into ministries as a result of the appointment of officials along partisan or sectarian lines. The Iraqi polity is highly pluralistic, but with deeply entrenched ethno-sectarian divisions; there is little possibility of a secular party emerging, at least for the present. While dominated by the Shia majority, Iraq also has multiple centres of power, federally and in the governorates, with little to unify them. There are also significant disagreements within the governing Shia alliance itself, which may weaken the position of the current prime minister.

The rules of the political game that might govern or constrain behaviour are either not clearly defined or not respected. Senior political leader are frequently accused of authoritarian behaviour and of acting outside the constitution or Iraqi law. Furthermore, many groups retain some militia capacity, resulting in centres of military power beyond the state's control that undermine its monopoly on the use of force.

International assistance to the governance sector, much of it provided by UN agencies, has supported the development of the procedural framework for a democratic system. However, the imposition of political rules has had little effect on the actual political behaviour of parties and political leadership. "Iraq demonstrates the resilience of domestic political forces in the face of even an eight-year occupation .... The

<sup>9</sup> Al-Hashemi is currently in exile in Turkey. The consequences of the September 10th 2012 sentence were unclear at the time of writing. The verdict coincided with a wave of over 20 attacks, mainly targeting Shia neighbourhoods across Iraq, during which an estimated 100 people were killed and more than 350 wounded, in one of the deadliest days since the U.S. departure.

U.S. occupation tried to superimpose on Iraq a set of political rules that did not reflect either the dominant culture or the power relations among political forces” (Ottaway & Kaysi, 2012: 2).

## Political competition and the generation of violence

The overall security situation in Iraq has improved since the peak of violence in 2006-07. The year 2011 was the least violent since the occupation, with an estimated 2,645 Iraqis killed, compared to over 18,000 in 2007. Iraq is currently not in a state of civil war and many areas of the country are relatively calm. However, data indicate a shift in the pattern of violence rather than the stabilisation of the security situation.<sup>10</sup> Spikes in violence closely correspond with important political events: major political actors retain the capacity for acts of violence and use it to reinforce their positions.

Conflict dynamics have been influenced by the gradual withdrawal of U.S. forces since 2009, which has reduced the U.S. role as an actor in Iraq's security dynamic and led to the greater influence of national and regional actors. Ethno-sectarian competition itself produces two interrelated forms of violence. Firstly, competition creates an environment for targeted and politically motivated attacks. Secondly, the political vacuum creates opportunities for internal and externally supported extremist groups, including a resurgent al-Qaeda. These organisations are responsible for recent mass-casualty events intended to stir up sectarian divisions and undermine the credibility of the government and the security forces.

Recent violent phenomena have come in various forms. Spikes in violence coincided with the 2010 elections and events related to the subsequent weak performance of the Erbil Agreement government. Compared with 2011, the number of incidents increased by 70% during the first six months of 2012. They included the return of mass-casualty events during 2011 and 2012, often in co-ordinated countrywide campaigns, demonstrating that extremist groups retain the

capacity to carry out complex operations. These attacks do not approach the levels of 2006-07, but are significant enough to destabilise the country and undermine state credibility. Two such events during 2012 involved 30-50 individual attacks co-ordinated across several governorates.<sup>11</sup>

There has also been a sharp increase in targeted attacks against political figures, government officials, public servants and members of Iraq's security forces.<sup>12</sup> The pattern changed somewhat during the first half of 2012, with growth in the number of high-casualty bombings. These attacks appear to be aimed at producing a new round of violence among Sunnis, Shias and Kurds. Meanwhile, organised criminal activity (kidnapping, extortion and smuggling, among others) has also risen, with an effect on overall citizen security.

Conflict among Iraq's political leadership, therefore, creates the conditions for political and extremist violence. The resurgence of extremist violence in 2011 is tied to the failure of political leadership, with armed and criminal groups taking advantage of the governance vacuum.

## The gap between state and society

Issues driving change in the wider Arab region are also present in Iraq: a youth demographic bulge, along with frustration over corruption, political exclusion, economic inequality, high poverty levels, unemployment and a lack of opportunity, particularly for women and young people. The Iraqi state has been no more responsive to the needs of citizens than other pre-Arab Spring governments, with the current political gridlock producing slow improvements to daily life, if any. A particular point of frustration with the state is rampant corruption, with Iraq rated as the 175th-worst of 183 countries on the 2011 Transparency International rating.

<sup>11</sup> As a recent example, at least 100 Iraqis died on July 23rd 2012 in 30 co-ordinated bombings and shootings in 18 towns across the country. It was the deadliest set of attacks in a single day for at least two years. In an online statement apparently claiming responsibility, the leader of the Sunni-led al-Qaeda in Iraq, Abu Bakir al-Baghdadi, called for Iraq's Shia government to be toppled.

<sup>12</sup> An estimated 40% of those killed during 2011 were members of the security forces and an additional 25% were affiliated with Awakening Councils that allied themselves with the government and the Multinational Force-Iraq during the 2008 “surge” (Khazai & Cordesman, 2012; IAU, 2012).

<sup>10</sup> There are less available and/or reliable data on violence in Iraq with the departure of U.S. forces and the reduction of the overall international presence.

Polling results consistently show that Iraqis are generally pessimistic about their future,<sup>13</sup> differences across sectarian groups and demographics notwithstanding.<sup>14</sup> Pessimism tracks the sense of vulnerability that Iraqis feel regarding their personal safety and security, a belief reinforced by the escalation in violence during 2012 and the broadly held perception that politicians are responsible.<sup>15</sup> A large majority fear that the country may yet slip back into sectarian conflict.

In this context, Iraqis do not feel that their situation has improved, either as a result of the war or the withdrawal of U.S. forces. Overall, Sunni and Shia populations do not believe they have more political freedoms. Rampant corruption and violence undermine the confidence all groups have in the political process. While the majority want their country to be a “democracy”, they are sceptical about whether democracy “can work” in Iraq. Discontent with basic service delivery is high, despite recent improvements, particularly in electricity supply.

However, widespread public discontent with the government has not produced activism on a scale that shifts the balance of internal power. No significant new actors or movements have emerged with the aim of handing greater power to citizens.<sup>16</sup> Iraq's traumatised and fragmented civil society lacks the cohesion needed to influence

political reform and has limited means to place checks on government. Most Iraqis are reluctant to engage in politics and show a preference for strong leadership to stabilise the situation, even if this is authoritarian. Ambivalence reflects the distance between government and citizens: politics exists in another realm that is isolated from people's daily lives.

## Trends in economic and human development

Iraq's economy is showing signs of recovery. By 2004 the country's gross domestic product (GDP) per capita was estimated at \$800, down from \$2,300 in 1990 and showing gradual deterioration after the first Gulf war and sanctions. During this period, Iraq's economic infrastructure was seriously degraded and the country suffered under a crippling debt burden. By 2011 GDP had recovered beyond 1990 levels to over \$2,900 per capita, with GDP growth of 11-12% estimated for 2012. Iraq is once again classified as a low middle-income country, and recent IMF and World Bank reporting indicates that it has sufficient natural and human resources to make significant development gains.

Iraq's oil-driven growth rates are among the highest in the Middle East and North Africa (MENA) region. Iraq is outperforming its neighbours in the Middle East, many of which are affected by internal instability. In particular, the Iraqi economy is growing at rates significantly higher than its traditional rivals in the region, Syria (affected by internal conflict), Iran (whose economy has been damaged by international sanctions) and Saudi Arabia (where growth of 6-7% is forecast for 2012). Iraq's growth rate and the forecast for increased oil receipts have two direct consequences. Revenues accruing to the government from the oil sector and available for public investment have grown significantly and expand the state's scope of action. However, capacity to use the annual budget is the main challenge: Iraq has large annual budget surpluses because its ability to make capital expenditures is limited by state dysfunction. Rapid growth is also changing regional power dynamics, with Iraq re-emerging as a regional economic power and growing player in international energy markets.

13 As examples of public opinion polls, see Zogby et al. (2011); International Republican Institute (2010); and Greenberg Quinlan Rosner and NDI Spring 2011 Public Opinion Research (2011).

14 Polls consistently show that people in the Kurdish north have a more positive outlook on the results of the war, the future and their personal situation. Shia and Sunni populations show much stronger negative perceptions.

15 Polling shows a fluctuation in the public's perception of priority issues, tracking the security situation. As security improved during 2010 and 2011, polling showed a growth in concern with basic service delivery, the economy and employment. There was also evidence of growing public anger on the issue of corruption, and concern for security and the rule of law. However, the 2012 spike in violence appears to have reversed this trend, with the focus back on personal and family security.

16 There were public demonstrations throughout Iraq during late 2010 and early 2011, culminating in a national “Day of Rage” on February 25th 2011. Protesters called for improvement to the delivery of essential services, more jobs and employment opportunities, and an end to corruption. In response, the government established a 100-day deadline to evaluate ministerial programmes and determine a way to better respond to people's needs. The 100 days were extended and the government produced the Government Strategic Programme 2011-2014, which focused priorities around improved governance and service delivery, the economy, and employment. However, the protests were not sustained, did not result in any new political grouping, and there has been little progress on the promised Strategic Programme.



Human development trends have improved as the violence subsides and some degree of “normality” returns to Iraq, but improvements have been slow. Increased GDP has not produced a meaningful decline in poverty levels. The oil sector is an “enclave economy” with weak links to the general economy and producing only about 2% of jobs. Furthermore, the state’s inefficiency means it has difficulty translating increased revenue into poverty-reducing services.

As a result, Iraq’s poverty headcount remains at 23%, with almost seven million Iraqis earning less than \$2.50 a day.<sup>17</sup> The poverty gap and levels of inequality in Iraq are very low, in part because of the Public Distribution System (PDS), which still circulates subsidised basic food and commodities.<sup>18</sup> However, this means that the majority of Iraq’s non-poor live just above the poverty line and their situation could be reversed by a shock, either external or personal. Almost 80% of Iraqis, therefore, are considered “vulnerable”.

The overall employment situation has improved in recent years, with an official unemployment rate for 2011 of 12-15%. However, a 2011 survey by the UN Interagency Analysis Unit/Iraq Knowledge Network found that unofficial rates are much higher, and that there are significant geographic, demographic and gender-based variations.<sup>19</sup> At 38%, the proportion of Iraqis in the labour market and working is low compared to other countries in the MENA region (where average participation is around 50%). In particular, the participation of Iraqi women in the workforce is exceptionally low, estimated at 15-18% in 2011. Women’s participation closely tracks education levels: with illiteracy rates three times higher than those for men, participation among women who are illiterate or have up to high school

education stands at 14%, while the small minority of women with college or university degrees have up to 72% participation.

With growth rates driven by the oil sector, high unemployment and low rates of labour market participation, economic diversification has emerged as a core public policy issue. Concern focuses on slow private sector development and the concentration of economic activity in the petroleum sector. Private investment accounted for 4.8% of GDP in 2011 and has grown only modestly since 2008. This compares to almost 30% for the public sector, which also shows a stronger rate of growth.

Limited progress has also been made on the reform of state-owned enterprises (SOEs). Subsidies to SOEs account for approximately 4% of the annual federal budget, while up to 60% of SOEs’ combined 600,000-person workforce is thought to be redundant. SOE losses, therefore, remain a significant drain on Iraq’s financial resources. There are currently no legislative initiatives to advance the reform process, while the plan to partner with international firms has not materialised. A significant obstacle to reform is mitigation of social harm: Iraq’s small private sector is not capable of absorbing laid-off SOE employees, making reform politically sensitive in an already unstable environment.<sup>20</sup>

## Dependence on oil

Iraq has replaced Iran as the second-largest Organisation of the Petroleum Exporting Countries (OPEC) producer, a symbolic shift that signals as much about the impact of international sanctions on Iran as it does about increased Iraqi production.<sup>21</sup> As noted, both Iraq’s

17 Data cited are from the current National Development Strategy (2010), which notes an increase in inequality as Iraq’s economy begins to grow (Republic of Iraq, Ministry of Planning, 2010: 23).

18 The PDS is the largest social protection programme in Iraq, reaching an estimated 70-80% of Iraqis. Almost seven million Iraqis would fall below the poverty level without food rations, making it an important poverty reduction mechanism. However, the PDS consumed 7.5% of the federal budget in 2010, making it more expensive than health and education combined. The effect is to crowd out more productive public services, as Iraq moves out of an emergency situation, and to distort food prices (Republic of Iraq, Ministry of Planning, 2010; UNDP, 2011).

19 Youth unemployment is 23-25% in the best five governorates, with the rest of Iraq’s 18 governorates reporting rates as high as 59%. The overall youth rate appears to be twice the rate of the over-25 cohort in the labour force. See <[http://www.iauiraq.org/documents/446/MDG\\_ERADICATE\\_EXTREME\\_POVERTY\\_03.pdf](http://www.iauiraq.org/documents/446/MDG_ERADICATE_EXTREME_POVERTY_03.pdf)>.

20 For the World Bank *Ease of Doing Business* reports issued between 2009 and 2011, Iraq ranked consistently at or near position 166 out of 183 countries. The government has not progressed on legislation to improve growth in the private sector.

21 According to International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA) estimates, Iraq produced 3 million barrels per day (mb/d) in August 2012, while Iranian production slumped to 2.9 mb/d, the lowest production level in over 20 years. Saudi Arabia remains the largest producer at 10 mb/d. The sharp drop in Iranian output is attributed to sanctions and growing diplomatic tension over its nuclear programme. There has also been a corresponding shift in earning between the two countries. The IAEA anticipates that the gap is likely to widen, as Iraq increases production and the situation with Iran remains unresolved (*Financial Times*, 2012).

economy and the state are highly dependent on the petroleum sector.<sup>22</sup> Oil accounts for 60% of GDP, 90% of government revenues and 98% of exports. Increased oil revenues mean that Iraq is largely funding its own development and no longer depends on international humanitarian or reconstruction assistance.

Revenue growth has enabled the rebuilding of infrastructure and some expansion of public services. However, it has also greatly strengthened the position of the state in relation to society, concentrating power in the Shia-led government's hands. Competition for political power is in turn exacerbated by the fact that the state is the principal source of wealth and reward, as are tensions between the central government and Iraq's northern Kurdish and southern Shia regions. This creates significant opportunities for corruption, which is now a major obstacle to Iraq taking advantage of its accumulating oil wealth. It also increases the accountability gap between Iraq's political leadership and society: the state is under less pressure to seek the consent of citizens, because it does not depend on their taxes to finance its activities.

Furthermore, oil dependence crowds out private sector development. Despite a formal policy of diversification, the trend is to further increase oil's importance within the economy. Production is estimated to at least double between 2012 and 2015, towards 5-6 million barrels per day (mb/d), from the current level of 3 mb/d, with a corresponding increase in the state's oil receipts. Non-oil GDP is forecast to grow more slowly, meaning that it will lose yet more of its share of the national economy in the coming years. The private sector has been further pressured by the consequences of "Dutch disease", which encourages imports rather than the development of other sectors of the economy.

Dependence has the effect of undermining economic opportunities for Iraqis. The concentration of economic power means that government has the dominant role in deciding

who the economic players will be. At the same time, the petroleum sector creates only 1-2% of jobs, while the state is responsible for over 40% of employment. In contrast, agriculture still employs about 20% of Iraq's labour force, but accounts for only 4% of GDP. The majority of non-public jobs are created in the small and medium-sized enterprise sector, with businesses employing less than 15 employees and often owned by extended family units. Importantly, the structure of the economy also means that there is no emerging entrepreneurial class that might push for reforms or otherwise challenge the state's economic monopoly.

## **Water, Iraq's environmental crisis and long-term regional conflict**

Iraq is in the midst of an environmental crisis, which is the consequence of long-term drought; poor internal water management; and, critically, years of unpredictability and a decreasing rate of trans-boundary water flow from neighbouring countries. More than 90% of Iraq's water requirements are met by surface water, 80% of which originates in Iran, Syria, or, most importantly, Turkey. The water policies of its neighbours, therefore, have a significant impact on conditions in Iraq.

Negotiations ongoing since the mid-1920s have failed to produce a regional water management agreement. Turkey, Iraq's most critical upstream neighbour, remains resistant to agreements that impose anything more than generalised co-operation commitments. Iraq finds itself in a weak negotiating position as the downstream riparian in relation to its neighbours, aggravated in recent decades by its diminished regional influence. Current regional tensions and the conflict in Syria further worsen the conditions for negotiations.

At the same time, all three of Iraq's upstream neighbours have embarked on large-scale water diversion programmes for hydroelectric power, irrigation and domestic use for growing populations. Estimates for 2020 are that external projects will divert up to 70% of the total flows from the Euphrates River and 50% from the Tigris. By that year, demand for water will outstrip current

<sup>22</sup> Iraq has the world's third-largest oil reserves, estimated at 143 billion barrels. It is emerging as a major energy power both in terms of production and long-term spending power. Under ideal conditions it is estimated to have the ability to produce 12 mb/d. However, infrastructure constraints, corruption and political instability are likely to keep production levels significantly lower.

supplies by 20-40%, depending on the source of the estimate. Compounding the problem, precipitation has steadily decreased and has averaged around 50% of normal levels since 2007.

Domestically, Iraq's water deficit has growing human consequences for food insecurity, water quality, health, economic livelihoods and environmental degradation. This deficit is also emerging as a potential conflict issue, internally within Iraq and externally with its neighbours. It is notable that past water disputes have contributed to other conflicts in the region, including between Israel and the Palestinians, Syria and Iraq, and Egypt and its neighbours downstream on the Nile.

## International influence

There has been an overall decline of international interest in Iraq, tracking a decline in foreign influence over the country's internal political dynamics. Iraq is out of the daily news cycle and many Western countries no longer keep up with developments there. Relations have shifted from a focus on humanitarian and reconstruction assistance to one on commercial development. Western countries now compete among investors from other countries and do not have a favoured position, as was the case during the occupation.

International assistance to Iraqi reconstruction has recorded some success, mainly after security conditions improved post-2008, while support to the governance sector helped create the procedural framework for democracy. The imposition of democratic procedural rules, however, has had little effect on the actual behaviour of the parties and political leadership to date, and international influence in Iraq has declined significantly with the combined withdrawal of U.S. troops and growth in oil revenues.

The exception will be in the area of oil and gas development, where international investment will play a significant role in shaping Iraqi federalism. In the past year, at least three large oil companies have signed agreements directly with the Kurdish Regional Government, bypassing Baghdad, which insists that agreements can be signed only with the central government. Companies have signed agreements on the understanding

that they will likely be prohibited from bidding on exploration blocks in the south, but calculating that better conditions and terms in the north will be more profitable in the long term.

In addition, the Kurdish government is in unauthorised negotiations with Turkey for the construction of a pipeline that would cross directly into Turkey, outside of Iraqi central government control. Such actions reduce the ability of the central government to exert power over and influence the Kurdish Regional Government and may result in oil companies becoming the principal agents of Kurdish autonomy, supported by the Turkish pipeline.

## Looking towards 2017

The message from Iraq is one of hope mingled with concern. There are signs of recovery and normality in Baghdad. The concrete walls dividing neighbourhoods are coming down, stores closed for years are reopening, public buildings and spaces are being restored, new shopping centres are being built by foreign developers, and street life is returning. Iraqis interviewed by the author during recent visits consider this as much an act of defiance and determination to live "normally" as a reflection of the belief that things are actually improving.

However, any progress coincides with the daily acts of violence, political instability and sectarian brinkmanship among their leaders; poor public services; and rampant corruption in state institutions. These undermine the legitimacy of the state in the eyes of many Iraqis. According to one interviewee, "when the politicians disagree the bombs go off and people die in the streets".

Iraqis are engaged in an ongoing struggle to establish a new national identity that bridges the country's ethno-sectarian divides. The preferred future scenario would be a compromise within Iraq's political leadership that allows for a focus on effective governance. Such a compromise would be based on a new and inclusive political formation (the emergence of national rather than sectarian political parties and social organisations), and rooted in a more clearly defined political framework, including constitutional reform.

For this preferred scenario to work there must also be a “democratising” economic power, reducing state privilege and control of the economy, opening space for new economic actors and improving official accountability to society. These changes would likely result in a significant reduction in violence, which is linked to political competition and the institutional vacuum it creates.

However, there is currently no evidence to suggest that Iraq's political leadership can deliver such a compromise. The more probable scenario towards 2017 is of continuing sectarian-based political competition, with a high cost to the Iraqi nation. In this context, it is likely that Iraq will evolve into a conservative Islamic state with a quasi-democratic polity: a procedural democracy, but marked by authoritarian political behaviour and unclear rules of the political game. Iraq's political leaders have already emerged as a leading threat to the nation. The country may stumble forward, but the failure of governance will undermine its economic and human development prospects.

In this regard, the results of upcoming national (2014) and governorate (2013) elections will be critical. The elections appear likely to be won by a Shia alliance, notwithstanding the possible resurgence of Al-Iraqiya on a more multi-sectarian platform. With a clear winner, the illusion of power sharing will dissipate and Iraq will settle into more sustainable Shia majority rule over time. This dynamic will probably not change in the coming decades.

The Dawa Party, the Islamic Supreme Council of Iraq and Muqtada al-Sadr have the power base to sustain a majority, although intra-Shia competition remains a destabilising factor. No significant political or social force is likely to emerge on a “national” or “reconciliation” platform, nor are there conditions for the re-emergence of a secular and reform-minded middle class that might result in the parties moderating their behaviour.

It is worth emphasising a number of important aspects of this scenario, firstly at the national level, and, secondly, by considering the future role of Iraq in a region marked by political convulsion, conflict, transnational sectarian divides and economic competition.

## **1. Iraq's national prospects: politics and economics**

- a. Iraqi politics over the medium term will be characterised by continued sectarian competition. No political party will emerge in the near future with a unifying national message, a multi-sectarian power base and the ability to bridge the divide separating Iraq's communities.
- b. Iraq's Shia majority will consolidate their political dominance. The reversal of historical Sunni domination reflects the demographic reality, but the marginalisation of Iraq's Sunnis will provide the conditions for continued political and legislative paralysis until such time as a political equilibrium is achieved.
- c. Iraq's Sunnis will settle into a minority situation, marginalised at the federal level, but seeking new avenues for influence. There will be opportunities for them to exercise power at the sub-levels of government. Also, there may be expanded opportunities in the economy.
- d. Of concern will be the dynamics in Iraq's federal system. Sunni governorates are likely to continue pressing for greater regional autonomy to reduce the influence of Shia-dominated Baghdad. Trends point to greater autonomy for the Kurdish north, as it increases its economic, political and cultural independence from Baghdad.
- e. Formal political independence will remain beyond the reach of the Kurds in the foreseeable future. However, they will continue to improve the conditions for de facto autonomy within Iraq's federal system, expanding their economic power and taking other measures to reduce the influence of Arab Iraq. Realistically, there is little Baghdad can do to reverse the trend towards Kurdish autonomy, short of open conflict. This trend will have regional implications, given Kurdish activism in Syria and Turkey.
- f. Iraq's southern region will also grow in strength and influence based on its resource wealth, although the south will be more closely tied to the Shia-controlled central government. Marginal to this process of economic consolidation will be the governorates that do not have natural-resource wealth.



- g. Violence will continue in the foreseeable future at levels significant enough to constrain “normal” development. The scope and pattern of violence will shift to reflect the dynamics of ethno-sectarian political competition and the failures of Iraq’s elected leadership. The security situation will improve only once a political equilibrium has been achieved. The continuation of a political vacuum also creates the opportunity for extremists groups to act.
- h. With deadly spikes, there is a real possibility that power struggles will provoke a new round of broader civil violence. Extremist groups will remain, while some of Iraq’s neighbours will continue to see that their interests are furthered by continued Iraqi instability.
- i. Iraq is not likely to reduce its economic dependence on oil. A series of factors create disincentives for meaningful economic reforms, while continued political competition and the rapid growth of Iraq’s oil sector make concentrating economic power attractive. The losers in this scenario will be Iraqis who do not have government employment. A weak private sector will be unable to generate sufficient economic opportunities for the many young people entering the labour market. Livelihoods and public services, therefore, will remain politically sensitive issues and a metric against which many Iraqis judge the credibility of government.
- j. Corruption will remain a significant obstacle preventing Iraq from translating its natural resource wealth into overall development improvements.
- k. The “Arab Spring” will have little impact inside Iraq, even as it transforms the region. Over the medium term Iraq’s political leadership will not be constrained by citizen demands or the need for accountability, given its limited reliance on tax-generated revenues.
- l. There is no evidence of action on Iraq’s pressing national and international water and environmental problems. Discussions with its neighbours appear unlikely in the current regional context. Medium-term consequences will range from reduced access to water for Iraqi households to declining agricultural output and regional tensions. Longer-term failure to achieve a regional water agreement could be a source of conflict.

## **2. *Iraq in the wider region***

- a. Iraq’s reintegration into an unstable region is more difficult to assess. The collapse and slow rebuilding of Iraq’s armed forces altered the regional balance of power, and Iraq will remain too weak militarily to act as a deterrent in regional dynamics. This balance will not change in the coming period as the military remains entangled in national conflict.
- b. Despite this, Iraq is poised to re-emerge as a major energy power. Its oil production will be sufficient to influence international markets and OPEC. Surpassing Iranian output is significant in this regard, both symbolically and materially. It places Iraq in various scenarios for alliances or rivalry with other significant producers.
- c. After decades of international isolation, Iraq’s hosting of the March 2012 Arab League summit was a “coming-out party” and an opportunity for the country to present its foreign policy aspirations. The long-term impact on intra-regional power dynamics, sectarian tensions and economic security remains to be seen. However, other regional powers, including the Gulf states, appear to have made a conscious effort to engage.
- d. The effect of regional dynamics is difficult to predict, in part because Iraqi policy in the region is still being defined. However, there is no doubt that the conflict in Syria is an immediate threat and is already spilling over into Iraq. Syria has similar dynamics to Iraq: a multi-sectarian population and a long-standing minority-ruled dictatorship. There is pressure from Iran, a close ally of the Ba’athist Syrian regime, and long-standing ties between Syria and Iraq that draw the latter into the violence. Large-scale refugee flows have started and displaced Iraqis are returning. There are close and historical relations between Sunni tribal groups in Anbar and Ninewa and their kin in Syria, and Iraqi Sunni militants are already running arms or in Syria supporting the opposition. A drawn out conflict or sectarian victory in Syria will likely exacerbate Iraq’s own sectarian tensions, especially if sectarian loyalties

fuse over the Iraq-Syria boundary: Iraqi Sunni areas along the Syrian border will support the opposition while the Shia-dominated central government will support the current regime, under Iranian pressure.

- e. The policies of Iraq's neighbours are driven by the sectarian divide in the greater region, with competition for influence inside Iraq. While Iran has been allied with Iraq's Shia government, the Gulf states have supported the Sunni leadership in a bid to curtail Iranian influence.
- f. Iraq has a long-standing historical relationship with Iran and shares a close sectarian affiliation. No Iraqi politician can avoid dealing with Iran. Iranian influence in Iraq has certainly grown since 2003 and with a scaled-down U.S. presence. However, the narrative that U.S. mistakes "handed" Iraq to Tehran is simplistic.

Iraqi public opinion is highly sceptical of Iran, even among the Shia population. Competition for regional influence and in energy markets also creates disincentives for a closer alliance. The relationship, therefore, is complex and has not historically produced a natural alliance.

- g. Turkey has been the most constructive regional power with regard to Iraq, along with Jordan. Turkey's main concern has been containing Kurdish separatist movements, and it continues to operate militarily inside Iraq's borders. However, Turkey has also served as a constructive political broker and is one of the largest investors in Iraq. At the same time, relations with Baghdad are currently strained by Ankara's discussions with the Kurdish Regional Government. Also, there is a perception that Turkey has sided with the Sunni minority during recent tensions.

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