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West Iraq: The Search for Leaders and Leverage

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and Kevin Truitte

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Feasibility Study

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Executive Summary

Against the background of reports that the so-called Islamic State (IS), or Da'esh, is losing its hold in Iraq and Syria, homeland security experts in the United States and Europe have been quick to note that the threat this group and its followers pose is simply changing its form. One of the main goals of IS--intensifying sectarian conflict between Sunni and Shi'a Muslims--has advanced considerably over the past two years. In a single week, top diplomats from Saudi Arabia and Iran accused one another of sectarianism and terrorism on the opinion pages of The New York Times. In Iraq, which straddles the fault line between these two major sects of Islam, resolving this gathering maelstrom of violence is a key priority not only for the country, but for the region as a whole.

Cities liberated from Da'esh remain in ruins. With the tacit approval of Baghdad, Shiite militias and majority Shiite Iraqi Army and Police units have carried out retributive destruction against Sunni population centers oppressively controlled by ISIS.

Areas of Sunni-majority population--the governorates of Anbar, Ninawa, Diyala, Salah Uddin, and parts of Kirkuk--distrust Baghdad's ability and willingness to provide security for the Sunni population and reintegrate it into Iraq's social and political fabric.

The solution may lie in strong regional autonomy for these areas, potentially leading in the long-term to an outright independent state.

This paper looks at a proposed solution to the centrifugal forces tearing Iraq apart. A massive deficit in trust handicaps the Baghdad government today, which an astonishing 75% of Iraqis view as hopelessly corrupt.¹ Even as some of the territory lost to Da'esh since 2014 returns to Baghdad's control, the same searing question persists about whether the Shi'a-dominated government, under considerable sway of Tehran, can co-exist with Sunni Arabs. Until 2003, they comprised much of the Iraqi elite, but today they complain of second-class treatment.

What will come of Fallujah now that Da'esh has been driven out? Will its local population suffer punishment for allowing the occupation? The same question is even more pressing for Mosul, as talk of a major effort to "liberate" the city from Da'esh mounts. Why, in the summer of 2014, did Mosul fall so quickly and easily? Time and again, Iraqi Sunni Arabs have, over the past 13 years, felt disenfranchised from their own country. Does a realistic path exist for their re-integration? Or does a civilized and segmented separation make the most sense for all sides in this continuing conflict? The Sunni population has been politically ostracized and will need a new political

¹ Fakhreddine, Jihad, "Iraqis' Approval of Prime Minister Drops Sharply," Gallup, January 6, 2016, <http://www.gallup.com/poll/188030/iraqis-approval-prime-minister-drops-sharply.aspx>.

compact to govern their territory. The politicians elected to serve these communities have acted opportunistically and against the interests of their constituents. A potential West Iraq would necessarily reject sectarian lines and provide an inclusive framework. A system must be set up that does not marginalize the minority populations, but rather addresses their interests in a secular manner, based on interest rather than ideology.

In 2006, then-Chairman of the U.S. Senate Foreign Relations Committee Joe Biden released a plan for the partition of Iraq into three segments: Sunni, Kurd, and Shi'a regions. The Biden plan came at a moment when sectarian tensions were spiraling, but the Bush Administration chose another path: a surge aimed at stomping out the sectarian forces then at play. Ten years later, the U.S. military has withdrawn from Iraq. No current surge is likely. Nor is it being seriously considered by either major U.S. presidential candidate. Considering the current facts on the ground, a different solution may be more practical for the moment. Could movement toward autonomy by the three groups eyed in the Biden plan make more sense today?

We look at key considerations of this question in terms of politics, economics, and security. In this paper we look at what the ends of such a policy shift could be, current interest on the ground in finding a new political solution, and whether the economic basis is there for a "statelet" in West Iraq. We also consider the key element of security, which is perhaps the most pressing issue to be considered.

Insurgency, Exclusion, Reconciliation, Repression

Since the 2003 US invasion, Sunni Arab Iraqis have struggled to define their role in the Iraqi state in political, economic, and societal terms. For decades, Saddam Hussein implemented policies favoring his fellow Sunni Arabs, a minority in the country, while systematically oppressing the majority Shiite Arab and ethnic Kurdish populations. Animosity generated from these longstanding policies lingered after the fall of Baghdad to the American military forces in April 2003. Sunnis, many of whom had belonged to the Baath party for non-ideological reasons, quickly found themselves disenfranchised by de-Baathification policies the American occupation leadership enacted and the Iraqi central government continued. Fueled by a feeling of displacement from their position of power and in a country awash with weapons following the dissolution of the Iraqi military, many Sunnis joined the growing insurgency against American forces and the nascent Iraqi government.

The Sunni insurgency in Iraq, led by Abu Musab al-Zarqawi's al-Qaeda in Iraq (AQI), sought to devastate the political landscape of Iraq, destabilize the newly constructed government, and ignite a sectarian civil war, pitting Shiite militias against Sunni insurgents with civilians from both sects caught in the crossfire. It was successful. The 2006 bombing of the Samarra Mosque, a sacred location for Shiite Muslims, initiated what AQI intended: retributive violence from Shiite militias against Sunni civilians, driving many into AQI's arms. During this period, for example, Sunni residents across Baghdad fled their homes, as neighborhoods in the country's capital became

increasingly homogeneous.² Shiite death squads executed Sunni civilians who refused to leave, and AQI bombed Shiite neighborhoods.³

The turning point in the battle against AQI and the insurgency came when many Sunni tribesmen, increasingly disillusioned by the violence of AQI, changed sides and allied themselves with the American forces in the Anbar Province. The formation of Sunni Awakening (“Sahwa”) Councils across Iraq in late 2006 and 2007 provided a means for American forces, by then implementing a new strategy under The Surge, to engage with Sunni communities. Under American auspices, the “Sons of Iraq,” temporary Sunni security forces, worked to combat AQI’s influences within Sunni areas in Iraq.⁴

The rise of the Awakening Movement in Sunni-majority areas of Iraq also represented the potential for a return to political participation for marginalized Sunnis. It raised the possibility that Sunni Iraqis would seek to buy into the Iraqi political project rather than remain at odds with it. The 2010 Parliamentary elections seemingly supported this notion, with Sunni Iraqis turning out in large numbers and voting Ayad Allawi’s Iraqiya Coalition to a majority (with an overwhelming 80% of the Sunni vote⁵).⁶ This support for an inclusive, secular coalition, led by a Shiite, reversed the outcome five years earlier, when Sunni leaders had called for a boycott of the January 2005 Parliamentary election, and those who voted did so for the explicitly Sunni-focused Iraqi Accord Front (“Tawafuq”) coalition.⁷

Iraqiyya was denied the chance to form a parliament due to Prime Minister al-Maliki’s ability to use Martial Law to delay the count, use Tribal Support Council money to buy support, and use the Terrorism and Accountability and Justice Laws (AJL) to intimidate and disqualify opponents.

Maliki’s State of Law coalition, having placed second, first threatened not to recognize the vote, then used the Accountability and Justice Commission (AJC) to disqualify more than 400 candidates under de-Baathification. Interestingly, this effectively disqualified more Sunni members of the Iraqiyya list, further disenfranchising this group from any meaningful role in governance. The affiliations between Iraqiyya and those purged by the politically-motivated AJC led other parties to shun any potential coalition. Political squabbles created internal divisions within the Iraqiyya Coalition, allowing Maliki’s State of Law (SoL) party to form a government, with the Prime Minister retaining his position. Despite the initial inclusion of Iraqiyya Sunni

² Fox, Maggie, "Satellite images show ethnic cleanout in Iraq," Reuters, September 9, 2008, <http://www.reuters.com/article/us-iraq-lights-idUSN1953066020080919/>.

³ Wing, Joel, "Columbia University Charts Sectarian Cleansing of Baghdad," Musings on Iraq, November 19, 2009, <http://musingsoniraq.blogspot.com/2009/11/blog-post.html>.

⁴ Knights, Michael, "The Status and Future of the Awakening Movements," Washington Institute for Near East Policy, June 2009, <http://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/view/the-status-and-future-of-the-awakening-movements>.

⁵ Wicken, Stephen, “Iraq’s Sunnis in Crisis,” Middle East Security Report 11, Institute for the Study of War, May 2013, <http://www.understandingwar.org/sites/default/files/Wicken-Sunni-In-Iraq.pdf>, pg. 15.

⁶ Leila Fadel and Karen DeYoung, "Ayad Allawi's bloc wins most seats in Iraqi parliamentary elections," Washington Post, March 27, 2010, <http://www.washingtonpost.com/wp-dyn/content/article/2010/03/26/AR2010032602196.html>.

⁷ Wicken, Stephen, “Iraq’s Sunnis in Crisis,” Middle East Security Report 11, Institute for the Study of War, May 2013, <http://www.understandingwar.org/sites/default/files/Wicken-Sunni-In-Iraq.pdf> pg. 10.

politicians such as Osama al-Nujaifi--speaker of Parliament--and Rafia al-Issawi--Minister of Finance--in the new government, al-Maliki would soon target Sunni politicians both within and without the government, accusing them of committing crimes and having them arrested.⁸

In the aftermath of the 2010 elections, Sunni Iraq's full-fledged flirtation with participation in Iraq's political project ended. It was a potentially irreversible trajectory away from unity steered not by Sunnis but by their adversaries in Baghdad. Whatever hopes of political inclusivity the 2010 elections offered to Iraq's Sunnis quickly faded. Within hours of the United States withdrawal of all combat forces from the country in December 2011, the Prime Minister began his campaign against rival Sunni politicians. He launched an operation to arrest Sunni Vice President Tariq al-Hashimi, arresting and torturing confessions from his bodyguards that the vice president had been complicit in the assassinations of Shiite politicians.⁹ Al-Maliki also asked parliament for a vote of no-confidence against Sunni Deputy Prime Minister Salah al-Mutluq¹⁰ and moved to strip the parliamentary immunity of an additional number of Sunni politicians.

Ultimately, the Prime Minister's marginalization of Sunni Iraqis sparked a Sunni mass protest movement after Iraqi Security Forces arrested the bodyguards of Sunni Finance Minister Rafi al-Issawi, with the minister himself fleeing the capital for fear of being arrested.¹¹ The initially "largely peaceful" protest movement, beginning against the purge of Sunni politicians, quickly spread through the Sunni-majority Anbar, Salahuddin, and Ninewa provinces and adopted a larger-scale message against anti-Sunni discrimination.¹² The protests became a rallying point for Sunnis who felt disillusioned by an Iraqi political system dominated by sectarian interests that had failed them.

The Sunni protest movement met with a heavy-handed response from the al-Maliki government. Security forces began to crack down on the protests starting in April 2013 with a major anti-government protest in Hawija, near Kirkuk. Security forces, backed by the Iraqi Army, stormed the protest site. The ensuing firefight between the security forces and armed protesters led to the deaths of 44 protesters, many of whom were unarmed.¹³ The response incited the already riled sectarian sentiments of the Sunnis to arms, as prominent tribal sheikhs in Anbar and elsewhere

⁸ Wicken, Stephen, "Iraq's Sunnis in Crisis," Middle East Security Report 11, Institute for the Study of War, May 2013, <http://www.understandingwar.org/sites/default/files/Wicken-Sunni-In-Iraq.pdf>, pg. 12-15.

⁹ Adrian Blomfield, and Damien McElroy, "Iraq in fresh turmoil as Prime Minister Nuri al-Maliki orders arrest of vice president," The Telegraph, December 19, 2011, <http://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/worldnews/middleeast/iraq/8966587/Iraq-in-fresh-turmoil-as-Prime-Minister-Nuri-al-Maliki-orders-arrest-of-vice-president.html>.

¹⁰ Joseph Logan, "Last U.S. troops leave Iraq, ending war," Reuters, December 18, 2011, <http://www.reuters.com/article/us-iraq-withdrawal-idUSTRE7BH03320111218>.

¹¹ Sinan Salaheddin and Adam Schreck, "Iraq confirms arrest of minister's bodyguards," Washington Post, December 20, 2011, https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/middle-east/iraq-confirms-arrest-of-ministers-bodyguards/2012/12/21/df60b1c6-4b9f-11e2-9a42-d1ce6doed278_story.html

¹² Sly, Liz, "Arab Spring-style protests take hold in Iraq," Washington Post, February 8, 2013, https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/middle-east/arab-spring-style-protests-take-hold-in-iraq/2013/02/08/f875ef7e-715f-11e2-b3f3-b263d708ca37_story.html.

¹³ Sowell, Kirk, "Maliki's Anbar Blunder," Foreign Policy, January 15 2014, <http://foreignpolicy.com/2014/01/15/malikis-anbar-blunder/>.

called for “legitimate self-defense” against Iraqi Security Forces. Within the protest movement were pro-Baathist sentiments tied to Sunni identity. There also was sympathy for the Islamic State of Iraq and al-Sham (ISIS)--the successor organization to AQI--then conducting a resurgent campaign of terrorist attacks against the Baghdad government, Iraqi Security Forces, and Shiites. After the crackdown at Hawija, in December 2013 Iraqi forces arrested Sunni firebrand MP and protest leader Ahmad al-Alwani, killing several of his bodyguards and his brother during a shootout.¹⁴ The Iraqi government then declared a state of emergency in Anbar, bulldozed the buildings at the site of the Sunni protest in Ramadi, isolated both Fallujah and Ramadi, and withdrew Iraqi military forces from both cities.¹⁵

Enter ISIS. Capitalizing on the anti-government tribal militia presence and the withdrawal of the Iraqi Security Forces, AQI (ISIS) forces seized control of Fallujah and parts of Ramadi. They joined forces with other anti-government groups, including local tribal military councils and the Baathist Jaysh Rijal at-Tariqa al-Naqshabandiya (JRTN).¹⁶ ISIS would expand its presence and influence throughout Sunni Iraq, capitalizing on the grievances of local residents against the Iraqi government and portraying itself as an ally of all Sunnis. By mid-June 2014, ISIS had seized control over Iraq’s third largest city, Mosul, and by July had declared itself the “Caliphate,” or IS. To this day, more than two years later, despite the intervention of the United States-led coalition and large territorial gains by Iraqi forces, IS retains territorial control over large swaths of Sunni territory.

After years of being subverted by both Baghdad and IS, the position of Sunnis in a unified Iraq looks bleak. Even those who have fled IS territory, or who have actively opposed IS, have been treated as second-class citizens in the country. The rise of the military power of Iranian-proxy Shiite sectarian militias as the major fighting force against IS, now legitimized ostensibly under the collective umbrella of the Popular Mobilization Forces (PMFs), threatens sectarian cleansing and oppression against Iraq’s Sunni citizens. A return to the al-Maliki years, those of political machination and sectarian repression against Sunnis, can only give rise to the eventual rise of a new insurgency, much as the failure of the Iraqi government to create inclusive politics after the defeat of al-Qaeda in Iraq led to the rise of the Islamic State.

Economic Feasibility of an Independent West Iraq

An autonomous or independent West Iraq within the geographic confines of Iraq must offer economic viability. The population must be able to develop its own economy to provide a feasible alternative to the existing system centralized around Baghdad’s authority and oil produced by Iraqi Kurds in the north and Shiite-majority Basra in the south. At the same time, any Sunni state

¹⁴ Human Rights Watch, <https://www.hrw.org/news/2014/01/03/iraq-investigate-violence-protest-camp>.

¹⁵ Sowell, Kirk, “Maliki’s Anbar Blunder,” Foreign Policy, January 15 2014, <http://foreignpolicy.com/2014/01/15/malikis-anbar-blunder/>.

¹⁶ Sly, Liz, “Al-Qaeda force captures Fallujah amid rise in violence in Iraq,” Washington Post, January 3, 2014, https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/al-qaeda-force-captures-fallujah-amid-rise-in-violence-in-iraq/2014/01/03/8abaeb2a-74aa-11e3-8def-a33011492df2_story.html.

must be able to negotiate access to the sea through southern Iraq or through Saudi Arabia or it will fail to have critical access to international markets. Thus, it must maintain some form of leverage to obtain these rights. For the purposes of this study, we will look at the economic prospects and leverage of the provinces in Iraq comprising Sunni-majority populations: Anbar, Ninewa, Salahuddin, and Diyala, and Hawija and Daquq sub-governorates of Kirkuk, excepting parts that are unlikely to experience the return of their displaced Sunni populations.

IS and the ongoing campaign against the terrorist group has wrought destruction in Sunni-majority areas of the country. Fighting has flattened cities vital to the reinvigoration of West Iraq such as Ramadi and Tikrit, and Shiite militias have demolished Tikrit. Infrastructure in these areas, too, has been devastated from IS and coalition efforts; oil wells have been set alight by retreating insurgents.¹⁷ Fuel depots, banks, and other money-generating facilities have been bombed by US aircraft.¹⁸ Insecurity has caused sharp contractions in non-oil investment in the country: an 8.8% decline in 2014 and a further 9% drop in 2015.¹⁹ Economic redevelopment of the Sunni regions of Iraq will require significant outside investment from development agencies such as the United States Agency for International Development (USAID), multinational corporations including oil companies, and regional actors such as Turkey, Saudi Arabia, Kuwait, and other Gulf States. It also will require a new mode of thinking, moving beyond the resource-driven model that Iraq has hitherto followed and overreliance on hydrocarbon exports.

Agriculture and Water

Arid conditions dominate the majority of Iraq. The country averages 8.5 inches of rain a year and less than 4 inches in the southern desert.²⁰ However, this does not preclude provinces from agricultural production; rather, Iraq's farming sector depends largely on surface water from rivers for irrigation purposes. The predominantly Sunni provinces--Anbar, Ninewa, Salahuddin, and Diyala--all have river systems running through them, enabling cultivation along their banks. The Diyala River Valley and areas along the Tigris River south of Mosul and near Tal Afar all have suitable conditions for wheat, cotton, and barley. Irrigated land supports the cultivation of dates, rice, barley, and vegetables along the Tigris, just north of Baghdad, and along the Euphrates River to the Syrian border.²¹

¹⁷ Kalin, Stephen, "Oil fires cast black cloud over Iraqi town retaken from Islamic State," Reuters, August 20, 2016, <http://www.reuters.com/article/us-mideast-crisis-iraq-oil-idUSKCN1150UR>.

¹⁸ Lockie, Alex, "See how US-led airstrikes are crippling ISIS infrastructure in Iraq and Syria," Business Insider, May 18, 2016, <http://www.businessinsider.com/see-how-us-led-airstrikes-are-crippling-isis-infrastructure-in-iraq-and-syria-2016-5>.

¹⁹ "Iraq's Economic Outlook- Spring 2016," World Bank, 2016, <http://pubdocs.worldbank.org/en/877101460208803340/Iraq-MEM.pdf>.

²⁰ Cordesman, Anthony, "War and the Iraqi Economy: An Experimental; Case Study," CSIS, September 30, 2015, https://csis-prod.s3.amazonaws.com/s3fs-public/legacy_files/files/publication/150915_Cordesman_Iraq_War_Economy.pdf, pg. 145.

²¹ Cordesman, Anthony, "War and the Iraqi Economy: An Experimental; Case Study," CSIS, September 30, 2015, https://csis-prod.s3.amazonaws.com/s3fs-public/legacy_files/files/publication/150915_Cordesman_Iraq_War_Economy.pdf, pg. 144.

Iraq thus has agricultural potential. Twelve percent of the country's overall land is arable, with 4% irrigated. Another 9% of the land can be used for animal grazing, including the Anbar and Ninewah Provinces. Saddam Hussein's regime failed to capitalize on this potential, and after the first Gulf War, the Iraqi agricultural infrastructure languished.²² The Iraqi agricultural sector peaked in the 1990s, comprising nearly 7% of the country's Gross Domestic Product. This dropped 90% after the overthrow of the Saddam Regime in 2003, in part because of a withdrawal of subsidies by the central government and an end of sanctions that had isolated Iraq's economy under Saddam.²³ Today, agriculture does not even comprise 4% of the country's GDP.²⁴ Before the Islamic State offensive across the country in 2014, much of Iraq's agricultural sector fell into Sunni-majority areas of the country. The Ninewa, Kirkuk, and Diyala provinces produced most of Iraq's cereal staples. The Salahuddin Province generated \$400 million in agricultural production in 2012, the largest yield in the country.²⁵ The losses to Iraq's agriculture due to the IS takeover shows how critical these areas are, not just to the Sunnis, but to the entire country. The shock of the terrorist group's takeover of parts of these provinces and the threat of further conquests caused agricultural production of the entire country to drop by nearly 40%.²⁶ Currently, the displacement of farmers by the ongoing security situation in the country will likely cause a medium-term food scarcity.²⁷ To cope with these losses, unoccupied Iraq has become increasingly dependent on Iranian goods.²⁸

To capitalize on agriculture's potential to undergird a sustainable Sunni state, the Sunni areas will have to overcome some substantial challenges. The country's agricultural sector has been poorly developed. Higher demand coupled with a shrinking resource base has created a system dependent on poor irrigation and water distribution networks: "farming systems that maximize

²² Iraq Economic Data (1989-2003), Regime Finance and Procurement - Annex D, CIA, Apr 23, 2007, https://www.cia.gov/library/reports/general-reports-1/iraq_wmd_2004/chap2_annxD.html.

²³ Al-Shaher, Omar, "Iraqi Agriculture in Crisis," Al Monitor, Trans. by Steffi Chakti, January 29, 2013, <http://www.al-monitor.com/pulse/originals/2013/01/iraq-farmers-abandon.html>.

²⁴ Dr. Muthher Muhammad Salih, "The Underclass and Eastern Tyranny in Iraq," Al-Bayan Center for Planning and Studies, April 2015, <http://www.bayancenter.org/en/2015/03/139/>.

²⁵ Al-Jaffal, Omar, "Fighting robs Iraqi farmers of harvest," Al Monitor, Trans. by Tyler Huffman, September 26, 2014, <http://www.al-monitor.com/pulse/originals/2014/09/iraq-agriculture-production-decrease-military-operations.html>.

²⁶ Nassir al Hassoun, "داعش» يتسبب بخسارة العراق 40 في المئة من قدرته الإنتاجية الزراعية«," Al-Hayat, January 19, 2015, <http://www.alhayat.com/Articles/6844138/-/%D8%AF%D8%A7%D8%B9%D8%B4--%D9%8A%D8%AA%D8%B3%D8%A8%D8%A8-%D8%A8%D8%AE%D8%B3%D8%A7%D8%B1%D8%A9-%D8%A7%D9%84%D8%B9%D8%B1%D8%A7%D9%82-40-%D9%81%D9%8A-%D8%A7%D9%84%D9%85%D8%A6%D8%A9-%D9%85%D9%86-%D9%82%D8%AF%D8%B1%D8%AA%D9%87-%D8%A7%D9%84%D8%A5%D9%86%D8%AA%D8%A7%D8%AC%D9%8A%D8%A9-%D8%A7%D9%84%D8%B2%D8%B1%D8%A7%D8%B9%D9%8A%D8%A9>.

²⁷ Cordesman, Anthony, "War and the Iraqi Economy: An Experimental, Case Study," CSIS, September 30, 2015, https://csis-prod.s3.amazonaws.com/s3fs-public/legacy_files/files/publication/150915_Cordesman_Iraq_War_Economy.pdf, Pg. 151-152.

²⁸ Al-Jaffal, Omar, "Iran dominates Iraqi market after occupation of Mosul," Al Monitor, Trans. by Pascale el-Khoury, July 24, 2014, <http://www.al-monitor.com/pulse/originals/2014/07/iran-dominates-iraq-market-after-mosul-takeover.html>.

short-term returns.”²⁹ Iraqi agriculture uses surface irrigation, rather than sprinklers and drip irrigation methods used by other countries such as Jordan. This leads Iraqi farmers to use nearly four times as much water as their Jordanian counterparts.³⁰ Compounding this situation, rural agricultural areas in Iraq have the highest unemployment rate in the history of the country, with nearly 50% of the working age population unemployed.³¹ Investment and development of this sector will require long-term planning. That likely will require the assistance of outside expertise to maximize production and efficiency in the agriculture sector. Sunni-majority areas can account for a significant portion of the country’s agricultural needs, but must be rebuilt following their destruction and abandonment after the defeat of IS.

In a similar vein, an autonomous region will include significant segments of the Tigris and Euphrates. Thus, the region will have control over the two largest sources of fresh water in the country. The rivers offer potential for the sustenance of agricultural land and generation of electricity. The country’s two largest hydroelectric dams, the Mosul Dam on the Tigris and the al-Qadisiya (Haditha) Dam on the Euphrates, will both fall within the boundaries of a West Iraq. These dams contribute the most power generation to the country’s total hydroelectric output, at full capacity contributing 10% of the country’s power demands.³²

Control over the Tigris and Euphrates also offer leverage over Shiite-dominated Baghdad and Southern Iraq, which depend on the rivers for their own irrigation and water supply. IS demonstrated how vital the Euphrates is to southern Iraq when it temporarily closed the Fallujah Dam in April 2014. The weeklong closure resulted in a significant drop in the water levels south of Fallujah. Steam power plants in southern Iraq saw their outputs drop significantly, and the Iraqi government warned that irrigation in the Hilla, Kerbala, Najaf, and Diwaniya provinces would suffer significantly.³³ The Mosul Dam, too, represents a cause for concern for Baghdad. The dam has significant structural problems, and engineers have warned of an impending collapse that could flood the banks of the Tigris down to and including Baghdad. The Badush Dam, a stopgap to prevent this scenario, was abandoned before completion during the 1990s.³⁴ Discharges from both rivers are expected to drop by significant margins in the future. Since 1972,

²⁹Cordesman, Anthony, "War and the Iraqi Economy: An Experimental; Case Study," CSIS, September 30, 2015, https://csis-prod.s3.amazonaws.com/s3fs-public/legacy_files/files/publication/150915_Cordesman_Iraq_War_Economy.pdf,Pg. 151-152.

³⁰ Al-Shaher, Omar, "Iraqi Agriculture in Crisis," Al Monitor, Trans. by Steffi Chakti, January 29, 2013, <http://www.al-monitor.com/pulse/originals/2013/01/iraq-farmers-abandon.html>.

³¹ Cordesman, Anthony, "War and the Iraqi Economy: An Experimental; Case Study," CSIS, September 30, 2015, https://csis-prod.s3.amazonaws.com/s3fs-public/legacy_files/files/publication/150915_Cordesman_Iraq_War_Economy.pdf,Pg. 151-152.

³² "Iraq: Country Water Resource Assistance Strategy: Addressing Major Threats to People’s Livelihoods," World Bank, June 28, 2006, <http://siteresources.worldbank.org/INTWAT/Resources/Iraq.pdf>, pg. 23.

³³ "Iraq insurgents use water as weapon after seizing dam," Reuters, April 11, 2014, <http://www.reuters.com/article/us-iraq-security-idUSBREA3AoQ020140411>.

³⁴ Borger, Julian, "Mosul dam engineers warn it could fail at any time, killing 1m people," The Guardian, March 2, 2016, <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2016/mar/02/mosul-dam-engineers-warn-it-could-fail-at-any-time-killing-1m-people>.

the Euphrates has seen a decrease of 43%.³⁵ The Tigris is projected to see its discharge capacity at Mosul drop by 50% if Turkey completes its construction of the Ilisu Dam in southeast Turkey. Violence in the region has delayed work on the project.³⁶ As the rivers' volume decreases, proper maintenance of these water resources will become even more critical for all of Iraq.

Hydrocarbons and Natural Resources

Oil wealth has long dominated Iraq's economy and society. Iraq's economy on the whole is gravely underdeveloped due to both instability and the dependence on oil revenues for economic growth. The majority of Iraq's hydrocarbon resources are located in the Shiite majority areas in the South, near Basra, and in the North in the Kurdish region or in Kirkuk, which now falls under de facto control of the Kurdistan Regional Government (KRG).³⁷ Sunni areas host only a "handful of small-scale oil fields."³⁸ Thus, a West Iraq regional economy will have to be less reliant on hydrocarbons than Baghdad and the Kurdish Regional Government currently are—not necessarily a drawback.

To be sure, West Iraq has natural resources, including hydrocarbons. A number of scattered oil fields show promise for future energy production, albeit a limited supply. The Najma and al-Qayara fields, for example, south of Mosul in the Ninewa Province each contain an estimated 800 million barrels of oil.³⁹ Other small fields in Ninewa, Salahuddin, and Anbar offer small pockets of oil that could reduce the need to import from either southern Iraq or Kurdish Iraq.⁴⁰ Violence and instability since 2003 have hampered the ability to conduct exploration in the Sunni-majority areas of Iraq. Western experts speculated in 2007 that as much as 100 billion barrels in oil may exist in deep formations in the Anbar Province, but political and security conditions have limited follow-up.⁴¹ Additionally, oil transportation infrastructure, such as pipelines from southern Iraq to Turkey and Syria, must pass through Sunni Arab majority areas in Salahuddin, Ninewa, and Anbar. The Baiji oil refinery, one of the two major refineries in Iraq, could also fall under control of a West Iraq.

³⁵ Dr. Nadheer al-Ansari, "Water Resources Policies in Iraq," No. 6, Al-Bayan Center Publication Series, Al-Bayan Center for Planning and Studies, March 01, 2016, <http://www.bayancenter.org/en/2016/03/641/>, Pg. 51.

³⁶ Dr. Nadheer al-Ansari, "Water Resources Policies in Iraq," No. 6, Al-Bayan Center Publication Series, Al-Bayan Center for Planning and Studies, March 01, 2016, <http://www.bayancenter.org/en/2016/03/641/>, Pg. 51.

³⁷ Malik, Hamdi, "Sunni Arabs of Iraq: the future prospects of a troubled community," Your Middle East, March 28, 2015, http://www.yourmiddleeast.com/culture/sunni-arabs-of-iraq-the-future-prospects-of-a-troubled-community_30963

³⁸ Malik, Hamdi, "Sunni Arabs of Iraq: the future prospects of a troubled community," Your Middle East, March 28, 2015, http://www.yourmiddleeast.com/culture/sunni-arabs-of-iraq-the-future-prospects-of-a-troubled-community_30963

³⁹ Glanz, James, "Iraqi Sunni Lands Show New Oil and Gas Promise," New York Times, February 19, 2007, http://www.nytimes.com/2007/02/19/world/middleeast/19oilfields.html?ref=middleeast&_r=0

⁴⁰ "Map: Iraq's Oil & Gas Infrastructure," The Barrel, S&P Global, January 30, 2014, <http://blogs.platts.com/wp-content/uploads/2014/01/iraq-map21.jpg>.

⁴¹ Glanz, James, "Iraqi Sunni Lands Show New Oil and Gas Promise," New York Times, February 19, 2007, http://www.nytimes.com/2007/02/19/world/middleeast/19oilfields.html?ref=middleeast&_r=0

In addition, the area boasts significant natural gas resources. The Akkas natural gas field, located near the Syrian border with Anbar, contains an estimated 5.6 trillion cubic feet of gas.⁴² According to some estimates, the Akkas Field could produce at full capacity the energy equivalent of 100,000 barrels of oil a day.⁴³ If Akkas came online, it could provide an alternative source of gas to Europe. Western countries could use that option to weaken Russia's control over Eurasian energy markets.

Anbar also contains some of the largest deposits of phosphates in the world. The four biggest deposits in the province--Akashat, H3, Ethna, and Swab--contain an estimated 5.75 billion tons, 9% of the total known global total.⁴⁴ The mining of phosphates in Western Iraq has been severely curtailed as a result of the IS presence in the area. However, the deposits offer potential for the region in the future, post-IS West Iraq.

Manufacturing, Trade, Commerce: Building a successful complex economy

The lack of dominant hydrocarbon reserves could represent a blessing, rather than a curse, for a West Iraq autonomous region. The commonly held logic is that large quantities of a commodity such as oil would invigorate an economy. This is not always the case. The "Dutch disease," coined by the Economist in 1977, could be one such symptom of a single-resource economy. This economic effect manifests itself in states that rely heavily on one industry or resource. The results of the Dutch disease is lower employment, less foreign investment overall in a country's economy, and an economy that is less competitive.⁴⁵ A West Iraq less dependent on any one resource, as Baghdad and Kurdistan have been on oil production, will require it to develop a more diverse and robust economy through trade, manufacturing, and foreign investment. It also would avoid the danger of the bloated public sector of a rentier economy, as in the current system, instead encouraging a strong private sector and providing assistance to young entrepreneurs.

The lesson of Iraqi Kurdistan is a particularly poignant instruction for why an autonomous region should seek to avoid dependency on a single resource, e.g., hydrocarbons. It also highlights the importance of an economy that is not reliant on the public sector. Often viewed as the only safe place for investment in Iraq, the Kurdish region of Iraq saw significant economic growth after the 2003 overthrow of Saddam Hussein. But the rise of ISIS and squabbles with Baghdad saw the KRG lose its access to its allotment of the national budget. To counter this, the Kurds negotiated a deal independent of Baghdad to export oil through Turkey. Kurdish Peshmerga also took over security of Kirkuk, fulfilling the long-held desire of Kurds to control the city and its massive oil fields. Despite being besieged by IS, the Kurds were riding high, and the issue of independence, once just a talking point, seemed nearer to reality than ever before. However, Kurdish success

⁴² "Oil and Gas Fields: Akkas," Iraq Business News, <http://www.iraq-businessnews.com/list-of-oil-and-gas-fields-in-iraq/oil-and-gas-fields-akkas/>.

⁴³ Lanz, James, "Iraqi Sunni Lands Show New Oil and Gas Promise," New York Times, February 19, 2007, <http://www.nytimes.com/2007/02/19/world/middleeast/19oilfields.html?ref=middleeast&r=0>

⁴⁴ Blair, David, "US finds 'world-class' phosphate in Iraq," Financial Times, September 7, 2011, <http://www.ft.com/cms/s/0/a7b82096-d969-11e0-b52f-00144feabdco.html#axzz4J8GmgS2t>.

⁴⁵ "What Dutch disease is, and why it's bad," The Economist, November 5, 2014, <http://www.economist.com/blogs/economist-explains/2014/11/economist-explains-2>.

came crashing down in 2014 when oil prices contracted exponentially. The sharp downturn decimated the KRG's budget and the Kurdish region's economy. By the end of 2015, the KRG's debt was estimated to be between \$14 billion and \$20 billion⁴⁶, and Kurdish public sector employees, including Peshmerga holding the line against IS, went without pay for months. Those receiving pay saw their salaries slashed.⁴⁷ The real estate markets in Erbil and Sulaimaniyah have collapsed, with ongoing construction halted and future projects cancelled. The Kurdistan region's Board of Investment has stated that investment approvals fell from a peak of \$12.4 billion in 2013 to under \$800 million in the first nine months of 2015.⁴⁸

Due to its status as an autonomous region, rather than an independent state, the Kurdish Regional Government could not request loans from the World Bank or the International Monetary Fund, nor could it print its own currency to stave off its economic decline.⁴⁹ Inevitably, these subnational drawbacks would impact an autonomous West Iraq as well. It would need mechanisms involving the international community and, if possible, Baghdad, to account for such future challenges.

The greatest challenge for an autonomous region derives from the reality that the infrastructure to create a robust manufacturing and trade-based economy does not exist. West Iraq would need to build it from the bottom up. The war with ISIS has devastated factories and infrastructure, particularly in Sunni areas. Iraq in general has struggled to develop its manufacturing. An Iraqi government effort to develop a domestic automobile industry in 2012 fizzled out through the lack of follow-through and government investment.⁵⁰ Iraq then abandoned local manufacturing--both small and medium-sized businesses--in favor of cheap foreign imports, leaving closed factories and unemployed Iraqis.⁵¹

To establish its economy, West Iraq will need to continue to receive some form of revenue-sharing from the Baghdad government, at least initially. This will need to be negotiated at the outset. This could be pegged to an interim resolution of Kirkuk's status. One method may be a continuation of the current system, at least in the short-term, while the West Iraqi economy takes form.

Trade with foreign nations, Baghdad, and the KRG will be a necessity for a successful economy. This will depend largely on neighboring governments. The Syrian crisis shows no sign of abating

⁴⁶“Why Iraqi Kurdistan is Struggling to Pay Its Bills,” Stratfor, <https://www.stratfor.com/analysis/why-iraqi-kurdistan-struggling-pay-its-bills>.

⁴⁷ Reichmann, Deb, “Kurdish officials say they're facing financial crisis,” Associated Press, January 15, 2016, <http://bigstory.ap.org/article/007e63266c7e4d048612a766153adb79/kurdish-officials-say-theyre-facing-financial-crisis>.

⁴⁸ DeWeaver, Mark, “Kurdistan's Great Recession: From Boom to Bust in a Rentier Economy,” Institute of Regional and International Studies, American University in Iraq Suleimani, 2016, http://auis.edu.krd/iris/sites/default/files/Kurdistan%27s%20Great%20Recession_2.pdf.

⁴⁹ DeWeaver, Mark, “Kurdistan's Great Recession: From Boom to Bust in a Rentier Economy,” Institute of Regional and International Studies, American University in Iraq Suleimani, 2016, http://auis.edu.krd/iris/sites/default/files/Kurdistan%27s%20Great%20Recession_2.pdf.

⁵⁰ Selmi, Zeina, “Iraq Seeks to Develop Automobile Industry,” Al Monitor, December 11, 2012, <http://www.al-monitor.com/pulse/ar/business/2012/12/push-for-iraqs-car-production-to-match-its-oil-output.html>.

⁵¹ Khalid al-Ansary, “Iraq's moribund manufacturing sector appeals for help,” Reuters, June 22, 2011, <http://www.reuters.com/article/us-iraq-manufacturing-idUSTRE75L4VX20110622>.

any time soon as IS still controls much of the border with Iraq. Thus, trade over the border with Syria is unlikely in the near term. Trade over the Jordanian border remained restricted after the fall of Fallujah in 2014 due to the deterioration in security. The impact on Jordan's economy was enormous: Jordan in 2013 exported \$1.25 billion of goods, or 20% of Jordan's total exports, to Iraq.⁵² Establishment of trade with Jordan will be mutually beneficial, as Anbar is the principal route for Jordanian transports headed to Baghdad. Saudi Arabia and Turkey, too, might be a potential trading partner with a West Iraq. Saudi Arabia currently has poor relations with Baghdad but may be interested in investing in an Iraq that it sees as both Sunni and independent of Iranian influence, unlike Baghdad. Baghdad and the KRG, too, will benefit from strong economic relations with West Iraq, a continuation of the existing economic interactions between the regions of Iraq.

Political Challenges

Iraqis have become disillusioned with the Baghdad government. A poll conducted in 2013-2014 found that nearly three quarters of Iraqis of all sects--Kurds, Sunnis, and Shiites, etc.--did not have confidence and trust in the Iraqi Council of Ministers and Parliament.⁵³ Nowhere is this feeling more salient than within the Sunni Arab community, which overwhelmingly distrusts Baghdad. Yet a 2016 study found that, in fact, sectarian tensions are not the primary reason for the Iraqi conflict. Rather "continued grievances--perceived or otherwise--toward the central government" were root cause of the rise of IS and the current violence.⁵⁴ The dissatisfaction of Sunnis and others with the Iraqi government and the utter contempt for the elected Baghdad elites stems from their sacrifice of Sunni wellbeing for their own benefit. But that is only part of the problem. Across the Iraqi political landscape, Sunni, Shiite nationalists, and Kurds feel they have no voice. That's because Shiite religious parties and their Iranian patron have spread their influence throughout the government. They squeeze out other stakeholders and leave no alternative to domination by the oppressive sectarian passions of these actors.

For an autonomous West Iraq to succeed, it will need to exist beyond ethnic and sectarian identity, instead basing its politics on pluralism and addressing multiple interests. Of course, that raises the question of whether an autonomous region led by a Sunni populace angered by its loss of power would avoid the fate of the current federal Iraq: a tyranny of a sectarian majority. Despite doubts by naysayers, this end may be attainable based on the current perceptions of the Sunni majority in the region. A common misconception of Iraqis is that Sunnis have flocked to IS due to its religious values. In fact, a large majority of Iraqi Sunnis reject a distinctly sectarian governance. Sunnis also reject a religious government, as undoubtedly would other ethno-sectarian minorities. The rejection of religious domination over institutions in the Sunni populace, which

⁵² Areej Abuqudairi, "Iraq crisis worsens Jordan's economic woes," Al Jazeera, August 25, 2014, <http://www.aljazeera.com/news/middleeast/2014/08/iraq-jordan-economy-trade-2014821114022366752.html>.

⁵³ IIA SS Poll, 2013-2014.

⁵⁴ Shinkman, Paul, "Study: Iraq Violence Not Caused by Sectarian Tensions," US News and World Report, January 5, 2016, <http://www.usnews.com/news/articles/2016-01-05/study-violence-in-iraq-that-bolstered-isis-not-caused-primarily-by-sunni-shiite-rift>.

is assumed to be the majority of the autonomous region, would allow for the cooperation and integration of others into a West Iraq government, whose rule would be based on interests and political opinions, rather than ethnicity or sect. Nationwide, 81% of Sunnis expressed said Iraq would be a better place “if religion and politics were separated.” Fifty-one percent also reject the idea that Sharia law should be the basis for the legal system.⁵⁵ These opinion trends indicate that Iraq’s Sunni population is more likely to view favorably the formation of a secular government inclusive of Christians, Kurds, Shiites, Turkmen, and others.

Sunnis in Iraq overwhelmingly reject IS. Ninety-seven percent of Sunnis polled stated that they believed IS was a terrorist organization.⁵⁶

This does not however, mean that these Iraqis also accept Baghdad’s security forces with open arms. In 2014, 94% of Sunnis polled declared that they did not trust the Parliament and the Council of Ministers. That same year, only 28% of Sunni Iraqis expressed confidence in the Iraqi Army’s ability to resolve the country’s conflict, a precipitous decline from 2011, when 69% were confident in the Army.⁵⁷ These misgivings emerged from political abuses under the Maliki government. For Sunnis, much of the distrust traces back to the perceived betrayal in the 2010 Election, when the Prime Minister stole the election and Shiite sectarians did not want Sunnis to share in the political process. The 2012-13 protest movements engendered these feelings, becoming increasingly populist and violent in rhetoric as Maliki further undermined any political strength Sunni Iraqis had. This allowed inroads for what would become IS to capitalize on Sunni grievances and appear as a false savior. A common view held that Baghdad’s corrupt policies and active aggression were a greater threat than IS (ISIS at the time). Thus, it made more sense--at least initially--to work with the jihadists than with Baghdad.⁵⁸ Disaffected elements, such as Baathists and former insurgents, felt that they could cooperate with IS to achieve their increasingly sectarian aims. However, this did not play out. The forces that had allowed IS to enter Fallujah and other places were subsumed by the terrorist group, purged, or fled.⁵⁹

There can be no return to the status quo of the pre-IS period. Sunnis have no desire to return to living under an oppressive Shi’a-led government in Baghdad. Indeed, many Sunnis would like to go back to ruling all of Iraq, as they had done since the days of the Ottoman Empire.⁶⁰ Realistically, this cannot happen under Iraq’s current demographics. Nor, as long as it is a democratic state, should it.⁶¹ Sunnis also are hesitant to seek separation from a united Iraq out of fear that it will both be a de facto acceptance of their own disenfranchisement and a significant loss of access to

⁵⁵ IIA SS Poll, 2013-2014.

⁵⁶ IIA SS Poll, 2013-2014.

⁵⁷ IIA SS Poll, 2013-2014.

⁵⁸ “Fixing the Iraq Mess,” New York Times, February 27, 2016,

<http://www.nytimes.com/2016/02/28/opinion/sunday/fixing-the-iraq-mess.html>.

⁵⁹ “Islamic State rounds up ex-Baathists to eliminate potential rivals in Iraq’s Mosul,” Reuters, July 8, 2014, <http://uk.reuters.com/article/uk-iraq-islamic-state-mosul-idUKKBN0FD1AA20140708>.

⁶⁰ Connable, Ben, “A Long-Term Strategy for a Democratic Iraq,” War on the Rocks, June 30, 2014, <http://warontherocks.com/2014/06/a-long-term-strategy-for-a-democratic-iraq/>.

⁶¹ Trofimov, Yaroslav, “After Minority Rule, Iraq’s Sunnis Refuse Minority Role,” Wall Street Journal, April 9, 2015, <http://www.wsj.com/articles/iraqs-sunnis-dont-accept-minority-role-1428571127>.

resources.⁶² The impact of last five years of political conflict has, however, shifted Sunni perceptions in terms of their own Iraqi nationalism. In 2008, 88% of Sunnis based their identity on being Iraqi. By 2014, only 41% associated their identity with Iraq.⁶³ One-third of Sunnis also feel they are being forced to “live outside Iraq.”⁶⁴ The rising sense of alienation among Iraq’s Sunni population shows no signs of abating. The Shiite-supremacist dominated government has engaged in what has been described as “Shia-centric state-building.” This sect-based approach to the construction of an Iraqi state is predicated on a belief best summed up as “Iraq is the Shi’a.... And the Shi’a are Iraq.”⁶⁵ This leaves little room for even the most non-sectarian, nationalist Sunni Iraqis, already uncomfortable with the post-2003 order that relegated them to a minority role. This Shia-centric state building is by its very nature exclusionary. If the Iraqi state continues along this path, Sunnis and others must accept a role as minorities, possibly even second-class citizens, within their own state. The creation of an secular autonomous West Iraq offers a viable alternative, not just for Sunnis, but for other minorities who feel excluded by the Shia-centric state that has emerged in Baghdad.

Threat of Sectarian Militias

The Iraqi government in Baghdad has lost its authority and no longer holds a monopoly on force in the country. In the face of the IS onslaught, the Iraqi military dissolved, abandoning positions and fleeing before the fight, which they were underequipped to handle. In its place, Shiite militias backed by Iran have emerged as the standard bearer of resistance against IS. They have rallied fighters to their banners through a blend of Shiite religious fervor and Iraqi nationalism. Iran’s regional imperial ambitions provide both motivation and support.

The collapse of Iraq's security forces gave way to an explosion in the size and strength of Iraq's notoriously sectarian Shiite militias. Badr Corps, Asa’ib Ahl al-Haq, Kata’ib Hizbollah, and others--many designated by the United States as terrorist organizations--moved quickly to occupy the security space, presenting themselves as defenders of Sunni Iraq. These militias shared not only ideology with the Iranian Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC) but also received weapons, training, and embedded support from IRGC's elite forces. To subjugate these militias under government control, Grand Ayatollah Ali al-Sistani, the venerated leading Shiite cleric in Iraq, issued a fatwa that created the Hashd al-Shaabi--popular mobilization units (PMUs).⁶⁶ These formations however, did little to rein in the militias; instead it legitimized their existence as an extension of the Iraqi security forces. The militias have committed war crimes against Sunni civilians. They

⁶² Malik, Hamdi, "Sunni Arabs of Iraq: the future prospects of a troubled community," *Your Middle East*, March 28, 2015, http://www.yourmiddleeast.com/culture/sunni-arabs-of-iraq-the-future-prospects-of-a-troubled-community_30963

⁶³ IIA SS Poll, 2013-2014.

⁶⁴ IIA SS Poll, 2013-2014.

⁶⁵ Haddad, Fanar, "Shia-Centric State Building and Sunni Rejection in Post-2003 Iraq," *Carnegie Endowment*, January 7, 2016, <http://carnegieendowment.org/2016/01/07/shia-centric-state-building-and-sunni-rejection-in-post-2003-iraq-pub-62408>.

⁶⁶ Al-Khadimi, Mustafa, "Will Sistani be able to control popular mobilization forces?". *Al Monitor*. 12 March 2015, <http://www.al-monitor.com/pulse/originals/2015/03/iraq-sistani-righteous-jihad-fatwa-popular-mobilization.html>.

have destroyed villages and cities for ethnic cleansing of Sunni areas, an attempt to redraw sectarian borders in favor of Shiites at the expense of Sunnis. They pay only lip service to Baghdad; their real friends work in Tehran.

These forces represent a fifth column to the state, and some have even gone so far as to suggest they take a post-IS role similar to the IRGC in Iran: a preserver of theocratic revolution within the country.⁶⁷ The militias represent a clear threat to Sunni Iraqis and would pose an unhinged threat to an autonomous region. Shiite militias spearheaded the offensive to retake the city of Tikrit and other parts of the Salahuddin Province from IS in autumn of 2015. In the aftermath of the battle, Human Rights Watch reported that 1,450 buildings were destroyed by “pro-government forces”-militias. Furthermore, the evidence, including video after the militias took areas, indicate that the destruction of at least 400 of these came after IS withdrew from the area. The militias detained more than 200 men and boys in the area, more than 160 of whom remain unaccounted for, likely summarily executed in revenge against the population by the militant groups.⁶⁸ These are not isolated events. The PMUs have carried out similar campaigns against Sunnis in areas “liberated” from IS. Even before the formation of the Hasd al-Shaabi, Shiite militias used executions of Sunnis to intimidate or displace populations.⁶⁹ Today, they continue to carry out collective punishment in retaliation for IS attacks.⁷⁰

Militias represent a threat to non-Shiite communities as they arbitrarily enforce their own form of vigilante justice. Continued life under the Baghdad government will allow these violations to continue without any means of redress. An autonomous region, predicated on a secular identity and collective security, could conceivably prevent Shiite militias from conducting such activities within West Iraq’s borders. That would give communities a sense of security against ethno-sectarian pogroms by the PMUs.

Leadership Deficit

The proposition of an autonomous region poses the question of who will lead such a region. Iraq has been held victim by leaders who have taken advantage of the political system to further their own ambitions. While the post-2011 political protests began in reaction to Maliki’s crackdown on Sunni politicians, those politicians were not long spared the ire of the marginalized population.

⁶⁷ "Iraqi militias aspire to be like Iran’s Revolutionary Guards," Al Monitor, August 21, 2016, <http://www.al-monitor.com/pulse/originals/2016/08/iraq-pmu-iran-irgc-russia-turkey-syria-agreement.html#ixzz4KwkkbZ8p>

⁶⁸ Ruinous Aftermath Militias Abuses Following Iraq’s Recapture of Tikrit, Human Rights Watch, September 20, 2015, <https://www.hrw.org/report/2015/09/20/ruinous-aftermath/militias-abuses-following-iraqs-recapture-tikrit>.

⁶⁹ Jessica Lewis, Ahmed Ali, and Kimberly Kagan, “Iraq’s Sectarian Crisis Reignites As Shi’a Militias Execute Civilians And Remobilize,” Institute for the Study of War, June 1, 2013, <http://www.understandingwar.org/backgrounder/iraqs-sectarian-crisis-reignites-shia-militias-execute-civilians-and-remobilize>.

⁷⁰ Beauchamp, Zach, "The US uses Iraq's Shia militias to fight ISIS. They just got accused of ethnic cleansing," Vox, February 5, 2016, <http://www.vox.com/2016/2/5/10918780/shia-militias-diyala-cleansing>.

Anger spilled over to the politicians as Sunni communities held them responsible for their corruption and inability to articulate the community's interests. In one instance, protesters pelted Deputy Prime Minister Saleh al-Mutlaq with rocks as the politician from Anbar--who joined the Maliki government to reach a solution to the political unrest--attempted to address the Ramadi protest camp.⁷¹ One Sunni politician summed up the people's grievances with their politicians thusly: "The [people] consider [the politicians] to be conspirators because they have not seen anything from them in terms of improved public services and living standards...They are fed up with us and the whole political process, but they don't know how difficult it is for us to get anything for them from a government that doesn't work properly."⁷²

The people's disdain for their politicians' mismanagement will likely carry over into a future statelet. The example of the KRG can provide a warning of the dangers that such an autonomous region will likely face. Patronage often buys Kurdish political loyalties in the KRG. The political system there divides the geography and military, with Peshmerga loyal to the KDP and the PUK defending the parties' power bases in Erbil, Dohuk, and Sulaimaniya. The current political crisis within the KRG emerged as Masoud Barzani's KDP presses forward with an independence vote, even as the PUK and Gorran parties continue to protest Barzani's refusal to step down as President of the KRG.⁷³ The parties have increasingly split control of the country into two parallel states, each with its own political and security services loyal to and dependent on the party, rather than a central government. The KRG's political crisis has furthered the deep divisions of the region, even as Iraqi Kurdistan approaches a vote for independence from Iraq.

The political travails of the KRG should serve as a lesson for West Iraq. Iraq suffers from overreliance on patronage. The Sunni provinces have existing networks based on tribal and political allegiances. They have undermined the political situation in the country and left many of the younger generation disillusioned with the political system. The youth who took part in the protests in 2012-2013 and those who have joined both IS and Shiite militias saw these choices as means to reject political exclusion resulting from this system. The politics across Iraq are "coalesced around a patronage system which was frozen around groups of well-connected individuals."⁷⁴ A bloated public sector generated by the resource-based economy, where positions are distributed as rewards for political support, compounds this system. Professionals do not occupy the top of the social pyramid; doctors, engineers, and other valuable careers barely make sufficient salaries. Political connections, rather than college degrees, weigh more heavily in hiring.⁷⁵

⁷¹ Samantha Stainburn, "Saleh al-Mutlaq, deputy prime minister of Iraq, attacked by protesters," Global Post, December 30, 2012, <http://www.pri.org/stories/2012-12-30/saleh-al-mutlaq-deputy-prime-minister-iraq-attacked-protesters>.

⁷² Samantha Stainburn, "Saleh al-Mutlaq, deputy prime minister of Iraq, attacked by protesters," Global Post, December 30, 2012, <http://www.pri.org/stories/2012-12-30/saleh-al-mutlaq-deputy-prime-minister-iraq-attacked-protesters>.

⁷³ Mohammed A. Salih, "Will unity deal deepen rivalries in Iraqi Kurdistan?" Al Monitor, May 18, 2016, <http://www.al-monitor.com/pulse/originals/2016/05/iraq-kurdistan-gorran-puk-kdp-agreement.html>.

⁷⁴ "Fight or Flight: The Desperate Plight of Iraq's 'Generation 2000'" International Crisis Group, August 8, 2016, <https://www.crisisgroup.org/middle-east-north-africa/gulf-and-arabian-peninsula/iraq/fight-or-flight-desperate-plight-iraq-s-generation-2000>

⁷⁵ "Fight or Flight: The Desperate Plight of Iraq's 'Generation 2000'" International Crisis Group, August 8, 2016, <https://www.crisisgroup.org/middle-east-north-africa/gulf-and-arabian-peninsula/iraq/fight-or-flight-desperate-plight-iraq-s-generation-2000>

After IS took over, Sunni politicians tried to exercise political power from the safety of Baghdad or from abroad. Tribal leaders such as Sheikh Abdulrazzaq al-Dulaimi, whose father was chief of the Dulaim tribe, have worked with the US coalition and Iraqi forces to build stable local security to eradicate IS.⁷⁶ Others have tried to manage efforts to reconstruct Sunni areas from afar. Atheel al-Nujaifi (former governor of Ninewa Province), Rafi al-Issawi (former Finance Minister), and Sheikh Khamis al-Khanjari (an Iraqi businessman) have started an initiative to bring a political voice to the Sunni community.⁷⁷ However, their ability to speak as representatives of Sunnis will likely be called into question by the very Sunni they need to win over. Many Sunni tribal leaders, once renowned for their roles in the Awakening Movement, have lost much of their support. Sheikh Wissam al-Hardan, a tribal leader from Anbar, now sits in Baghdad. The tribal fighters who fell under his direction--he estimates 6,000--now sit unpaid by the Baghdad government.⁷⁸ Similarly, Sheikh Ahmad Abu-Risha al-Rishawi, a close ally of the United States referred to as "the face" of the Anbar Awakening, now wields little in the way of influence and popularity on the Sunni Arab street.⁷⁹ Abu-Risha and al-Hardan exemplify the lack of trust Sunnis have in their leadership.

What may transpire is a move away from personality-based to pragmatic politics, especially as the citizens of IS-ravaged cities seek new solutions. This may include returned diaspora, technocrats, and younger representatives of the rising generation as elected officials at the local and regional levels. More than 100,000 Iraqi nationals, predominantly Sunni, currently reside in Amman. Some of them not only can return but also can bring investment with them. Unlike the governing Shi'a parties in Baghdad or the ethnically-based Kurd parties, no political party in Iraq currently lays claim to even a plurality of Sunni voters. This leads the political market-place open which, given widespread discouragement with the best-known public figures, can be a positive situation for West Iraq.

Borders and Benefits

The borders of West Iraq would need to be delineated through political means. It cannot be a "rump state of 'Sunnistan,' created by battlefield realities rather than a political accord."⁸⁰ The legal permission for the creation of a politically autonomous region in Sunni-majority areas

⁷⁶ Lake, Eli and Josh Rogin, "Sunni Leader Warns Against Using Shiites to Retake Ramadi," Bloomberg View, May 19, 2015, <https://www.bloomberg.com/view/articles/2015-05-19/sunni-leader-warns-against-using-shiites-to-retake-ramadi>.

⁷⁷ "Iraqi Sunnis Accelerate Push to Make Their Voices Heard," Associated Press, December 1, 2015, <http://www.voanews.com/a/iraqi-sunnis-push-make-voices-heard/3083171.html>.

⁷⁸ Lake, Eli, "Waking Iraq's Sunnis to Crush Islamic State," Bloomberg View, February 11, 2015, <https://www.bloomberg.com/view/articles/2015-02-20/can-iraq-s-sunnis-awaken-to-fight-islamic-state>.

⁷⁹ Lake, Eli, "The Rise and Fall of America's Favorite Iraqi Sheik," Bloomberg View, June 11, 2015, <https://www.bloomberg.com/view/articles/2015-06-11/the-rise-and-fall-of-america-s-favorite-iraqi-sheik>.

⁸⁰ Michael O'Hanlon and Edward P Joseph., "If Iraq must be divided, here's the right way to do it," Reuters, July 4, 2014, <http://blogs.reuters.com/great-debate/2014/07/03/if-iraq-must-be-divided-heres-the-right-way-to-do-it/>.

already exists in the Iraqi constitution. The 2005 Constitution holds that any province has the ability to transform itself into a semi-autonomous region if a referendum receives the support of more than half of the population.⁸¹ However, there must be some form of political consensus from the Baghdad government. And Kurds bring an enormous challenge for the prospects of the state's creation. Baghdad will not want its creation since its patron Iran will oppose an affront to Tehran's ambition toward a regional hegemony.

Both Iranian proxy forces and the Kurds have nibbled away at what were once considered Sunni-majority areas. West Iraq's borders will need to take into consideration these demographic exploitations while reversing the more egregious claims. Shiite militias and Kurdish Peshmerga have both engaged in ethnic cleansing and clearing of territory previously occupied by Sunni Arab residents to simplify the takeover of these areas by their respective power bases. As previously noted, Tikrit, a staunchly Sunni area, has seen its numbers reduced significantly through the Shiite militias' terrorizing demolitions and forced disappearances. In the mixed but previously Sunni-majority Diyala province, militias have carried out sectarian violence and revenge attacks following IS attacks and have prevented the return of more than 100,000 Sunni residents displaced by fighting.⁸² After the retaking of the predominantly Sunni city of Muqadiyah from IS, the Shiite militias executed hundreds of civilians arbitrarily accused of being "collaborators," bombed Sunni mosques, and coerced others to flee their homes under threat of violence.⁸³ The Kurdish Peshmerga have cleared and destroyed Sunni villages in the Daquq subdistrict, south of Kirkuk, as a means to bolster their claim to the city and its rich oil resources.⁸⁴ In northern Ninewa, too, Kurdish Peshmerga restricted Iraqi Arabs to "security zones" and prevented their return to their villages to expand the Kurdish Region's territory.⁸⁵

The territory of an autonomous West Iraq will include the Sunni-majority provinces, including most of Ninewa, Anbar, Salahuddin, and portions of Diyala and Kirkuk. The carving out of these borders will not be easy. All parties have conflicting claims to land. West Iraq must include Mosul, but where will the Kurdish territory, which has expanded toward the city from the north, end? How can Diyala, a province of traditionally mixed sects and increasingly after 2003 inter-sect marriage, be split? The Kurds will likely get Kirkuk, but would West Iraq take the southern areas that are populated by Sunni Arabs? Will Samarra, which has a slim Shiite majority post-IS, remain within Baghdad's sphere, or will it become a part of West Iraq? The breakup of these territories must be methodical, lest the parties turn violently on one another. Communities entering the

⁸¹ al-Salhy, Suadad, "Unity through division: The Sunni plan to save themselves and Iraq," Middle East Eye, February 22, 2016, <http://www.middleeasteye.net/news/iraqi-sunnis-plan-use-law-create-autonomous-regions-1074892889>

⁸² "Iraqi militias turn Diyala city into 'ghost town'" Al Araby Al-Jadid, March 10, 2016, <https://www.alaraby.co.uk/english/news/2016/3/10/iraqi-militias-turn-diyala-city-into-ghost-town>.

⁸³ "Analysis: Sunnis demand international intervention to stop Shi'ite ethnic cleansing in Iraq," Jerusalem Post, Maayan Groisman, January 19, 2016, <http://www.jpost.com/Middle-East/ISIS-Threat/Analysis-Sunnis-demand-international-intervention-to-stop-Shiite-ethnic-cleansing-in-Iraq-441937>.

⁸⁴ Williams, Sarah Elizabeth, Destroying Homes for Kurdistan, Foreign Policy, July 23, 2015, <http://foreignpolicy.com/2015/07/23/peshmerga-war-crimes-ethnic-cleansing-islamic-state-iraq/>.

⁸⁵ "Iraqi Kurdistan: Arabs Displaced, Cordoned Off, Detained," Human Rights Watch, February 25, 2015, <https://www.hrw.org/news/2015/02/25/iraqi-kurdistan-arabs-displaced-cordoned-detained>.

confines of Western Iraq's territory could take solace in that West Iraq will not be driven by sectarian interest or be ethnocentric, as the Baghdad government is.

The formation of a second autonomous region in West Iraq would benefit the Kurdish Region. First, it would provide a key partner in pressuring the intractable Baghdad government. Currently, the KRG's internal political fissures hinder its ability to conduct an independence referendum, and its revenue-sharing agreement with Baghdad remains in jeopardy. By uniting with West Iraq to lobby Baghdad, the KRG would likely be able to obtain more favorable outcomes. In addition, the split between West Iraq and Baghdad would allow the Kurds greater room to reiterate their claim to Kirkuk and its oil wealth. In return, West Iraq could use the KRG's assistance in negotiating with Baghdad to obtain its own preferential oil revenue-sharing agreement for the short-term. The KRG is determined to obtain its independence. While Western Iraqis would not support this goal, a separation of another autonomous region from Baghdad would strengthen the Kurdish case against remaining at the mercy of a Baghdad that consistently subverts the Kurds' long-term interests.

Providing Security – Only Sunnis Can Defeat ISIS

There can be no success--economically, politically, or socially--for an autonomous West Iraq without security. Security is of tantamount importance in the areas where al-Qaeda in Iraq once operated and where vestiges of a defeated IS will still exist. Security will allow more than three million displaced Iraqis to return to their homes. To obtain security, a West Iraq must be able to create a security force that can combat the threats of terrorism while protecting the region from the specter of Iran's proxy militias. Through the formation of a local security apparatus, Sunni Iraq may be able to degrade its terrorist problem significantly.

The major question facing the creation of security forces to operate in West Iraq would be the composition of such a force. The answer here lies in the past. The Awakening Movement back in the mid-2000s managed to rally more than 100,000 Iraqis to its cause and reject AQI. The hesitance of Iraq's Sunnis to fight as "National Guard" against IS stems from their distrust of Baghdad, and by extension, of Tehran's influence.⁸⁶ Iraq's Sunnis fear a repeat of the past, where the Awakening forces were abandoned by Maliki and subsequently targeted. This fear has suppressed the number of Sunnis willing to fight for the Iraqi Security Forces. The current number of Sunni tribal forces fighting against IS is estimated at 3,000, far below the 100,000+ who fought alongside the United States military against AQI.⁸⁷ Freed from the fears of being retaliated against by Baghdad, Sunnis would show greater enthusiasm for returning to security positions.

West Iraq would benefit both Baghdad and the KRG by providing its own security and eliminating IS from its territory while enabling Iraqi military from the southern provinces and Peshmerga from Kurdistan to focus their attention on policing their own zones. The international community,

⁸⁶ Dafna H. Rand and Nicholas A. Heras, "Iraq's Sunni Reawakening," *Foreign Affairs*, March 16, 2015, <https://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/iraq/2015-03-16/iraqs-sunni-reawakening>.

⁸⁷ Knights, Michael, "The Future of Iraq's Armed Forces," Al-Bayan Center for Planning and Studies, March 2016, <http://www.bayancenter.org/en/wp-content/uploads/2016/03/The-future.pdf>, pg. 23.

too, will benefit from this arrangement. No longer will the United States and its allies be forced to counter IS forces through counterproductive support of militias that ultimately will just shape the scene for the next iteration of disenfranchised insurgents. The United States and its allies instead could work with local forces, part of the community they are operating in. They would be far less likely than militias to commit excesses. That would be a major coup: preventing the resurgence in popularity of an ISIS 2.0 or an AQI 3.0.

A Challenging, but Logical Path Forward

This paper may raise as many questions as it answers: what legal hurdles exist, is independence or just greater autonomy the end goal, and how might Iraq's neighbors respond to an effort to create West Iraq. The answers to the questions may not be immediately discernable, but our exploration of other questions – how would this region be economically viable and how would it sustain itself – demonstrate that an opportunity for a creative re-alignment of Iraq does indeed exist.

There are several junctures in the near future where the concept of West Iraq may be advanced. The aftermath of the imminent Mosul campaign raises issues similar to those currently seen in Fallujah and Ramadi: how to guard against corruption and sectarianism further alienating already traumatized populations, or perhaps more directly, how will the citizens of these regions gain a greater stake in their own destinies than they've been allowed to date?

Local elections scheduled for 2017 will provide a platform for existing and new political organizations to test their appeal and their messaging about what they might expect from Baghdad in the future. And between now and then, a revision of the 2005 Constitution would provide an opportunity to rebalance Iraq's broken social contract.

From the standpoint of logic alone, calls for greater autonomy and possibly independence for the regions of West Iraq can only be expected to grow. Policymakers may now want to begin preparing for new approaches to security, justice, and stability in the region.

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