

4. Mosul, Sunni Arabs and the Day After

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Since June 2014 and the “Islamic State’s” (IS) takeover of Mosul, a succession of dramatic events has put the endless Iraqi crisis back to centre stage, bringing back memories of the chaotic experience of Sunni Arabs since the Saddam Hussein regime was overthrown in 2003¹. More than any other, the Sunni Arab experience is emblematic of the socio-political hyper-fragmentation that has been undermining Iraq’s fragile nation-state for years, and whose logics defy many conventional assumptions². Indeed, one cannot stress enough that the Iraqi conflict is by no means reducible to a simplistic, denominational confrontation which exclusively opposes Sunni and Shiite communities. Admittedly, IS’ rise to power over the last years and subsequent violence have accentuated sectarian tensions, but violence has been similarly intense among Sunni Arabs themselves.

Informed observers all agree that normalising the status of Sunni Arabs’ populations, which has been a longstanding question for Iraq, constitutes a prerequisite for long-term security and stability, and for the restoration of a state and citizenship presently in tatters. The future is very uncertain, however, given that the conditions which, in 2013-2014, allowed the dazzling advance of the “Islamic State” group in a context of widespread protests in Sunni Arab provinces have not fundamentally evolved³. Many Sunni Arabs continue to share suspicion and

¹ See author’s book *Irak, la revanche de l’Histoire. De l’occupation étrangère à l’État islamique* (Iraq, the Revenge of History. From Foreign Occupation to the Islamic State), Vendémiaire, Paris, 2015.

² While Iraq’s politics remains deeply dysfunctional, it has moved beyond basic sectarian cleavages. On the flawed narrative of Shiites versus Sunnis, see for example H. al-Khoei, “Is the conflict in Iraq really sectarian in nature?”, *The Guardian*, 8 January 2012.

³ K.H. Sowell, “Iraq’s Second Insurgency”, *Current Trends in Islamist Ideology*,

hostility towards the established elites and the political system as a whole, especially with regard to the ruling Shiite coalition and militias that dominate national politics. Their socio-economic situation is as deplorable as it was before the war, when not accentuated by the level of destruction and displacements caused by the jihadist shockwave. The feeling of marginalisation, which has long prevailed among them, has now turned into abandonment, susceptible to give rise to lasting violence.

To make things worse, Sunni Arabs are deeply divided as to the definition of their identity and destiny within a decaying Iraqi entity⁴. The political domination exerted over them by the “Islamic State” for almost two years has strengthened pre-existing cleavages and the vicious circle of reprisals, which promises to be even more virulent as the jihadists lose their strongholds. Fractures are noticeably deepening between parties, armed factions, tribes and clans, civilians in search of vengeance and justice, and often within Sunni Arab families themselves⁵. The following chapter aims to shed light on this unprecedented state of fragmentation by raising two essential questions for the near and farther future: what do these divisions within the Sunni Arab constituency mean as we near the end of the ongoing military operations in Mosul and for the post-IS governance in Iraq’s second largest city? What do the current circumstances imply when it comes to relations with other ethno-sectarian groups, in particular with the Shiites and the Kurds, and to prospects for long-term national reconciliation and reconstruction?

Hudson Institute, August 2014.

⁴ R. Mansour, *The Sunni Predicament in Iraq*, Carnegie Endowment for International Peace’s Middle East Center, March 2016.

⁵ T. Arango and F. Hassan, “A War of Brothers in Iraq: ‘I Will Kill Him with My Own Hands’”, *New York Times*, 18 June 2016.

Sunni Arabs and the Mosul interlude

The cascade of events in 2014 has most often been approached through sensationalism, characterised by a media coverage more concerned with immediate developments than with the longer history that they could reveal⁶. Yet, the circumstances that surrounded the fall of Mosul deserve a more critical retrospective examination for they raise as many questions about this specific period as they do about the sequence that will likely open up once the confrontation between the “Islamic State”, Iraqi troops, and coalition forces reaches its final breaking point. Two main narratives have structured the crisis in this respect: first, the commonplace notion of a *blitzkrieg* campaign led by the jihadists, while their offensive has been a much more gradual process; second, the supposed unswerving support that Sunni Arab civilians provided them, in Mosul in particular. A more detached view could actually help unveil the much more complex configuration that unfolded on the ground.

From this standpoint, it is indisputable that the territorial gains achieved by IS took a majority of analysts, including the most knowledgeable, by surprise. Many continue to question the factors that led to the capture of Mosul in the absence of an official version or unanimous account, apart from stories of mass desertions among the Iraqi security forces stationed in the Nineveh province at the time⁷. It is clear, nevertheless, that the jihadists had long planned their military assault and enjoyed significant support in and around the city, in particular among local religious leaders and tribes willing to knock heads with Baghdad and the Nuri al-Maliki cabinet. Rumours of a jihadist offensive had circulated long before the actual fall of Mosul and many combatants had *de facto* taken control of entire areas before the summer of 2014. Several jihadists arrested as early as

⁶ T. Abdulrazaq and G. Stansfield, “The Enemy Within: ISIS and the Conquest of Mosul”, *Middle East Journal*, vol. 70, no. 4, Autumn 2016, pp. 525-542.

⁷ N. Parker, I.I Coles and R. Salman, “Special Report: How Mosul fell – An Iraqi general disputes Baghdad’s story”, Reuters, 14 October 2014.

May the same year confessed their objectives to the Iraqi intelligence, against the backdrop of the early capture of towns such as Falluja and parts of Ramadi in the al-Anbar province.

While still in charge, former Prime Minister al-Maliki had greatly underestimated the group's appeal among entire sectors of the Sunni Arab population, as well as its determination to fight the government forces. After he stepped down, parties and political figures, starting from his successor Haider al-'Abadi and leaders of Shiite militias, omitted for their part that not all Sunni Arab citizens had welcomed IS in their areas – far from it. It is worth recalling that in Mosul, the local population split as soon as the jihadist coup started, divided between its declared supporters, passive or indifferent communities, and its open enemies⁸. Such contrasted attitudes reflect divisions that remain relevant three years later. Many Sunni Arabs who rejected the “Islamic State” from the onset fled and accused the army of having abandoned them, and even “sold” their city to Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi. Others were left to themselves or simply unable to find shelter; they often stayed to provide for their relatives, out of uncertainty and also out of fear of a more dangerous and precarious situation had they escaped⁹.

IS salient resilience

Beyond this differentiated landscape and extremely shifting circumstances, the “Islamic State” is still profoundly rooted in Iraq, astonishing for its resilience. The military and human setbacks suffered by the group since the launching of the U.S.-led Inherent Resolve operation have only partially questioned its presence and pan-Islamist enterprise, especially among the disenfranchised Sunni Arab youth that are still seduced by

⁸ T. Abdulrazaq and G. Stansfield, “The Day After: What to Expect in post-Islamic State Mosul”, *RUSI Journal*, vol. 161, no. 3, 2016, pp. 14-20.

⁹ F. Hawramy, S. Mohammed and K. Shaheen, “Life under Isis in Raqqa and Mosul: ‘We’re living in a giant prison’”, *The Guardian*, 9 December 2015.

its revolutionary cause. The Iraqis, who along Abu Mus‘ab al-Zarqawi played a central role in the group’s formation, remain its first fighters on the ground, well above foreign fighters. The movement’s sociology speaks for itself: in 2017, local Iraqis represent nearly 90% of its membership, including militarily active or mere accomplices and sympathisers. Started in 2005, the “Iraqification” of the “Islamic State” has not given way to the constitution of a more autonomous foreign militant base. From a local perspective, the jihadist group remains much more than an insurgency; it is a deeply-seated socio-political reality, a phenomenon durably anchored beyond its misfortunes.

A set of combined factors account for this resilience, beginning with the extreme atomisation of the Sunni Arab constituency, marked by a structural crisis of leadership that highlights why many initially saw in the jihadist project an alternative to the political vacuum. In the absence of other ideological options, the allegedly unifying utopia offered by IS retains resonance among parts of the Sunni Arab society, especially the young generation that did not experience the Baathist era and utterly lacks political benchmarks. Both the American and Iraqi authorities recognise this pattern and the fact that IS keeps considerable recruiting capacities among young Sunnis aged between 16 and 25, often poor, unemployed, and deprived of education because of years of war. This generation has been shaped by a long process of desocialisation, started during the embargo decade and protracted under foreign occupation. In most cases, this generation has trivialised violence, consecrating it as quasi norm. Often, the youngest have only experienced violence throughout their lifetime, therefore becoming the ideal breeding ground for the “Islamic State” and other insurgent factions.

Besides, many of these young men originate from local tribes that swore allegiance to al-Baghdadi in 2014 and onwards. Examples are numerous and vary from one province and city to the other. In June 2015, for instance, al-Anbar dignitaries of the influential al-Jumaili clan in Falluja publicly joined the jihadist group following a meeting with its local members. To justify

their choice, they evoked their rejection of foreign intervention and the continuing discrimination carried out by the central government against Sunni Arabs, targeting the refugees from Ramadi in particular. The growing military involvement of Iran-backed Shiite militias, also represented within the Popular Mobilisation Forces (PMF)¹⁰, was another motivation for their rallying. In the case of other Sunni Arab tribes, many have been afraid of suffering the same fate as those who had opposed the jihadists, like the Albu Nimr, whose men were mass murdered at the end of 2014. In the last three years, the al-Jumaili provided hundreds of fighters and several senior officials to IS¹¹.

Towards sectarian hyperpolarisation

The “Islamic State” being so entrenched, including in regions taken back from the group since 2015 in the context of the allied Iraqi and coalition operations, has allowed the jihadists to withstand military pressures and carry out their strategy of destroying Iraq’s society through civil war. On the one hand, their two-year rule over entire sections of the Iraqi territory has translated into an even more acute exacerbation of inter-communal tensions. In this regard, the radical viewpoint of jihadists, guilty of countless atrocities, has met the brutal response of other belligerents. Sectarian Shiite militias, in particular, nurture strong anti-Sunni feelings due to the continued attacks carried out against their community and killings of civilians by IS. This dynamic is not new: these militias and the jihadists have clashed on numerous occasions during the Iraqi conflict,

¹⁰ Known in Arabic as *Hashd al-Sha’abi*, the PMF are an Iraqi state-sponsored movement that is mainly composed of Shiite militiamen, but also includes a number of Sunni Arabs, tribes in particular. It was formed in the immediate aftermath of the “Islamic State”’s assault and has heavily relied on the involvement of volunteers beyond more organized paramilitary groups.

¹¹ Among them was, for example, Iyad al-Jumaili, a former Baathist intelligence officer also known in Iraq as Abu Yahya and allegedly killed in April 2017 in a U.S. strike in the al-Qaim area.

most notably in 2006¹². Obviously, the recent period has led to an even greater and deadlier confrontation between them, from the Camp Speicher massacre of June 2014, when IS affiliates killed more than one thousand Shiite Air Force cadets in Tikrit, to the looting, torture, murder, and even ethnic cleansing imputed to Shiite paramilitaries against Sunni Arab populations¹³.

It is useful to point out that Shiite militias were not initially supposed to join the fighting in the Nineveh plains and Mosul, and that resistance to their involvement on the Sunni Arab side was violent. Like most other sub-state players, these militias do not follow a distinctly Iraqi agenda – or it is at least inspired by a very selective reading of what “Iraq” means. On the contrary, they obey well-understood interests, namely increasing their sphere of influence, both territorial and political, through concrete military successes. Some have in fact replaced failing institutions in the areas recaptured from the jihadists, and the margin of manoeuvre of central and provincial authorities seems limited in this regard. Many Shiite militias have also infiltrated units of the federal armed forces, infusing even greater sectarianism. Moreover, in November 2016, the PMF were institutionalised by a controversial law transforming them into a government entity alongside the regular army. In fact, these militias are almost totally independent. Such autonomy makes it difficult to control their excesses and prevent authorities from holding them accountable for many of the current misdeeds. Imbued with pure revanchism, they often make no distinction between actual IS fighters and mere civilians, who are systematically suspected of supporting and colluding with the jihadist groups, and therefore beleaguered.

¹² N. Rosen, “Anatomy of a Civil War”, *Boston Review*, 8 November 2006.

¹³ For an overview of the devastating impact that the conflict has recently had on civilians, including war crimes and crimes against humanity, see Amnesty International’s report “*Punished for Daesh’s Crimes: Displaced Iraqis Abused by Militias and Government Forces*”, October 2016. In some instances, like in the Mount Sinjar, Kurdish Peshmergas were also accused of reprehensible drifts. S. Dagher and B. Kesling, “Arabs Accuse Kurds of Exploiting War With Islamic State to Grab Land”, *Wall Street Journal*, 25 November 2015.

Such intrusion of overtly hostile militias in the affairs of territories, which have otherwise been distant from Iraq's Shiite realities, is considered by most Sunni Arabs as unacceptable and frightening. Virtually wherever they settled down, Shiite militias have turned their back on local residents. Mosul, as such, constitutes a powder keg waiting for the formal defeat of the "Islamic State" to explode: Shiite presence there was historically almost non-existent and Moslawis have witnessed the rise of political Shiism after 2003 with bewilderment. It has contributed, in a direct manner, to their alienation. Perhaps even more disturbing is the fact that the more Shiite paramilitary influence spreads, the more some Sunni Arabs may be tempted to turn around, including those cooperating with Iraqi security forces and the international coalition. Iraq is familiar with circumstantial and brittle alliances. On the whole, Sunni Arabs do not trust either the "liberation" that they have been promised or the ability of the Iraqi government to ensure their security against their so-called "liberators".

In search of a post-Jihadist renewal

Widespread resentment boiling among Sunni Arabs in the face of misconduct by Iraqi security forces and of militia reprisals, combined with the unparalleled destruction caused in their areas by coalition and government airstrikes, emboldens their potential comeback to and backing of the "Islamic State". As in any civil war, cumulative violence provides key resources to the jihadists, as they currently seek to regroup in several Iraqi provinces, such as Diyala (Baquba, Muqdadiyya...)¹⁴. In addition, most of the socio-political and socio-economic grievances and demands that IS exploited in the first place to secure support have not vanished and are even worsened by the massive

¹⁴ M. Knights and A. Mello, "Losing Mosul, Regenerating in Diyala: How the Islamic State Could Exploit Iraq's Sectarian Tinderbox", *CTC Sentinel*, October 2016, pp. 1-7.

displacement of populations over the period 2014-2017¹⁵. This is more particularly the case in areas where Iran-backed Shiite militias have increased their presence but are far from welcome, such as Tal Afar, west of Mosul, a traditional stronghold of Sunni insurgents.

In 2014, it was around Sunni Arab alienation and the loss of confidence in Baghdad and local authorities that the “Islamic State” built a large part of its popularity: it had promised a new state to those who would swell their ranks, against the delinquency of formal institutions, corruption, the lack of basic services, and the reprehensible attitude of the Iraqi army. The inhabitants of Mosul complained of major abuses and shortages brought about by the government. The broad sense of ostracism and injustice that overwhelmed them at the time was strategically used by IS, whose combatants were able to negotiate the allegiance of dignitaries and notables well before their military offensive and the conquest of Mosul and other provinces¹⁶. The commitments made by the jihadists were manifold: the rapid improvement of living conditions, the return to public order, the restitution of political authority to the dispossessed, more specifically the tribes. This promise of a jihadist welfare state was enticing in a context of simmering anger against the system. Symbolically, the buildings of the Nineveh provincial government were taken in the very first hours of Mosul’s fall, while former governor Athil al-Nujaifi escaped.

IS pan-Islamist project was nothing new, though: as of its emergence in the autumn 2006, in its original version, the

¹⁵ According to the Iraqi Ministry of Migration and Displaced, since 2017 and the start of the assault on western Mosul, approximately 100,000 civilians have been displaced due to the intensity of airstrikes and urban fighting. Most have joined overpopulated refugee camps. According to the United Nations, as many as 800,000 civilians would also still be trapped by the battle and unable to ensure their security.

¹⁶ As of January 2014, Falluja was overrun by the radical militants in a context of boiling discontent towards the al-Maliki government. The “Islamic State” sought to win over local populations by claiming that its fighters were there to protect Sunnis, and thus requesting their full co-operation.

group was entirely oriented toward the creation of a dissident state reserved to Sunni populations. Many civilians were already at odds with – if not in a state of war against – the central government, seen as lost to ultra-sectarian, corrupt, and discriminating Shiite factions. Therefore, in the “Islamic State” many saw the first stages of a return to power, as well as collective revenge and regained dignity. Current clashes in Mosul and other regions are far from extinguished beyond the official narrative put forward by the Iraqi government. IS shadow is indeed omnipresent. Yet, most Sunni Arabs who lived under its yoke for months can testify to its ferocious management, and the fervour of those who had first believed in its secessionist ambition has largely eroded, leaving behind confusion and disenchantment. Many made the bitter experience of a utopia which turned into tyranny, amidst intensification of fighting and widespread devastation.

In the midst of this vacuum, salaries have not been paid to civil servants in Mosul since June 2015 and the state is only a ghost. Each local player acts as a state within the state. None of the government ministers has visited the area since the liberation of the eastern bank in January 2017. Infrastructure, hospitals, schools, and the university are destroyed, while access to water, electricity, roads, and sewages remains limited. However, the main wish of Iraqi citizens is the return to the rule of law, and security. On which basis, using which power-sharing formula, with which forces? No aspect of the post-jihadist governance and relations between the forces involved was negotiated before the battle began last October. Quite the contrary: the logics of conquest and control prevail, around diverging visions of the new political system to emerge. In liberated towns such as Tikrit, Baiji, Falluja, and Ramadi, everything related to governance is basically blurred¹⁷.

¹⁷ Since September 2016, IS militants have killed dozens in Tikrit. For example, in April 2017, 31 were killed and more than 40 wounded in a series of suicide attacks later claimed by the group. It was reported by several press outlets that men wearing police uniforms had entered the city in the preceding hours.

Conflicting definitions of nationhood

Rebuilding an Iraqi state also means re-founding a citizenship beyond cleavages, a national feeling wrecked by nearly 15 years of conflict¹⁸. More than any other social group, Sunni Arabs have suffered the consequences of dismantled institutions and the cycles of violence that followed. Any true common belonging needs to be shaped by the state. Yet, Iraqi nationalism has almost entirely disappeared from the socio-political spectrum, replaced by a plethora of sub-nationalisms of ethno-sectarian nature, like the Shiite and Kurdish ones. Further reinforced by the struggle waged against the “Islamic State”’s own Sunni religious nationalism, these sub-national affirmations remove any real perspective of reconciliation for the moment. Indeed, Shiite and Kurdish national feelings have little echo among Sunni Arabs, often unable to define their collective identity in concise terms.

On the one hand, pan-Islamist religious nationalism, as advocated by the “Islamic State”, is not entirely extinct in 2017 and still benefits from the wide rejection of the al-‘Abadi government by Sunni Arabs. Despite its territorial losses, the jihadist so-called “caliphate” is set to be an active force in the near future, even under a more clandestine form and with more scattered cells of support. Unfortunately, as many Iraqi officials rightly put it, IS is here to stay. In addition, the group has managed to socialise large parts of Sunni Arab society, often versed in extreme religiosity (Salafism) and estranged from the Iraqi nation-state, both as a concept and a material reality¹⁹.

The best illustration of this process is perhaps how Sunni Arab political figures seeking to put Iraqi nationalism forward

¹⁸ See H. Al Qarawee, *Imagining the Nation: Nationalism, Sectarianism and Socio-Political Conflict in Iraq*, Rossendale Books, Lancashire, 2012; K.F. Osman, *Sectarianism in Iraq: The Making of State and Nation Since 1920*, Routledge, Abingdon/New York, 2015.

¹⁹ More broadly on this question, see the report authored by R. Dar, S. Hamid and W. McCants, *Islamism after the Arab Spring: Between the Islamic State and the nation-state*, Brookings Institution, January 2017.

have either been ignored or perceived as “traitors”. To this day, they have not been able to present a united front, a coherent definition of what a post-IS phase would mean and look like. Many are desperately fighting for representativeness. Among them are figures like Saleh al-Mutlak, former Deputy Prime Minister, Jamal al-Karbuli and Iyad al-‘Allawi, whose relations with ruling Shiite parties have been very versatile since 2010, to say the least²⁰. More pragmatic are those who opted for a rapprochement with the Shiite coalition to strengthen their partisan base and political role, like Ahmad ‘Abdallah al-Juburi, ‘Abd al-Rahman al-Luwaizi and its Sunni Union, or Sa‘adoun al-Dulaimi. All try to position themselves more strongly in Baghdad and Sunni Arab provinces, and have called for reforms. In January 2017, the head of the Iraqi Forces Alliance parliamentary bloc Ahmad al-Masari declared that the political process was still on a wrong base, explaining the “Islamic State”’s continued infiltration of entire areas.

Sunni Arab political formations and alliances are far from pursuing a centralising agenda as some of their counterparts in Baghdad would like them to. An influential politician such as Usama al-Nujaifi, leader of the Mutahidun bloc, has been calling for an Iraqi confederation formed around one or several semi-autonomous Sunni regions: modelled on Kurdistan, it would assemble the al-Anbar, Salah al-Din, and Nineveh provinces in particular. He and his allies consider such an evolution as the only viable answer and the best outcome to Iraq’s structural crisis, as well as the only guarantee for the country’s unity. A Sunni Arab region would be endowed with its own borders, armed forces, and legislation. Others, such as parliament spokesman Salim al-Jubburi, consider for their part that strengthening the prerogatives of provincial councils is sufficient and that greater fragmentation of the territory must be countered. This option would also allow for tightened co-operation with the central government, seen as more realistic.

²⁰ See S. Wicken, *Iraq’s Sunnis in Crisis*, Middle East Security Report 11, Institute for the Study of War (ISW), May 2013.

The spectrum of renewed insurgency

Intra-Sunni Arab political rivalries and clashes, which in August 2016 led to the destitution of Defence minister Khaled al-'Ubaidi before the beginning of the Mosul battle, are creating new opportunities for IS to resurge. The announced end of military operations in the Nineveh province will certainly not terminate the Iraqi Sunni insurgency, which began more than a decade ago. On the one hand, the ongoing confrontation in Mosul and other places have not repaired the conditions which originally led to the "Islamic State" catastrophe in 2014 and had radicalised a peaceful protest movement²¹. On the other hand, there is no real plan for the day after, no negotiated agreement as to the next local administration. The claimed triumphs against IS since 2015 have paradoxically provided operational room to the group and other insurgent factions. Lacking stability, Sunni Arabs areas globally remain an environment conducive to insurgency.

The "Islamic State" has regained a foothold in many of the allegedly "liberated" territories, and in fact, never left them, most notably historic bastions like Falluja. In some cases, members of local tribes favourable to the group have also facilitated its return, like in Ramadi a few months after the city was "cleaned" by Iraqi security forces. A series of suicide attacks hit several areas in the past months, where IS members preserve underground networks of accomplices and some ideological and tactical support among residents. In the early days of the offensive launched to retake Mosul, the group launched an assault on the ethnically mixed city of Kirkuk, where Iraqi forces have postponed their operations²². Since then, armed attacks, targeted assassinations, and suicide bombings have been on the

²¹ See *Make or Break: Iraq's Sunnis and the State*, Middle East Report 144, International Crisis Group (ICG), August 2013.

²² In May 2017, the "Islamic State" executed nine men over accusations of collaboration with Iraqi security services in the town of Hawija, which fell into its hands in mid-2014.

rise everywhere, at a frantic pace. This includes other provinces such as Basra in the south, where the security situation has deteriorated²³.

Beyond IS, other Sunni Arab movements, whether initially aligned on radical jihadism or not, plan on carrying on the fight against the coalition and the Iraqi authorities²⁴. The present conditions objectively help such continuation, including the violence of the anti-Shiite sentiment among significant sectors of the population. These formations include the Army of the Men of the Naqshbandi Order (*Jaysh Rijal at-Tariqa al-Naqshbandiyya*, or JRTN), which became an enemy of the “Islamic State” after temporary co-operation in 2014, or the Brigades of the 1920 Revolution, linked to Muthanna al-Dhari’s Association of Muslim Scholars, as well as al-Qa’ida, which intends to forward the banner of the Sunni cause in Iraq and portrays itself as a local force²⁵. At least on a rhetorical level, these groups, hitherto eclipsed by the “Islamic State”, seek to demonstrate that they are the best protectors of Sunni Arabs and the best alternative to both IS, the Shiite-led government, and Iranian influence. They wish to benefit from the rout of the radical jihadists in Mosul and from clear disillusionment among civilians to regain some level of control.

In substance, the causes for the resistance of these groups to the “Islamic State” have not varied since the first dissensions occurred between them in 2007. They are essentially ideological and tactical. IS State has been blamed for its ultraviolent methods, against Sunni Arab civilians in particular, routinely imprisoned, tortured, arbitrarily killed, or taken as human shields in fierce battles such as Mosul. Their members are reported to have

²³ While many could think so, southern Iraq has not been spared by the jihadist attacks. Very recently, several civilians and Iraqi soldiers were killed in a suicide car bombing on a highway near Basra’s oilfields.

²⁴ S. Adnan and A. Reese, *Beyond the Islamic State: Iraq’s Sunni Insurgency*, Middle East Security Report 24, Institute for the Study of War (ISW), October 2014.

²⁵ On 25 August 2016, al-Qa’ida leader Ayman al-Zawahiri called on the Sunnis to resist the “Safavid-crusader occupation” in Iraq and to resume long guerilla war to reverse territorial losses at the hands of their opponents.

infiltrated the flood of internally displaced persons and humanitarian camps to recruit partisans, offering religious courses and basic assistance to otherwise ungoverned populations, in addition to their attempt to co-opt defectors of the “Islamic State”, like in the Euphrates valley.

Sunni Arabs and the regional game

As in the case of the Shiite community, Sunni Arab hyper-fragmentation has facilitated the growth of regional interference in a country where sectarianism does not account for all the rivalries but remains a key fault line²⁶. During the years of occupation, Sunni Arab religious, tribal, and political figures sought support from their coreligionists or sometimes took refuge in neighbouring countries in the face of the various accusations and threats that they faced. In January 2017, the Iraqi government renewed the arrest warrant targeting the former Nineveh governor Athil al-Nujaifi, dismissed by the parliament in 2015 and forbidden from entering Mosul. Other Sunni Arab players have also been targeted by similar measures, like former vice-president Tariq al-Hashimi in December 2011 and Finance minister Rafi al-Issawi who resigned in 2013. Baghdad publicly accused al-Nujaifi of having allowed Turkey to penetrate Iraq during the course of his mandate and station its troops at the Bashiqa base, north-east of Mosul, a manoeuvre considered a violation of sovereignty. Nujaifi's supporters, conversely, describe Ankara's increased role as a paramount guarantee of survival in the face of current Shiite expansion in northern Iraq.

Against the grip of Baghdad and its Sunni Arab allies, al-Nujaifi carried out a complex and twofold rapprochement with Erbil's Kurdish Regional Government (KRG) and Ankara, with

²⁶ On sectarianism in Iraq and the broader Middle East, see F. Haddad, *Sectarianism in Iraq: Antagonistic Visions of Unity*, Hurst & Co., London, 2011; and N. Hasheemi and D. Postel, *Sectarianization: Mapping the New Politics of the Middle East*, Hurst & Co., London, 2017.

the formation of a paramilitary brigade made of about 3,000 volunteers, trained and assisted by Turkish forces. The al-Nujaifi clan sees this move as the only way to ensure the security of the Nineveh province as the anticipated end of military operations in Mosul approach²⁷. Until now, the members of this brigade have been prevented from taking part in the struggle, in this case by the PMF, for which they represent a threat and that reject Turkish interference in Iraqi affairs, as well as any form of mediation by Ankara. However, the force under Nujaifi's command has concretely let Turkey get a foothold in the local game and strengthen its alliances with Sunni forces (Arab or not) hostile to Baghdad like the Iraqi Islamic Party, led by Iyad al-Samarrai and historically linked to the Muslim Brotherhood.

In the present circumstances, the search for regional support has become a priority for many Sunni Arab forces. Despite pressure from the central government and their Sunni Arab rivals, who often emphasise their alleged complicity with IS and their attempts at dividing the nation, several meetings were held in Ankara and Geneva over the last months to discuss the future of the country. On 8 March 2017, one of these meetings – supported by Jordan, the United Arab Emirates, Qatar, and the United States – brought together key figures²⁸, including a number of Sunni Arab lawmakers, tribal leaders, and clerics. In its wake, it aroused the ire of Iraqi authorities. In fact, this

²⁷ The so-called National Mobilisation (*Hashd Watan*) emerged in 2015 under Athil al-Nujaifi's tutelage and with the support of both the KRG and Turkey. Around 4,000 fighters compose this all-Sunni force based on the military base of Zalikan in Sheykhkan, a town situated in Mosul's vicinity. For months, these men have received training and arms. Their number is set to further rise in the near future. In October 2016, this paramilitary force rebranded itself as the Nineveh Guard (*Haras Ninawa*).

²⁸ Among them was Khamis al-Khanjar, closely linked to the al-Nujaifi family and leader of the Arab Project. Al-Khanjar is a native of Falluja and for years has been fighting against the marginalization of Sunni Arabs while advocating a federalized solution to their existential crisis. In his eyes, this move would facilitate a greater degree of autonomy. Al-Khanjar is also among the strongest Sunni Arab proponents of a civil and secular state.

conference did not result in any unified position or agreement regarding the safe governance of Mosul and its surroundings. Rather, it once again underscored a highly-divided Sunni Arab political scene lacking a lucid vision for the communities that it purports to represent.

Conclusion

The long sequence of power exercised by the “Islamic State” and the operations launched by a constellation of local and foreign players to defeat the group will have painful and longstanding effects on Sunni Arabs. Against the backdrop of radicalised inter-communal tensions and destruction in all their provinces and other parts of Iraq, the Sunni Arabs have never been as divided as today. This equally applies to their relations with Baghdad and the Shiite-dominated ruling coalition, in which the majority has no confidence, and to their interactions with local elites. As such, the victory proclaimed against the “Islamic State” is not really a victory, since the movement already managed to redeploy itself across the country. Above all, this “victory” does not solve the issues which in the first place led to the jihadists’ rise.

The fear is enormous that underlying conflicts will detonate once the battle of Mosul is over. There is indeed a genuine risk that the various warring parties will split around the control of power, local resources, and civilian populations in this city. Beyond their inability to project themselves into what remains of Iraq’s nation-state, Sunni Arabs are, in this respect, extremely polarized. Their intra-sectarian rivalries will undoubtedly be just as brutal as the current confrontations. Dysfunctional institutions, endemic corruption, and the selfish calculations at play will likely reinforce the prospect of long-term violence, not to mention the weight of external interference that presently makes an Iraqi peace process almost impossible.

In this fragile context, the members of the international coalition, particularly Europeans, are critically exposed to the

deleterious effects of Iraq's crisis through unprecedented migratory waves and a series of historic terrorist attacks. A first step would consist in recognizing that increased military force and security measures will never be enough to curtail the long-term consequences of Iraq's collapse and that of neighboring countries. The European Union should invest additional efforts in terms of institutional support brought to local Iraqi forces and attempt to mediate their conflicts. It has become crucial to identify players among Sunni Arabs who have credible capacities to move toward greater reconciliation with Shiites and Kurds and kick off genuine reforms, without which the state of hundreds of thousands of refugees and displaced persons will remain unresolved for the time to come.