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2003-2018, 15 YEARS INTO THE “NEW IRAQ”

LORENA STELLA MARTINI

2003 REGIME-CHANGE: HOPES AND CONTROVERSIES

The overthrow of Saddam Hussein’s regime operated by the US-led Operation Iraqi Freedom marked the beginning of a new phase for Iraq. The country emerged from 24 years of dictatorial rule, during which Saddam and his Sunni entourage ruled over the Iraqi Shia majority and the Kurdish constituency, mainly located in the North of the country. Following Hussein’s toppling, officially justified by his possession of weapons of mass destruction and support of terrorism, Iraq was supposed to experience a democratic transition. The gathering of many representatives from the Iraqi opposition in Washington to discuss post-Saddam Iraq had boded well for the future of the country. The democratic transition was meant to be guided by the US: the CPA (Coalition Provisional Authority), led by Ambassador Paul Bremer, originally had the role of easing the creation of a new Iraqi polity. However, at least two major mistakes made by the CPA are believed to have seri-

ously compromised the project. First, the Coalition proceeded with a total dismantlement of the security forces and with a very robust and across-the-board de-Baathification process. These purges created evident security issues, while also progressively increasing the sense of resentment within the Iraqi Sunni community, which suddenly felt delegitimised.

Secondly, it was exactly over the course of the CPA’s short lifespan that sectarianism was institutionalised within Iraqi politics, through the establishment of the Interim Governing Council (IGC), whose members were for the first time selected according to ethno-sectarian demographic criteria. These same principles were used later on during the drafting of the Transitional Administration Law (TAL), and in the subsequent creation of the transitional sovereign government, led by Iyad Allawi.

The drafting of the Constitution further marked this point, by defining the population’s division into distinct ethnic communities

and sects, as it was confirmed on the ground by the voting trend of the first parliamentary election held in 2005. From this point on, sectarian logic would dominate Iraqi politics and the country's security apparatus. In addition, the new Constitution lacked a clear definition of regional power management: on one hand, it granted a certain degree of autonomy to local authorities; on the other, however, the Kurdish issue was never concretely solved, notwithstanding the promises that a referendum over the status of the so-called disputed areas – with Kirkuk as their epicenter – would be held by 2007 (Article 140 of the Iraqi Constitution).

In spite of such shortcomings, 2005 is largely considered as a positive year for newly freed Iraq, as three rounds of voting took place. In spite of its numerous challenges and issues, the country has not missed a single election since, hinting at the Iraqi people's penchant for democracy.

AL-MALIKI: TWO MANDATES AND MANY CHALLENGES

The first free and independent parliamentary election was held in December 2005 and led to the first mandate of Shia Prime Minister Nuri al-Maliki, hailing from the Dawa Party. In 2006 the mis-management of the security and political issues which were initially sparked by the regime exploded, resulting in a violent civil war between Arab Sunni factions (which included marginalised Sunni nationalists, tribal members and jihadists) and Arab Shia militias. Some of the key actors from this conflict are still active in Iraqi politics today: on the Sunni side, al-Qaeda in Iraq, the ancestor of the Islamic State (IS) fought against Shia militias such as the Badr Brigades, now of one the spearheads of the Popular Mobilisation Units (PMU).

The Sunni insurrection was eventually tamed thanks to the American counter-insurgency campaign, combined with a new entente between the US and Sunni tribal chiefs, the so-called 'Sahwa'. The end of the civil war and the negotiation for the withdrawal of US troops, scheduled to be completed by 2011, granted al-Maliki the necessary legitimacy that he was lacking. Al Maliki's increased popularity was later confirmed by 2009 provincial election; his re-election as Prime Minister in 2010, however, only came after several months of political deadlock, and was strongly backed by both the US and Iran. Despite benefiting from ample international support, the new government remained weak, as al-Maliki lacked the necessary supporting majority in Parliament, which would have enabled him to reach agreements and carry out reforms on the most contentious issues. Hence, al-Maliki started to increasingly revert to sectarian and authoritarian policies against both his Krg counterpart and the Sunni community in order to seek legitimacy for his mandate. In particular, his attacks on Sunni politicians were tailored to demonstrate that the Sunnis posed a threat to Iraqi polity, and that he was the only one capable of protecting the Shia constituency. Al-Maliki's policies, however, coupled with the security vacuum left by the long-announced withdrawal of American troops, gradually re-awakened those Sunni factions that had been temporarily silenced after the 2005-2007 civil war. One of these factions was the Islamic State in Iraq (ISI), which under the guidance of Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi emerged stronger than ever before. The timing could not have been more perfect, since the break-out of a civil war in Syria provided ISI with a chance to establish new contacts with other Sunni jihadists, assemble fresh recruits and start a tactical ex-

pansion from the Iraqi to the Syrian scenario, thus adopting the new name of 'Islamic State in Iraq and al-Sham' (ISIS). In 2013, ISIS began its rapid expansion through North-western Iraq; the meagre response of Iraqi Security Forces (ISF) – which reached its climax with the mass disorganised retreat of Iraqi soldiers facing the advancing jihadists in Mosul – revealed the weakness and lack of control of the central State. Similarly, Baghdad's grip over the Kurdistan Regional Government (KRG) was also loosening, and following accusations that Erbil was exporting oil without Baghdad's permission, the central government deliberately stopped providing the KRG with the due revenues from national oil, which amounted to 17% of the total Iraqi oil budget. Such a dispute increased the Kurdish will of independence, which would only intensify later on when, during the battle against IS, the Kurds would progressively act as an autonomous actor on the Iraqi and international scenario, establishing control over some previously disputed areas that they had effectively freed from the Jihadists' grip.

AL-ABADI: MENDING THE FENCES

Haider al-Abadi was selected as Prime Minister following the 2014 election, when, as a member of the Dawa Party, he ran as a candidate for the Dawlat al-Qanun list, headed by al-Maliki. The incumbent Prime Minister, in spite of the partial victory of his coalition, was not chosen for a third term. To replace him, the moderate and less divisive figure of al-Abadi appeared more suitable to provide Iraq with a more inclusive, united image during such a dramatic crisis. In fact, when al-Abadi rose to power in August 2014, al-Baghdadi had already declared the establishment of an Islamic Caliphate from newly-conquered Mosul (June 2014), again

changing the name of the organisation into 'Islamic State' (IS), to reflect its universal aspiration well beyond the sole control of Syraq.

Accordingly, the priority of al-Abadi as Prime Minister has undoubtedly been the fight against the Caliphate, which at its peak controlled 40% of Iraqi territory, including many strategic areas rich in natural resources. The threat of IS was countered by a vast array of players who proved essential in backing the ISF: among them were the Popular Mobilisation Units, a militia umbrella organisation whose foundations were laid down in 2014 by the fatwa of Grand Ayatollah Ali al-Sistani, who called for Iraqi citizens to take up arms against the terrorists. In reaction to the massive response to al-Sistani's fatwa, before stepping down, al-Maliki signed a decree that officially recognised the PMU as an active force in the war against IS. The PMU's contribution was fundamental in the armed struggle, yet their mainly sectarian nature and their autonomous and ambiguous conduct are not proving easy for al-Abadi to control. The Kurdish Peshmerga units also played a paramount role in the defeat of IS, fighting both independently and besides the international coalition forces that were deployed in Iraq in 2014 and 2015.

The defeat of IS was officially announced by al-Abadi in December 2017. Although some extremist cells are still active, Baghdad and its allies have regained territorial control over Iraq, thus initiating the reconstruction phase. As a part of this process, al-Abadi announced at the end of 2017 that the next war would be fought against the plague of corruption. Moreover, an international conference took place in February 2018 in Kuwait, to raise initial financial support for the reconstruction of the country. In this extremely thorny situation, the next parliamentary election will be held

on May 12, 2018, according to the constitutional timing. The election date was scheduled in spite of the pleas from both the Sunni and Kurdish communities to put off this vote – as it had already been done with the provincial one, which will take place in December – to wait for the extremely high number of Internal Displaced People (IDPs) to return to their hometowns.

Al-Abadi is eager to capitalise on the recent victory over IS, exploiting his success in order to win a second term as Prime Minister. However, he is not the only one: the PMUs, whose political offspring will run in the upcoming election under the leadership of Hadi al-Ameri, also count on their successful role within the war to become a main stakeholder

in the new Iraq. Likewise, the Kurds too could exploit their engagement against IS as a leverage to endorse their requests to Baghdad.

Many challenges lay ahead, and it will be up to the new government to counter massive corruption, (re)establish security, curb sectarianism, reignite and diversify economic growth, and manage the return and resettlement of IDPs. Another dilemma is represented by the Kurdish issue: if the ambition for KRG's independence seems to have been temporarily put aside after Baghdad's strong reaction against the referendum held last September, the question of the disputed areas has been pending for 13 years now, and urgently needs to be fixed.