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IRAQ 15 YEARS ON: A NEW BEGINNING?

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Fifteen years after the demise of the Saddam Hussein regime, Iraq is still struggling to keep faith with the promises generated by the fall of one of the most brutal regimes ever ascending to power, able to maintain its grip on the “land of the two rivers” for decades despite internal opposition, external pressure and ill-fated military operations. With all its problems and flaws, the constitution approved in 2005 is one of the few testimonies to a post-Saddam era that, despite its uncertainties and the huge mistakes made in the managing of the transitional period, was defined by faith in a “new Iraq” to be built over the ashes of the Baathist regime:

“We, the people of Iraq, who have just risen from our stumble, and who are looking with confidence to the future through a republican, federal, democratic, pluralistic system, have resolved with the determination of our men, women, elderly, and youth to respect the rule of law, to establish justice and equality, to cast aside the politics of aggression, to pay attention

to women and their rights, the elderly and their concerns, and children and their affairs, to spread the culture of diversity, and to defuse terrorism.

We the people of Iraq of all components and shades have taken upon ourselves to decide freely and with our choice to unite our future and to take lessons from yesterday for tomorrow, to draft, through the values and ideals of the heavenly messages and the findings of science and man’s civilisation, this lasting constitution. The adherence to this constitution preserves for Iraq its free union, its people, its land and its sovereignty”¹.

Unfortunately, the years following the approval of this controversial document proved how difficult the task set was, highlighting the depth of the fissures permeating the Iraqi socio-political fabric and the extent of the polarisation processes threatening to tear it apart. The mistakes made by the Coalition Provisional Authority (CPA), the sectarian war lurking in the

¹ Preamble to the Iraqi Constitution, October 2005

shadows since 2004 that erupt in all its depth with the Samarra bombing (2006), the bitter fight that pit the offspring of al-Qaeda in Iraq (later renamed "Islamic State in Iraq") against the *sahwa* councils, the promises betrayed by the second Nuri al-Maliki administration (2010-2014), the deep crisis generated by the ascendance of the self-proclaimed Islamic State (IS) and the independentist agendas expressed by important strata of Iraqi society, all contributed to weakening the bonds of a country continuously described as on the verge of definitive collapse. In addition to these destabilising factors were widespread corruption, increasing polarisation along ethno-sectarian lines, external influences, high unemployment rates, weak institutions and a rule of law system challenged by a "multiple loyalties phenomenon" evident at all levels.

Yet, despite all these flaws and perils, the Iraqi polity survived and is still an important force to reckon with. To be sure, the "new Iraq" was and still largely is miles apart from the model set forth by the preamble to the 2005 Constitution, proving time and time again the state's inability to cope with the needs and aspirations of its people. However, one cannot forget what Iraq was after the fall of the Saddam Hussein regime and the extent of the progresses achieved. After 2003, state institutions simply did not exist anymore: the army disbanded, the Baath Party was outlawed, much of the Iraqi *intelligencija* expatriated or was barred from contributing to the country's reconstruction. All this in the midst of heightening external influences and a socio-political vacuum characterised by the emergence of a wide array of non-state actors who came to dominate the life of huge segments of the

Iraqi population both in rural and urban areas.

Fifteen years on, Iraq is set to hold a new round of parliamentary elections after the double consultations of 2005 and the voting of 2010 and 2014. While the May 2018 consultations cannot attest to Iraq's definitive transition to democracy, or be considered a panacea for the many evils affecting the "land of the two rivers", they do represent a crucial opportunity to rewrite the fate of the country. This holds particularly true as Iraq is getting back on its feet after the harsh battles fought against IS and the crisis that led to the withdrawal of peshmerga forces from the region of Kirkuk and most of the areas disputed between Baghdad and the Kurdistan Regional Government (KRG).

In all likelihood, the vote will lead to prolonged negotiations and to a socio-political spectrum divided along multiple lines. Yet for the first time in years, political agendas and programs seem to have overshadowed a debate that for too long has centered on sectarian dynamics and equilibriums only. Even more important, growing strata of Iraqi society are pushing for the definition of a set of reforms able to cope with the many challenges affecting the country: be they the launching of a true reconciliation process, the definition of disputed areas status or Erbil-Baghdad relations.

In one way or another, after years of despair and tragedies, the upcoming Iraqi elections have the potential to spark a new beginning for the "land of the two rivers"; a "new era" able to revive the hopes generated by the end of the Baathist regime. An opportunity no one can afford to squander.