

# American Foreign Policy Council

## IRAQ

### QUICK FACTS

Population: Number: 38,146,025  
(estimated July 2016)

Area: 438,317 sq km

Ethnic Groups: Arab 75-80%,  
Kurdish 15-20%, Turkoman,  
Assyrian, or other 5%

Religions: Muslim 99% (Shi'a 60-  
65%, Sunni 32-37%), Christian or  
other at 1%

Government Type: Federal  
Parliamentary Democracy

GDP (official exchange rate): \$165.1  
billion (2015 est.)



*Map and Quick Facts courtesy of the CIA World Factbook (Updated November 2016)*

### OVERVIEW

*Iraq's history contains both secular and Islamist currents. Shi'a and Sunni Islamist movements formed in Iraq largely in response to Saddam Hussein's secular nationalist Ba'athist regime, and as part of the political Islam movement sweeping the region in general. Most of these Islamist parties existed in exile or in hiding for much of 1980s and 1990s and emerged in Iraq only after the fall of Saddam in 2003. Since that time, both Sunni and Shi'a Islamist parties have played an important role in Iraq's political system. Although the 2010 parliamentary election saw the rise of secular political coalitions, rising sectarianism gave new life to Islamist currents. An extreme example was the Islamic State, which took Iraqi towns and cities in early 2014, as well as certain Shi'a paramilitary*

*groups in the Popular Mobilization Units (PMU), which were formed as a response to the Islamic State. Both Sunni and Shi'a Islamist militant groups are active in Iraq and have fueled sectarian violence. In 2015, the Iraqi Security forces, supported by the PMUs, began re-taking territory from the Islamic State. The question of Shi'a militant groups, however, remains more uncertain as some of these groups have sought a more prominent role in Iraqi society yet remain unwilling to integrate into the state apparatus. As Iraq's nascent democratic system evolves, secular and Islamist forces will continue to vie for influence and power.*

## ISLAMIST ACTIVITY

Islamist activity in Iraq today takes three distinct forms. Given that the Shi'a population of Iraq is significantly larger than that of Iraq's Sunnis, there exists a wider array of Shi'a militant groups. However, Sunni groups, especially the Islamic State, pose a significant threat to the Iraq state. Islamic activity among the Kurdish population is the most minimal of the three groups.

### *Shi'a Groups*

The main Shi'a political factions in Iraq are the Dawa Islamiya Party, the Sadrist Trend, and al-Majlis al-A'ala al-Islami al-Iraqi, (the Islamic Supreme Council of Iraq, or ISCI). The main Shia military factions are known as al-hashd al-shaabi (the Popular Mobilization Units, or PMU), including the Badr Organization, Asaib ahl al-Haq, Kataib Hezbollah, and others. Many of these paramilitaries have their own political identities. Smaller Islamist groups include the National Reform Trend (led by former Prime Minister Ibrahim al-Jaafari) and the Fadhila (Islamic Virtue) Party.

### *The Islamic Dawa Party*

The Dawa Party is the oldest Shi'a Islamist party in Iraq. It emerged in the late 1950s in response to the spread of socialist and communist movements in Iraq.<sup>1</sup> Grand Ayatollah Mohammed Baqir al-Sadr, a distinguished Shi'a scholar, is widely credited as Dawa's founder.<sup>2</sup> Dawa emphasized the promotion of Islamic values and ethics and believed the right to govern was distinct from the juridical function of religious authorities. It believed that both should be subsumed under constitutional mechanisms.<sup>3</sup> In the 1980s, Sadr split from Dawa due to tensions with the *hawza* (Shi'a seminary) in Najaf, where Grand Ayatollah Abu al-Qasim al-Khoei remained wary of Sadrists. Dawa remained the leading Shi'a Islamist opposition party of the 1970s and 1980s, and as such, Saddam Hussein's Ba'athist regime fiercely persecuted its members. Throughout this time, its members remained active either hiding in Iraq or in exile. The main exiled Dawa branches existed in Iran, Syria, and the United Kingdom.

Following the 2003 Iraq war and the establishment of the Coalition Provisional Authority (CPA), Dawa emerged as one of the main Shi'a political groups in Iraq. The CPA was a transitional government for Iraq that lasted from March 2003 to April 2004. All of Iraq's Prime Ministers since the creation of the CPA (which lasted from March 2003 to April 2004) have been members of Dawa, including Prime Minister Nouri al-Maliki (2006-2014), who had a reputation for weakness, was selected as a compromise candidate in 2006. Until 2008, he relied heavily on other Shi'a factions, such as ISCI and the Sadrists for political support. However, with U.S. support in the form of a "surge" of military personnel, he was able to launch a political and military campaign against both Sunni (AQI) and Shi'a (JAM) militant groups, thus solidifying his leadership and the political supremacy of Dawa. Maliki then formed the State of Law Coalition (*Dawlat al-Qanoon*), which has remains the umbrella organization for Dawa to the present day. Maliki became the single most powerful political actor in Iraq during his second term as premier (2010-2014), when he centralized power and weakened Sunni and Shia political opponents.<sup>4</sup>

The emergence of the Islamic State, however, caused Maliki to step down and allow another compromise candidate, current Prime Minister Haider al-Abadi, to emerge. Although they come from the same party, Abadi and Maliki are political rivals. Due to this schism, and despite continuing to be the strongest party, Dawa has split into two factions.

### *The Sadrist Trend*

The Sadrist Trend is a nationalist religious movement founded by Shi'a cleric Mohammed Sadeq al-Sadr in the 1990s. Across southern Iraq and in Baghdad, the movement gained widespread support from poor Shi'a communities that were drawn to its emphasis on economic and social relief, along with its focus on traditional Islamic law and customs.<sup>5</sup> The Sadrists believe that religious leaders should take an active role in political and social affairs—a position that is closely aligned with the current Iranian regime, but distinguished by their desire for an Iraqi Supreme Leader (rather than simply allegiance to the Iranian Supreme Leader, Ayatollah Ali Khamenei).<sup>6</sup> Sadrists oppose the interference of any external actor (including both the United States and Iran) in Iraqi domestic affairs.

In 1999, Saddam Hussein ordered the assassination of Sadeq al-Sadr and his two oldest sons, causing much of the movement's leadership to go into hiding. After the 2003 invasion of Iraq, the Sadrist Trend re-emerged under the leadership of his youngest son, Muqtada al-Sadr. The Sadrists vehemently opposed the presence of U.S. forces in Iraq. They also opposed Baghdad's new elite of exiled returnees who had spent decades away from the country – referring to these leaders as "foreigner Iraqis."<sup>7</sup> Indeed, Muqtada al-Sadr was able to derive considerable legitimacy on the street by

making the claim that he was the only leader who had lived in Iraq under the Saddam Hussein dictatorship. The Sadrist Trend and its *Jaysh al-Mahdi* (JAM) militia were a powerful force during the height of sectarian violence in Iraq from 2004 to 2007.

The movement lost significant influence as U.S. and Iraqi forces degraded the JAM during security offensives in 2007 and 2008. Nouri al-Maliki's *Saulat al-Fursan* (Operation Knights Charge) effectively drove out Sadr, who disbanded the JAM and went into exile in Iran.

In 2011, Sadr returned from exile. His time in Iran had turned his sympathies away from the Islamic Republic of Iran and back toward Iraq, and his public discourse reflected this change in sentiment. He restructured the movement to emphasize political and social programs and a need to combat ineffective governance.<sup>8</sup> Sadr has also presented himself as cross-sectarian – he worked with Kurdistan Region President Massoud Barzani and secular leader Ayad Allawi (who represented Iraq's Sunnis) in an effort to depose Maliki in 2012. His emphasis on combatting corruption and calling for a change to the political system of *mubasasa*, which grants power based on identity, has won Sadr significant support with the population. The Sadrist political wing, *al-Ahrar*, is successful in local and national elections.

Moreover, in 2016, Sadr inspired a protest movement that saw millions take to the street of Baghdad's Tahrir Square.<sup>9</sup> In March 2016, Sadr trespassed into Baghdad's Green Zone, where most of the international embassies in the city are. Rather than reprimanding or arresting Sadr for trespassing, the Iraqi greeted him respectfully.<sup>10</sup> The Sadrists continue to maintain a militant wing, called Sarayat al-Salam (the Peace Brigades), which has less sectarian connotations than the previous JAM. The Peace Brigades have fought alongside Sunni tribes in Anbar, and remain skeptical of the better-funded, Iranian-backed Shi'a paramilitaries – particularly Asaib ahl al-Haq and Kataib Hezbollah.

### *The Islamic Supreme Council of Iraq*

The third significant Islamist political actor is the Islamic Supreme Council of Iraq (ISCI). ISCI is not a native Iraqi organization, having originally been founded in Iran in 1982, following Saddam Hussein's crackdown on Dawa, SCIRI also boasted a dedicated militia, Badr Corps. The Iranian government later facilitated the formation of SCIRI in Iraq during the Iran-Iraq War to support Shi'a activism against the Saddam regime.

Following the 2003 U.S.-led invasion, SCIRI became a dominant political force in the post-CPA government, while maintaining its close relationship with Iran. Eventually, it was forced to disband its Badr militia, which became an independent political entity named the Badr Organization.<sup>11</sup> In the mid 2000s, many Badr members were incorporated into the Iraqi Security Forces, where they retained their fighting status.<sup>12</sup>

As time went on, Iran only increased its interference in Iraq. In an effort to distance itself from Iran, SCIRI changed its name to ISCI in 2007.<sup>13</sup> In addition, the group began to focus more heavily on Iraqi nationalism. It also shifted its primary religious allegiance away from Iran's Supreme Leader, the Ayatollah Khamenei, to Grand Ayatollah Ali Sistani, an Iraqi cleric who believes religious leaders should not be involved in the administration of the state. Sistani is the head of the Najaf *hawza* (seminary) and as such is the head of the *marjai'ya* (Shia religious establishment).

ISCI, however, remains only the third most-influential Shia party. Its inability to broaden its political base and the continued perception that it maintains close and historical ties with the Iranian regime have proved to be significant stumbling blocks in the group's development. Furthermore, leadership personality has affected the group's standing. After the death of ISCI leader Abd al-Aziz al-Hakim in August 2009, his son, Ammar al-Hakim, assumed control of the movement.<sup>14</sup> Hakim has a reputation of being unwilling to take a stance and working from the shadows. As such, he has not been able to become a dominant figure in Iraqi politics.

In March 2012, the ISCI split from the Badr Organization further weakened its position. The split was partly due to leadership squabbles in the wake of poor performance in the 2010 parliamentary elections.<sup>15</sup> More importantly, the two organizations disagreed over whether to support the incumbent prime minister, Maliki. The Badr organization, under the leadership of Hadi al-Ameri, split off to continue supporting the prime minister. Hakim, however, was wary of Maliki's consolidation of power and hesitant to support his bid for a second term as premier. More importantly, the two organizations disagreed over whether to support the incumbent prime minister, Maliki. The Badr organization, under the leadership of Hadi al-Ameri, split off to continue supporting Maliki. Under the auspices of the PMU, and while an active participant in the fight against the Islamic State, ISCI maintains a military wing. Its militias include the Ashura Brigades and the Supporters of the Faith brigades. These groups receive funding and weapons from the prime minister's office, and abide by the central government's policy decisions. They often fight alongside the Iraqi Security Forces.

A key ideological question of leadership divides ISCI from Dawa and the Sadrists. ISCI retains its Iranian roots as manifested in its belief that clergy should lead society (a doctrine known as *wilaya al-faqih*). By contrast, Dawa and the Sadrists, stemming from the influence of Mohammad Baqir al-Sadr, believe that the community should be dominant in society (*wilayat al-umma*).

The various Shi'a political parties differ in their views of the role of federalism in Iraq. In 2008, there was an important shift in Iraqi politics away from Islamist and sectarian movements. In the 2009 provincial elections, Shi'a parties sought to style themselves as nationalist, secular, cross-sectarian movements in response to growing popular sentiment and a rejection of the sectarian violence that fueled Iraq's civil war

in 2006 and 2007.<sup>16</sup> This was particularly evident during the formation of electoral coalitions in the run-up to the country's 2010 parliamentary election. Notably, Prime Minister Maliki's *Dawa* Party abstained from joining the main Shi'a coalition, the Iraqi National Alliance, and instead created a separate electoral list, the State of Law Coalition.<sup>17</sup> The victory of the Iraqiyya coalition, which was a secular nationalist list comprised of a number of Sunni political parties but led by a secular Shi'a politician, exemplified this trend.

However, there has been a reversal of this anti-sectarian trend in recent years, and following 2010 Shi'a parties returned to identifying as Shi'a in order to stop the emergence of al-Iraqiyya. Since that time, sectarian identity and Shi'a Islamism have manifested a renewed and important role in Iraqi politics.

Like *Dawa*, the Sadrist Trend supports a strong central Iraqi government, but opposes an American or Iranian presence in Iraq. They also oppose the current elite, which they believe are corrupt and unrepresentative of the people.

#### *The Popular Mobilization Units (PMU)*

Following the emergence of the Islamic State, which began taking over Iraqi towns and cities in early 2014, Maliki established the PMU, which was later further legitimized by Sistani's *fatwa*, which called on Iraqis to volunteer to fight against the group. The PMU is not a single organization; rather, it consists of some 70-100 militias, some of which groups are loyal to Sistani, while others, like the previously mentioned Ashura Brigade, are the militant wings of political groups. However, the most powerful and formidable PMUs are those backed by Iran. Those groups tend to be better-funded and better-equipped than their wholly Iraqi counterparts.

Hadi al-Ameri's Badr Organization, Abu Muhandis' *Kataib Hezbollah* (KH), and Qais Khazali's *Asaib ahl al-Haq* (AAH) are all groups that are fighting in direct coordination with Iran. They are known to receive extensive support from the Qods Force paramilitary unit of Iran's Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC-QF), including training, funding, and supplies. They share strong relations with the IRGC-QF's leader Qassem Solaimani.<sup>18</sup>

KH emerged in 2007, and since that time has conducted numerous attacks on U.S. and Iraqi forces.<sup>19</sup> KH has used advanced tactics and systems, including Improved Rocket-Assisted Mortars (IRAMs).<sup>20</sup> The group has remained active following the withdrawal of U.S. forces from Iraq in 2011.<sup>21</sup> It has reportedly conducted attacks against the camps of the *Mujahedeen-e-Khalq*, an Iranian dissident group with elements based in Iraq. KH fighters are also fighting in Syria at the behest of the Iranian and Assad regimes.<sup>22</sup>

AAH is an offshoot of JAM and was formed following the split between Muqtada al-Sadr and Qais Khazali.<sup>23</sup> Khazali, who was captured by Coalition forces in March

2007 but subsequently released as part of a prisoner exchange in January 2010, is the leader of AAH. Since the departure of U.S. forces in December 2011, AAH has expressed its desire to participate in Iraqi politics and rebranded itself as a nationalist organization also dedicated to Islamic resistance. It has established political offices throughout the country and has instituted religious and social outreach programs.<sup>24</sup> AAH's turn towards politics has heightened its competition with the Sadrist Trend. Sadr and Khazali have publicly traded accusations and the tensions have even resulted in violent clashes.<sup>25</sup> Maliki cultivated strong ties with AAH as a counterbalance to the Sadrists and other opponents. The second group includes paramilitaries closer to Sistani. The Ali al-Akbar Brigades and the Abbadiyah Brigades are part of this group.

The third group is made up of militias that represent wings of political parties. For instance, the above-mentioned ISCI militias, or Sadr's *Sarayat al-Salam*, fall into this category.<sup>26</sup>

### *Sunni Groups*

The Sunni political landscape has shifted dramatically in post-2003 Iraq. The major ideological debate among the Sunni Islamist community has been over the question of cooperating with Baghdad.<sup>27</sup> During the civil war (2006-2007) and then again following the emergence of the Islamic State in Mosul and elsewhere (2014-present), many Sunni Islamists have chosen to reject the central government, which they perceive to be a Shi'a-Iranian dictatorship. However, during the Anwar Awakening and subsequent period of comparatively good governance in Iraq (2008-2010), Sunni Islamists participated in the political process.

### *The Iraqi Islamic Party*

The primary Sunni Islamist political party in Iraq has been the Iraqi Islamic Party (IIP). It is currently led by Ayad al-Samarraie. The IIP has its earliest roots in the mid-1940s or early 1950s, when Mohammed al-Sawwaf, an Iraqi studying in Egypt, met Muslim Brotherhood founder Hassan al-Banna.<sup>28</sup> Upon his return to Iraq, al-Sawwaf and another activist, Amjad al-Zahawi Mahmood, founded an Iraqi organization modeled on the Muslim Brotherhood, known as the Islamic Brotherhood Society.<sup>29</sup> Later, in 1960, the Iraqi Islamic Party was formally established afterafter Abdul-Karim Qassem's government allowed political parties to form in Iraq.<sup>30</sup> Following the overthrow of Qassem's government by the Ba'ath Party in 1963, the IIP was violently suppressed but continued its operations clandestinely and in exile.<sup>31</sup> Ayad al-Samarraie, who had been the Secretary General of the IIP since 1970, fled Iraq in 1980.<sup>32</sup>

Following the fall of Saddam Hussein's Ba'athist regime in 2003, many IIP leaders, including al-Samarraie, returned to Iraq and the party re-emerged. In the December 2005 parliamentary election, the IIP ran as the leading party of a Sunni coalition known as *Tawafuq* (Iraqi Accord Front) and won 44 seats in the 275-member parliament. From 2005 to early 2009, *Tawafuq* was the dominant Sunni political presence

in the parliament, though it was seen by many Sunni Iraqis as an exile party that did not represent their interests. By early 2009, *Tawafuq* began to disintegrate as its constituent parties left the coalition during the debate over the selection of the parliamentary speaker.<sup>33</sup>

In recent years, the influence of the IIP has waned as a variety of other Sunni political groups and leaders have emerged. Today, IIP is a divided group, with some of its leaders sharing close relationships with Shia leaders. For instance, parliamentary speaker Salim Jabouri hails from IIP and shares a close relationship with Maliki. Others in the IIP, however, blame Maliki for the breakdown of Iraqi governance.

In 2009 and 2010, the IIP lost a considerable portion of its electorate to the secular nationalist coalition of former Prime Minister Allawi's *al-Iraqiyya*, also called the Iraqiyah list. By the 2010 parliamentary election, the vast number of Sunni political entities joined the Iraqiyah List. Even IIP leader Tariq al-Hashimi left the group to join *al-Iraqiyya*. IIP was the only party to run under the *Tawafuq* banner in 2010, and consequently, the total number of seats held by *Tawafuq* shrank from 44 to just 6.

#### *The Association of Muslim Scholars*

The Association of Muslim Scholars (*Hay'at al-'Ulama' al-Muslimeen*) formed immediately after the U.S.-led invasion in April of 2003. The group is not a political party, but rather a group of influential Sunni clerics and scholars seeking to represent the Sunni voice in a Shi'a-dominated Baghdad. It was initially led by Harith al-Dhari, a cleric who called on Iraqis to boycott the U.S.-led attempts to rebuild the Iraqi government in a *fatwa* that also called for a "national insurgency."<sup>34</sup> Such sentiments, along with the Iraqi people's fear of retaliation if they participated in the political process, combined to significantly depress voter turnout. For example, Anbar Province, which is 90% Sunni<sup>35</sup> and has often suffered from violence and high levels of insurgency, had a voter turnout of just 1% in the January parliamentary interim elections of 2005.<sup>36</sup> However, by the December 2005 elections for a permanent government, national voter turnout rose to 77%.<sup>37</sup> The group was an important driving force of Sunni insurgency in 2006. However, the group came into conflict with AQI and its leader, Abu Musab al-Zarqawi, particularly on the question as to the type and scope of acceptable violence. Following Harith's death, his son, Muthanna, has taken over the organization, which continues to claim to speak on behalf of disenfranchised Sunnis. It also relies on rousing a sense of Iraqi nationalism.

#### *The Islamic State (formerly al-Qaeda in Iraq - AQI)*

The Islamic State initially grew out of an al-Qaeda offshoot, al-Qaeda in Iraq (AQI). AQI members included native Sunni Iraqis, members of the Kurdish Islamist group Ansar AL-Islam, and some foreigners, including its Jordanian-born leader, Abu Musab al-Zarqawi.<sup>38</sup> AQI was responsible for some of the deadliest car bombs and suicide



bomb attacks in Iraq, as well as a surge in sectarian violence. AQI lost many of its strongholds in northern and western Iraq following the security offensives that began in 2007; however, it continued to operate in areas of northern Iraq, especially the city of Mosul, and in areas of Diyala, Salah ad-Din, Anbar, Baghdad, and its surrounding areas. Though AQI leaders pledged their allegiance to al-Qaeda in 2004, the group lost the affiliation and was no longer able to retain operational links with al-Qaeda leaders based in the tribal areas of Pakistan.<sup>39</sup>

The group subsequently transformed into the Islamic State in Iraq and the Levant (ISIL). Back in Iraq, the group maintained a largely passive presence, but as Maliki began suppressing and attacking Iraqi Sunnis, the Islamic State grew in numbers. Finally, in early 2014, it began taking over Iraqi territory, beginning in Fallujah and leading to Mosul, Iraq's second largest city, which was taken in June 2014. Following this, ISIL formally declared a Caliphate and changed its name to the Islamic State. The group's leader is currently Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi. In 2016, the group has suffered defeats at the hands of the Iraqi security forces, the PMU, and the Kurdish *peshmerga*, reversing a trend of steady territorial gains and political growth. As of this writing, it has lost Ramadi, Fallujah, and Tikrit. To maintain legitimacy, it has altered its tactics, reverting to the AQI-style guerilla warfare and attacks on civilians in Baghdad and other major cities that took place a decade ago.

The Army of the Men of the Naqshbandi Order (JRTN) The Army of the Men of the Naqshbandi Order (*Jaysh Rajal al-Tariqah al-Naqshbandia*, or JRTN) is a Sunni Sufi militant group that was founded in December 2006 in response to the execution of Saddam Hussein.<sup>40</sup> JRTN is linked to former Iraqi Ba'athist officials, including Izzat Ibrahim al-Duri, one of Saddam's closest deputies.<sup>41</sup> A main goal of the group is the return of the Ba'ath Party in Iraq.<sup>42</sup> JRTN operates primarily in the northern Iraqi provinces of Ninewah, Kirkuk, Salah ad-Din, and Diyala, where it conducts attacks.

### *Kurdish Groups*

Political Islam has also developed extensively in Iraqi Kurdistan, also called the Kurdistan Region, an autonomous region in northern Iraq run by the Kurdistan regional government. It is particularly strong in the city of Halabja, but occurs in other major areas as well. The largest Kurdish Islamist political groups are the Kurdistan Islamic Union (KIU) and the Kurdistan Islamic Group (KIG).<sup>43</sup>

### *The Kurdistan Islamic Union*

The KIU, also known as *Yekgirtu*, was established in 1994. Principally an adherent to Sunni Islam, the group was closely aligned with the Muslim Brotherhood. The group describes itself as "an Islamic reformative political party that strives to solve all political, social, economic and cultural matters of the people in Kurdistan from an Islamic

perspective which can achieve the rights, general freedom, and social justice.”<sup>44</sup> It is currently led by Secretary General Sheikh Salah ad-Din Muhammad Baha-al-Din. The KIU has no armed forces of its own, and is most active in charity work.

### *The Kurdistan Islamic Group*

The KIG was established in 2001 as a splinter faction of the KIU. It is led by Mala Ali Bapir. The KIG is believed to have close ties with extremist Islamist armed groups, such as *Ansar al-Islam*, which has been involved in attacks against leaders of the predominant political parties in Kurdistan, the Kurdistan Democratic Party (KDP) and the Patriotic Union of Kurdistan (PUK).<sup>45</sup> Bapir, however, claims his group has abandoned violence.

Nevertheless, the political influence of the KIU and KIG cannot compete with that of the KDP, PUK, and Change List (*Gorran*), which dominate Kurdish political and social life. Of the 111 seats in the Kurdish parliament, the KIU and KIG have only four.<sup>46</sup> At the national level, the influence of Kurdish Islamist parties is even further diminished. The KIU has 4 seats in the 325-seat Iraqi parliament, while the KIG has only 2 seats. The emergence of Gorran shifted the balance of power and gave the KIU and KIG another ally in the Kurdish Regional Government parliament with which to challenge the dominant Kurdish parties. However, Kurdish Islamist parties remain only marginal actors in Iraqi political life.

## **ISLAMISM AND SOCIETY**

97 percent of the Iraqi population is Muslim, and of that group, 60-65 percent are Shi’a Muslims.<sup>47</sup> Iraqi Shi’a primarily live in central and southern Iraq, though there are Shi’a communities in the north. 32-37 percent of Iraqi Muslims are Sunnis, and they are concentrated mainly in central and northern Iraq.<sup>48</sup> Of Iraq’s more than 30 million citizens, 75-80 percent are Arabs; 15-20 percent are Kurds; and Turkmen, Chaldean, Assyrian, Armenians, and other minority groups comprise the remaining 5 percent.<sup>49</sup> Religious minorities, such as Christians, Mandeans, and Yazidis, comprise the remaining three percent of Iraq’s population; however, these non-dominant ethnic and religious populations have declined significantly since 2003.<sup>50</sup>

According to the U.S. military, more than 77,000 Iraqis were killed during the height of sectarian violence from 2004 to 2008; Iraqi government statistics put that number at over 85,000.<sup>51</sup> According to the UN, the emergence of the Islamic State in Iraq led to “staggering violence” with some 18,800 killed between January 1, 2014 and October 31, 2015.<sup>52</sup> That violence shows no sign of abating.

Following the fall of Saddam Hussein’s secular regime in 2003, both Sunni and Shi’a Iraqis were able to openly express their Islamic faith in ways that they had not been able in decades. This was especially true for Shi’a Iraqis, who for the first time in decades could take part in the religious pilgrimages to the holy cities of Najaf and

Karbala in southern Iraq. Exiled Sunni and Shi'a Islamist parties and movements returned to Iraq, where they played key roles in shaping Iraq's emerging political system. Iraqi politics, after 2003, became defined by identities – making political Islam an important tool for legitimacy.

Parts in the north of Iraq have, during various periods, fallen under strict Islamic rule. From 2004 to 2007 and from 2014 to the present day, as the security situation has deteriorated and the Iraqi state proved itself unable to capably govern, Sunni Islamist militant groups (namely, AQI then the Islamic State) have grown in strength and violently imposed their strict interpretations of Islamic law. They established strongholds in the predominantly Sunni areas of northern and western Iraq, such as the Anbar or Ninewah province. There, they brutally enforced harsh rules, including the banning of smoking and singing, prohibiting men from shaving their beards, forcing marriages and raping local women, such as Yazidi women, forcing minorities to flee their homes, enforcing the wearing of strict Islamic dress by women, and maiming or killing anyone caught violating their radical laws.<sup>53</sup>

In the south, Shi'a militia groups have also at times enforced strict rules in the areas of Baghdad and southern Iraq that were under their control. During the 2005-2007 civil war, sectarian violence soared, as Shi'a militia groups violently attacked mixed areas of Baghdad.

At other times, however, sectarianism has been rejected. In 2008, Iraqis of all sects and ethnicities grew frustrated with the years of strife, under which Islamist parties and militias dominated. Sunni tribal leaders in Anbar province rejected AQI rule and took arms against Sunni extremists, in a movement that became known as the Anbar Awakening. Awakening movements spread across Sunni areas from 2007 to 2008.<sup>54</sup> This, coupled with the U.S.-led security offensive that cleared first Baghdad and later the provinces surrounding the capital, significantly degraded AQI's capabilities and networks. During the Surge, Iraqi forces supported by the U.S. also targeted Shi'a militia groups in Baghdad and throughout central and southern Iraq. This culminated in the Iraqi-led operations in Basra and Baghdad, which dealt a significant blow to JAM and culminated in Sadr's announcement to disband his once-fearsome militia.<sup>55</sup> By mid-2008, when the last of the Surge forces left Iraq, violence had plummeted by more than 60 percent.<sup>56</sup>

The 2009 and 2010 elections saw the reorientation of Iraqi politics away from Islamism in a manner that reflected changes in society. As discussed above, Islamist exile parties like ISCI and the IIP lost considerable influence.<sup>57</sup> New political realities emerged in Iraq, and there was widespread anti-incumbent sentiment and a growing demand for secular, nationalist, and technocratic government that could preserve security, provide essential services, and reduce corruption.<sup>58</sup> These themes played an important role in the provincial and parliamentary elections.

Nonetheless, Iraqi society remains heavily fragmented and sectarian divisions still exist, providing an opening for the re-emergence of the Islamic State.<sup>59</sup> Iraq's leading Shi'a parties, Dawa and the Sadrist Trend, retain their Islamist character and have emphasized this identity to shore up support.

## ISLAMISM AND THE STATE

Iraq is a parliamentary democracy and not a theocratic republic like its neighbor, Iran. The Iraqi Constitution guarantees the democratic rights of all Iraqi citizens as well as "full religious rights to freedom of religious belief and practice of all individuals."<sup>60</sup> Yet the Iraqi Constitution stipulates Islam as the official religion of the state and makes clear that no law may be enacted that contradicts the established provisions of Islam. The ambiguities inherent in these provisions have led to challenges in interpretation and meaning. In some areas of Iraq, local governments have adopted stricter interpretations of Islamic law. The provincial councils in Basra and Najaf, for instance, have banned the consumption, sales, or transit of alcohol.<sup>61</sup> In November 2010, the Baghdad provincial council used a resolution from 1996 to similarly ban the sale of alcohol.<sup>62</sup> There have been occasional violent raids or attacks on venues believed to be selling alcohol.

The Iraqi government's response to Islamist militant groups has varied. Islamist parties dominated provincial and national governments from 2004 to 2008. During that time, the state was both unwilling and unable to challenge the Islamist militant groups that threatened the state's legitimacy. Shi'a militia groups penetrated elements of the Iraqi Security Forces, and certain paramilitary and police units were accused of perpetrating brutal sectarian violence.<sup>64</sup> The threat from extremist groups ultimately jeopardized the functioning of the Iraqi state by late 2006. Several months later, in early 2007, U.S. forces announced a change of strategy in Iraq and the deployment of 20,000 additional troops, in what became known as the Surge. As the counterinsurgency offensives of the Surge unfolded, the Iraqi state also became more willing and able to challenge Sunni and Shi'a extremist groups as their influence and capability waned.<sup>65</sup> U.S. support during this time was critical in giving the Iraqi Security Forces, and even Iraq's political leadership, the confidence to move against extremist groups as well as in preventing the manipulation of the security forces for political ends. U.S. and Iraqi leaders also worked to professionalize the Iraqi Security Forces, expand their capabilities, and root out corrupt or sectarian elements.<sup>66</sup> U.S. and Iraqi operations from 2007 to the present significantly degraded both Sunni and Shi'a extremist groups and reduced violence, doing so by over 90 percent.<sup>67</sup>

Today, the Iraqi forces continue to robustly target the Islamic State in Iraq. Despite the growing influence of the PMU, which Amnesty International and Human Rights Watch have both criticized for committing war crimes, the government has decided not to act against Shi'a militant groups. Given the weakness of the central govern-

ment, it is unclear whether the Iraqi state can maintain the will or muster the ability to sufficiently check Shi'a militant groups (some of which continue to receive Iranian assistance) or whether political interests will enable such groups to expand.

## ENDNOTES

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