Iraq

INTRODUCTION

Iraq's contemporary history is replete with both secular and Islamist political currents. Shi'a and Sunni Islamist movements in Iraq formed in response to Saddam Hussein's secular nationalist Ba'athist regime, and as part of the regional political Islam movement. Most of these Islamist parties existed in exile or in hiding for much of 1980s and 1990s, emerging after the fall of Saddam Hussein's regime 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. One extreme example was the Islamic State, which took Iraqi towns and cities in early 2014; another is the presence of certain Shi'a paramilitary groups within the Popular Mobilization Units (PMU, also known as the Popular Mobilization Forces, or PMF), an umbrella armed organization formed as a response to the Islamic State.

Sunni and Shi'a Islamist militant groups active in Iraq continue to fuel sectarian violence throughout the country. In 2015, the Iraqi Security Forces, supported by the PMUs, began re-taking territory from the Islamic State. By the end of 2017, Iraqi forces had retaken most of the territory that had been lost, including Mosul, the country's second largest city. Currently, in the so-called post-ISIS context, the question of Shi'a militant groups remains. Some have sought a more prominent political and economic role in Iraqi society, yet remain unwilling to integrate into the state apparatus or be held accountable under the rule of law. As Iraq's nascent democratic system evolves, both secular and Islamist forces will continue to vie for influence and power.

ISLAMIST ACTIVITY

Islamist activity in Iraq today takes three distinct forms based along ethno-sectarian lines. Because Iraq's Shi'a population is significantly larger than that of the country's Sunnis, there is a wider array of Shi'a militant groups, ranging from sectarian to nationalist orientations. Salafi-*jihadi* Sunni groups, such as the Islamic State, continue to pose a significant threat to the Iraqi state. Additionally, among the country's Kurdish population, Islamic activity does exist – some Kurds have joined Salafi-*jihadi* groups, and others have joined the PMU – but remains relatively minimal.

Shi'a Groups

Since 2003, the main Shi'a political factions in Iraq have been the Ḥizb al-Daʿwa al-Islamiyya (Islamic *Dawa* Party), al-Tayyar al-Sadri (the Sadrist Trend), and al-Majlis al-A'ala al-Islami al-Iraqi (the Islamic Supreme Council of Iraq, or ISCI). During Iraq's first post-invasion elections, in 2005, the main Shi'a Islamist groups registered under one political bloc, known as the al-Itilaf al-Iraqi al-Muwahhad (United Iraq Alliance, or UIA). Since then, both ISCI and *Dawa* have suffered internal ruptures. In 2010, the Badr Organization, an armed faction, split from ISCI. Then, in the summer of 2017, ISCI leader Ammar al-Hakim split from the group to form the Tayar al-Hikmah al-Watani (National Wisdom Movement). Since 2003, *Dawa* has also suffered internal divisions and, as a result, lost the prime minister's office following the 2018 elections. Ahead of this vote, Abadi decided to form a new electoral list, the Tahaluf al-Nasr (Victory Alliance) to compete against his *Dawa* compatriot Nouri al-Maliki, who headed the Itilaf Dawlat al-Qanun (State of Law Coalition). During this election, Shi'a Islamist groups competed in separate electoral coalitions, some of which included groups and officials who were not Islamist or not Shi'a. These coalitions included Tahaluf al-Nasr (Haider al-Abadi's Victory Alliance), Nouri al-Maliki's Itilaf Dawlat al-Qanun (State of Law Coalition, or SOL), Hadi al-Ameri's Tahaluf al-Fateh (Conquest Alliance) and Muqtada al-Sadr's Tahaluf al-Sairoon (Revolutionaries for Reform Alliance).

Today, the main Shi'a military factions fall under the al-Hashd al-Shaabi (Popular Mobilization Units, or PMUs), including the Badr Organization, Asaib ahl al-Haq, Kataib Hezbollah, and others. Many of these paramilitaries have their own political identities. In early 2018, the PMU leadership formed an electoral list named the Tahaluf al-Fatah (Conquest Alliance), which includes non-armed Shi'a Islamist groups such as ISCI.[1] Groups to which these people belong include Kataeb Hezbollah, the Imam Ali Brigades, Sayed al-Shuhada, the al-Badr Organization, and Asaib ahl al-Haq (League of the Righteous).[2] Smaller Islamist groups include the National Reform Trend (led by former Prime Minister Ibrahim al-Jaafari) and the Fadhila (Islamic Virtue) Party.

Iraq's *Atabat* units are paramilitary groups affiliated with Shia Muslim shrines. These so-called "shrine units" are made up of four main groups — Liwa Ansar al-Marjaiya, Liwa Ali al-Akbar, Firqat al-Abbas al-Qitaliyah, and Firqat al-Imam Ali al-Qitaliyah — and have no links with Iran's Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC). Instead they are affiliated with the Ayatollah Ali Sistani, the Iraqi Shi'a leader whom they regard as their source of religious emulation. In total, the *Atabat* have around 18,000 active soldiers and tens of thousands of reserves.[3]

On January 3, 2020, Major General Qassim Soleimani, commander of the Quds Force of the IRGC, as well as Jamal Jafar Muhammad Ali- al-Ibrahim (also known as Abu Mahdi al- Muhandis), deputy chairman and *de facto* leader of Iraq's Popular Mobilization Forces/ Units, were killed in an American drone strike. The PMU has since faced significant challenges in its organization and leadership succession. This has led to a rivalry between the pro-Iran faction of the PMU and those loyal to Iraq's Grand Ayatollah Ali al-Sistani.[4]

The Islamic Dawa Party

The *Dawa* Party is the oldest Shi'a Islamist party in Iraq, and enjoyed executive power from 2005 to 2018 under three prime ministers: Ibrahim al-Jaafari, Nouri al-Maliki, and Haider al-Abadi. The party emerged

in the late 1950s in response to the spread of socialist and communist movements in Iraq.[5] Grand Ayatollah Mohammed Baqir al-Sadr, a distinguished Shi'a scholar, is widely credited as *Dawa's* founder.[6] *Dawa* emphasized the promotion of Islamic values and ethics, and believed that the right to govern was distinct from the juridical function of religious authorities and that both should be subsumed under constitutional mechanisms.[7]

In the 1980s, Sadr split from *Dawa* due to tensions with the Shi'a *hawza* (seminary) in Najaf. *Dawa* remained the leading Shi'a Islamist opposition party of the 1970s and 1980s, suffering fierce persecution from Saddam Hussein's Ba'athist regime. Its members remained active and hid, either within Iraq or in exile. The main exiled *Dawa* branches were located in Iran, Syria, and the United Kingdom.

Dawa emerged as one of the main Shi'a political groups in Iraq in 2003 after the Iraq war and during the time of the Coalition Provisional Authority, the U.S.-administered transitional government that lasted from March 2003 until April 2004. Since power was handed back to Iraqi authorities, all of Iraq's Prime Ministers had been members of *Dawa* – with the exception of the current Prime Minister, Mustafa Al-Kadhimi, who was elected in May 2020. Al-Kadhimi is the first PM not to hail from a Shiite political movement.[8] Consequently, Kadhimi's appointment has caused concern in Tehran, due to his desire to limit Iran's influence in Iraq.[9]

The Sadrist Trend

The Sadrist Trend is a nationalist populist 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 drawn to its emphasis on economic and social relief, along with its focus on traditional Islamic law and customs.[10] The Sadrists believe that religious leaders should be politically and socially active, but oppose the Khomeinist notion of *wilayat al-faqih* (government of the jurists). The Sadrists are distinguished by their desire for technocratic ministers and their opposition to any external interference in Iraqi domestic affairs.[11]

In 1999, Saddam Hussein ordered the assassination of Sadeq al-Sadr and his two oldest sons, forcing much of the movement's leadership into hiding. After the 2003 invasion of Iraq, the Sadrist Trend reemerged under the leadership of Sadeq's youngest son, Muqtada al-Sadr. The Sadrists vehemently opposed the presence of U.S. forces in Iraq. They also opposed Baghdad's new elite, who had spent decades exiled from the country, referring to these leaders as "foreigner Iraqis."[12] Muqtada al-Sadr was able to derive considerable legitimacy by making the claim that he was the only leader who had lived in Iraq under Hussein's 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 offensives in 2007 and 2008. Nouri al-Maliki's *Saulat al-Fursan* (Operation Knights Charge) 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 back toward Iraq and against Iran, 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.[13]

Despite opposing the existence of the PMU, the Sadrists continue to maintain a militant wing, called Sarayat al-Salam (the Peace Brigades). 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 Hezbollah. Like *Dawa*, the Sadrist Trend supports a strong central Iraqi government, but opposes American or Iranian presence in Iraq. It also opposes the current elite are corrupt and unrepresentative of the people.

In 2018, the Sadrists formed the Tahaluf al-Sairoon (Revolutionaries for Reform Alliance), which included Islamists and secularists linked to the Iraqi Communist Party, running on an anti-corruption platform. While al- Sadr was not an official political leader for the Alliance, he put his support behind the

six- party coalition.[14] The list won 54 of 329 seats in the May 2018 elections, giving Sadr the chance to play kingmaker in the future. In March 2020, a new groups calling themselves Usbat al Tha'ireen (League of Revolutionaries) and Ashab al-Kahf (people of the Cave) emerged and have since been claiming responsibility for attacks and attempts against U.S. targets.[15] It is widely believed that these groups were created to serve as front organizations and allow Iran- backed PMF unites to continue to plan and carry out attacks against the United States without legal and/or political repercussions.[16]

The Islamic Supreme Council of Iraq
The third significant Islamist political actor in post-2003 Iraq is ISCI, previously known as the Supreme Council for the Islamic Revolution in Iraq (SCIRI). SCIRI was founded in Iran in 1982 and worked closely with the Iranian government during the Iran-Iraq War to support Shi'a activism against the Saddam regime. It had a militia called the Badr Corps. However, of all the Shi'a Islamic groups, ISCI has been affected the most by fragmentation. In the country's 2018 national elections, it only managed to secure two seats.

SCIRI became a dominant political force in the country's post-Coalition Provisional Authority government while maintaining its close relationship with Iran. In the mid 2000s, many Badr members were incorporated into the Iraqi Security Forces.[17] In an effort to distance itself from Iran, SCIRI changed its name to ISCI in 2007.[18] The group began to focus more heavily on Iraqi nationalism and shifted its primary religious allegiance away from Iran's Supreme Leader, the Ayatollah Ali Khamenei, to Grand Ayatollah Ali Sistani, who believes religious leaders should not be involved in state affairs. Sistani is the head of the Najaf Shi'a *hawza* and as such is the head of the Shi'a *marjai'ya* (religious establishment).

After the death of ISCI leader Abd al-Aziz al-Hakim in August 2009, his son, Ammar al-Hakim, assumed control of the movement. ISCI has suffered from two key defections. In March 2012, ISCI split from the Badr Organization, partly due to leadership squabbles in the wake of a poor performance in the 2010 parliamentary elections.[19] More importantly, the two organizations disagreed over whether to support Maliki as the incumbent prime minister. The Badr organization, under the leadership of Hadi al-Ameri, split off from Hakim's ISCI. Then, in 2017, Hakim left ISCI to form the National Wisdom Trend. As justification for his departure, Hakim cited internal power struggles within ISCI's senior leadership.[20]

After the Islamic State's defeat in 2017, PMUs resigned from their militia posts in order to run in the 2018 elections. Since its defeat the various Shia parties and militias, including ISCI, are no longer a cohesive group. These factions have subsequently turned on each other, using violence at times.[21]

The ideological concept of *wilayat al-faqih* (leadership by clerics) divides ISCI from *Dawa* and the Sadrists. While ISCI is closer to the belief that clergy should lead society, *Dawa* and the Sadrists, due to the influence of Mohammad Baqir al-Sadr, believe in *wilayat al-umma* (leadership by community).

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 commission. The commission was further legitimized by Grand Ayatollah Ali al-Sistani's *fatwa*, which called on Iraqis to voluntarily fight against the group. It is notable that Sistani did not intend for the volunteers to join militias, preferring them to join state institutions. However, the collapse of the state's armed forces led many volunteers to prefer the militias.

The PMU is a conglomerate of roughly 50 militias, some of which are loyal only to Sistani (known as the Shrine militias). The most powerful, better funded, and better equipped PMUs are particularly loyal to and backed by Iran. Hadi al-Ameri's Badr Organization, Abu Muhandis' *Kataib Hezbollah* (KH), and Qais Khazali's Asaib ahl al-Haq (AAH) are all known to directly coordinate with Iran.

The second group includes paramilitaries closer to Sistani. The Ali al-Akbar Brigades and the *Abbadiyah* Brigades are part of this group. The third contingent is made up of militias that represent wings of political parties. ISCI militias or Sadr's *Sarayat al-Salam* fall into this category.[22]

In November 2016, the Iraqi parliament passed a law that will transform the PMUs into a legal and

separate military corps alongside state forces.[36] Both Sadr and Sistani remain opposed to the politicization of the PMUs, and both call for the provision of greater state power. Sadr, despite being a militia leader, has claimed he is willing to disband if all other paramilitaries are also disbanded and the government monopoly on legitimate violence is restored.

In March 2019, the PMU continued its pursuit of state legitimacy, this time via the Iraqi national budget, which for the first-time recognized pay parity for PMU fighters with fighters in the MOD and MOI.

In a post-ISIS context, the PMU is redefining its identity. As the frontier has dried up, PMU groups are now competing with each other for access to territory, which brings with it access to revenues (checkpoints, taxation, etc.). Part of this process has thus included internal power struggles and arrests of potential dissidents.[23] Moving forward, the PMU are expanding their political and economic role in Iraq while maintaining their security responsibilities. They collectively hope to develop national guard style of presence, manning major roads connecting cities around southern and central Iraq.

Hikmah

As discussed above, in 2017 Ammar al-Hakim broke away from ISCI to form Tayar al-Hikmah al-Watani, or the National Wisdom Movement. In the 2018 election, *Hikmah* secured 19 seats. Hakim's ideas, the foundation for *Hikmah*'s ideology, argues for a bottom-up Islamism in tune with wider Iraqi society and is not solely based on Shi'ism. The faction also argues in favor of greater independence from Iran.

Sunni groups

The Sunni political landscape has recently shifted dramatically in Iraq. The major ideological debate among the Sunni Islamist community, however, remains the question of cooperating with Baghdad.[24] Many Sunni Islamists have chosen to reject the central government, which they perceive to be a Shi'a-Iranian dictatorship. However, during the Anbar Awakening and subsequent period of comparatively good governance in Iraq (2008-2010), Sunni Islamists participated in the political process.

The Iraqi Islamic Party

The Iraqi Islamic Party (IIP) is the only Sunni Islamist political party in Iraq, although it is not a unified organization and lacks the institutional capacity of most political parties. It is currently led by Ayad al-Samarraie. The IIP has its roots in the mid-1940s or early 1950s, when Mohammed al-Sawwaf, an Iraqi studying in Egypt, met Muslim Brotherhood founder Hassan al-Banna.[25] 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.[26] Later, in 1960, the IIP was formally established after Abdul-Karim Qassem's government allowed political parties to form in Iraq.[27] When the Ba'ath Party overthrew Qassem's government in 1963, the IIP was violently suppressed but continued clandestine operations in exile.[28] Ayad al-Samarraie, who had been the Secretary General of the IIP, fled Iraq in 1980.[29]

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. The IIP ran as part of a Sunni coalition known as *Tawafuq* (Iraqi Accord Front), which won 44 seats in the 275-member parliament in the December 2005 parliamentary election. *Tawafuq* was the dominant Sunni political presence in the parliament, though it was seen by many 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.[30]

In 2009 and 2010, as a result of a decline in membership, the IIP lost a considerable portion of its electorate to the secular nationalist coalition of former Prime Minister Allawi's *al-Iraqiyya* grouping, also called the Iraqiyah list. Even IIP leader Tariq al-Hashimi left the group to join *al-Iraqiyya*. IPP was the

only party to run under the *Tawafuq* banner. At the start of the Arab Spring, IIP sought to build its support network by appealing to Sunnis through demonstrations, where the party used Islamist clerics to rally support of the party's Islamist messaging.[31] In 2014, the party lost credibility amongst its Sunni members due to its alliance with the Shiite Prime Minister, Haider al-Abadi. On May 12, 2018, the country held its first parliamentary elections since the defeat of ISIS, where many IIP candidates ran individually of as part of the party – winning 14 seats in the country's 329 seat parliament.[32]

The Association of Muslim Scholars

Hay'at al-'Ulama' al-Muslimeen (The Association of Muslim Scholars) was formed immediately after the U.S.-led invasion in April of 2003. It is a group of influential Sunni clerics and scholars seeking to represent the Sunni voice in 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."[33] Such sentiments, along with the Iraqi people's fear of retaliation if they participated in the political process, combined to significantly suppress voter turnout. For example, Anbar Province, which is 90% Sunni and has often suffered from violence and high levels of insurgency, had a 1% voter turnout in the January 2005 parliamentary interim elections.[34] However, by the December 2005 elections, national voter turnout rose to 77%.[35] The group was an important driving force of Sunni insurgency in 2006. However, it 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 took over the organization, which continues to claim to speak on behalf of disenfranchised Sunnis and attempts to stoke Iraqi nationalism.

Other groups seek to represent Sunni interests as well. Waqf al-Sunni (the Sunni Endowment) is a government-recognized body tasked with managing holy sites and distributing resources to the population. It is led by Abdul Latif al-Humayim, who was appointed by Prime Minister Haider al-Abadi. Majma al-Faqih al-Iraqi (the Fiqih Council of Iraq) and Dar al-Iftah al-Iraqi are other groups seeking to represent Sunnis. Finally, Hayat al-Iftah al-Salafi is a small Salafi organization opposed to the government in Baghdad.

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 leader Abu Musab al-Zarqawi.[36] 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 became the Islamic State of Iraq (ISI) in 2006. The organization had lost many of its strongholds in northern and western Iraq following the security offensives that began in 2007, but continued to operate in areas of northern Iraq, especially Mosul, in areas of Diyala, Salah ad-Din, Anbar, and Baghdad. Though AQI leaders pledged their allegiance to al-Qaeda in 2004, the group was no longer able to retain operational links with al-Qaeda leaders based in the tribal areas of Pakistan in the years that followed.[37]

ISI's subsequently transformed into the Islamic State in Iraq and the Levant (ISIL) in 2014. The group maintained a largely passive presence in Iraq but grew in numbers as Maliki began suppressing and attacking Iraqi Sunnis. It began taking over Iraqi territory, beginning in Fallujah and leading to Mosul which in early 2014. ISIL formally declared a caliphate and changed its name to the Islamic State after claiming Mosul in June 2014. By 2017, the group 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. In 2019, the group faced a disastrous reality – it faced a massive decimation by Coalition forces, and lost control over several major cities, including Mosul (which it claimed as its capital), Ramadi, Fallujah, and Tikrit. In response, the group altered its tactics, reverting to AQI-style guerilla warfare and attacks on civilians in the Kirkuk, Diyala, Salahadeen, and Anbar provinces. Most of its attacks were against security

forces, including checkpoints manned by police or PMU groups. As of this writing, ISIL fighters are seen to be ramping up terror activities anew, claiming responsibility for the surge of attacks across Iraq in the last six months.[38] These new attacks are low-tech, low-cost, but deadly[39] and exploit security gaps in Iraq's security sector caused by the coronavirus pandemic.[40]

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 (KRG). 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).[41]

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."[42] 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 maintains 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).[43] 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 *Gorran* (Change List), which dominate Kurdish political and social life. Of the 111 seats in the Kurdish parliament, the KIU and KIG have only four.[44] At the national level, Kurdish Islamist parties are even less influential. The KIU and KIG collectively hold six seats in the 325-seat Iraqi parliament. The emergence of *Gorran* shifted the balance of power and gave the KIU and KIG another ally in the KRG 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.[45] 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.[46] 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 remainder.[47] 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.[48]

According to the U.S. military, more than 77,000 Iraqis were killed during the height of sectarian violence between 2004 and 2008. Iraqi government statistics put the number higher, at over 85,000.[49] 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.[50] The United Nations Assistance Mission to Iraq estimated that approximately 6,878 Iraqi civilians were killed in 2016 in total, primarily by the Islamic State.[51]

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. The Shi'a population, 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.

Some places in northern Iraq have, at various times, fallen under strict Salafi-*jihadi* rule. From 2004 to 2007 and again from 2014 to 2017, as the security situation deteriorated and the Iraqi state proved unable to capably govern, Sunni Islamist militant groups (namely, AQI, and subsequently the Islamic State) grew in strength and violently imposed their strict interpretations of Islamic law on the population. They established strongholds in the predominantly Sunni areas of northern and western Iraq, brutally enforcing harsh societal rules.[52]

Shi'a militia groups have also at times enforced strict rules in the areas of Baghdad and southern Iraq 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. Sunni tribal leaders in Anbar province rejected AQI rule and took up arms against Sunni extremists in 2006 during what became known as the Anbar Awakening. 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 also targeted Shi'a militia groups in Baghdad and throughout central and southern Iraq. Iraqi-led operations in Basra and Baghdad dealt a significant blow to JAM and culminated in Sadr's announcement to disband his once-fearsome militia.[53] By mid-2008, when the last Surge forces left Iraq, violence had plummeted by more than 60 percent.[54]

By 2017, however, the shift from identity to issue-based politics reappeared, as internal Shi'a, Kurdish, and Sunni struggles outweighed the sectarian narrative. An NDI poll that year found that most Iraqis blamed corruption and their own leaders, rather than sectarianism, for the rise of groups like ISIS. Moreover, the poll also revealed that Shi'a leaders such as Abadi or Sadr enjoy considerable popularity in Sunni areas.[55]

In 2018, protests erupted in Basra as the summer's heat and the state's lack of services (electricity and water) became unbearable for the many in the province, where the poverty level is highest in the country. Unlike previous years, however, this time the protesters also began targeting the Islamist groups that previously enjoyed legitimacy, including the headquarters of PMU groups. Many activists argued against the Islamists who had governed them since 2003. In response, the PMU and state forces repressed protesters.[56]

Iraqi society remains heavily fragmented and sectarian divisions still exist, providing an opening for the possible re-emergence of the Islamic State.[57] Iraq's leading Shi'a parties, *Dawa* and the Sadrist Trend, retain their Islamist character and have emphasized this identity to shore up support. On October 25, 2019, mass anti-corruption protests spread throughout the country. Protesters demanded that the government be held accountable for its actions and halt Iran's influence within Iraq. The government failed to respond to the demands, instead it made noncommittal promises of reform and instructed its security forces to crack down with brutal force - leading to hundreds dead and tens of thousands injured.[58] In January 2020, the largely Shiite protests, which challenged the political *status quo* established after Saddam Hussein's demise, were crushed after Sadr announced that the protests had taken the wrong path and he was withdrawing his support.[59] Following the formation of a new Iraqi government in early May, protesters returned to the streets, clashing with security forces. The summer months have brought the expansion of protests to the southern provinces over a lack of clean water and electricity.[60] As of late July, security forces have continued to use force to try and contain ongoing anti-corruption demonstrations.[61]

Islamism and the State

Iraq is a parliamentary democracy, unlike 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."[62] 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 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.[63] In November 2010, the Baghdad provincial council used a resolution from 1996 to similarly ban the sale of alcohol.[64] There have been occasional violent raids or attacks on venues believed to be selling alcohol.[65]

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.[66] The threat from extremist groups ultimately jeopardized the functioning of the Iraqi state by late 2006 and, 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 became more willing and able to challenge Sunni and Shi'a extremist groups as their influence and capability waned.[67] U.S. support during this time was critical in giving the Iraqi Security Forces and Iraq's political leadership the confidence to challenge extremist groups. U.S. and Iraqi leaders also worked to professionalize the Iraqi Security Forces, expand their capabilities, and root out corrupt or sectarian elements.[68] U.S. and Iraqi operations from 2007 to the present significantly degraded both Sunni and Shi'a extremist groups and reduced violence by over 90 percent.[69]

Today, Iraqi security forces are struggling to target the Islamic State in Iraq amid the coronavirus pandemic. Despite the growing influence of the PMU, which Amnesty International and Human Rights Watch have both criticized for committing war crimes, the former government of Adil Abdul-Mahdi did not act against Shi'a militant groups.[70] Through grassroots activism, the Iraqi people demanded the removal of the corrupt central government, specifically Abdul-Mahdi, who allowed Iranian leadership to play a significant role in Iraq's politics. The current PM, Mustafa al-Kadhimi, was thrust into a dysfunctional central government, and 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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