

American Foreign Policy Council

IRAQ

QUICK FACTS

Population: 31,858,481

Area: 438,317 sq km

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

Religions: Muslim 97% (Shi'a 60-65%, Sunni 32-37%), Christian or other 3%

Government type: parliamentary democracy

GDP (official exchange rate): \$212.5 billion

Map and Quick Facts courtesy of the CIA World Factbook (last updated June 2013)



Iraq has a history of 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. Though many of these Islamist parties existed in exile or in hiding for much of 1980s and 1990s, they re-emerged 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 dramatic secular political coalitions, rising sectarianism has given new life to Islamist currents. Both Sunni and Shi'a radical Islamist militant groups are also active in Iraq, and have fueled insurgent activity and sectarian violence there. Operations by U.S. and Iraqi forces since 2007 have dramatically reduced their capabilities, but growing instability in Iraq has enabled a resurgence of terrorist groups like al-Qaeda in Iraq (AQI). At the same time, some Shi'a militant groups have sought a more prominent role in Iraqi politics and society. As Iraq's nascent democratic system evolves, these secular and Islamist forces continue to vie for influence and power.

ISLAMIST ACTIVITY

Islamist activity in Iraq today takes three distinct forms, defined along both ethnic and confessional lines.

Shi'a Groups

The main Shi'a parties in Iraq are the *Dawa* Party (also known as *Dawa Islamiya*, or the Islamic *Dawa* Party), the Sadrist Trend, and the Islamic Supreme Council of Iraq (ISCI, formerly the Supreme Council for the Islamic Revolution in Iraq). Smaller Islamist groups include the National Reform Trend (led by former Prime Minister Ibrahim al-Jaafari); the *Fadhila* (Islamic Virtue) Party; and *Dawa Tanzim* (an offshoot of the main *Dawa* party).

The *Dawa* Party is the oldest Shi'a Islamist party in Iraq, having emerged in the late 1950s or early 1960s in response to the spread of Arab socialist and communist movements.¹ Grand Ayatollah Mohammed Baqir al-Sadr, a distinguished Shi'a scholar, is widely credited as being *Dawa's* founder.² *Dawa* emphasized the promotion of Islamic values and ethics, but believed the right to govern was distinct from the juridical function of religious authorities, and that both should be subsumed under constitutional mechanisms.³ *Dawa* was the leading Shi'a Islamist opposition party of the 1970s and 1980s, and was therefore fiercely persecuted by Saddam Hussein's Ba'athist regime. Throughout this time, members of *Dawa* remained active either in exile or in hiding. The main branches of *Dawa* existed in Syria, Iran, and the United Kingdom. Since 2003, *Dawa* has re-emerged as one of the main Shi'a political groups in Iraq, and prominent members include Prime Minister Nuri al-Maliki, the current head of *Dawa*. Unlike its main Shi'a rivals, however, *Dawa* does not have its own militia and was therefore seen as a weaker party. Rather, from 2006, when he was selected as a compromise candidate for Prime Minister, until 2008, Maliki relied heavily on other Shi'a factions such as ISCI and the Sadrists for political support.⁴ In recent years, however, Maliki and his allies have used the position and resources of the Prime Minister's office to greatly expand *Dawa's* influence in Iraqi politics and society, much to the alarm of rival groups.⁵ Maliki now has unprecedented influence over Iraq's security and intelligence forces, giving him the ability to implicitly or explicitly threaten political opponents.⁶

The Sadrist Trend is a nationalist religious movement founded by the Shi'a cleric Mohammed Sadeq al-Sadr in the 1990s. The movement gained widespread support from the poor Shi'a communities across southern Iraq and in Baghdad, who were drawn to its emphasis on economic and social relief for

the poor and a return to traditional Islamic law and customs.⁷ 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).⁸ Sadeq al-Sadr was assassinated by Saddam Hussein's regime in 1999 and much of the movement's leadership went into hiding, but the Sadrist Trend re-emerged after the 2003 invasion of Iraq under the leadership of his son, Muqtada al-Sadr. The Sadrists have vehemently opposed the presence of U.S. forces in Iraq. 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 significantly degraded JAM during security offensives in 2007 and 2008, after which time Muqtada al-Sadr announced that JAM would formally be disbanded and his movement reorganized.⁹ Since that time, the Sadrists have restructured the movement, emphasizing its political and social programs.¹⁰ This has allowed them to win significant representation in the national government, as well as in key provincial governments in southern Iraq. The Sadrists nevertheless maintain a militant wing, called the Promise Day Brigade, which receives Iranian support and targets U.S. forces in Iraq.¹¹

In addition to the Sadrists' Promised Day Brigade, two other Iranian-backed Shi'a militant groups are also active in Iraq. They are *Kataib Hezbollah* (KH, or the Hezbollah Brigades) and *Asaib Ahl al-Haq* (AAH, or the League of the Righteous). Both AAH and KH are known to have received extensive support from the Qods Force paramilitary unit of Iran's Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC-QF), including training, funding, and supplies.¹² KH emerged in 2007, and since that time has conducted numerous attacks on U.S. and Iraqi forces.¹³ While little is known of the KH leadership, one known adviser is Abu Mahdi al-Muhandis, who is closely aligned with the IRGC-QF and who has operated militant networks in Iraq and elsewhere for decades.¹⁴ KH is the most elite of the Iranian-backed groups in Iraq, and has used advanced tactics and systems, including Improvised Rocket-Assisted Mortars (IRAMs).¹⁵ The group has remained active following the withdrawal of U.S. forces from Iraq.¹⁶ It has reportedly conducted attacks against the camps of Mujahedeen-e-Khalq, an Iranian dissident group with elements based in Iraq. Fighters of *Kataib Hezbollah* are also fighting in Syria at the behest of the Iranian and Assad regimes.¹⁷

AAH is an offshoot of JAM, which was formed following the split between Muqtada al-Sadr and several of his deputies, most notably Qais Khazali.¹⁸ Khazali, who was captured by Coalition forces in March 2007 but released as part of a prisoner exchange in January 2010, is the leader of AAH.¹⁹ 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, along the lines of Hezbollah in Lebanon. While AAH did not run in Iraq's 2013 provincial elections, it has established political offices throughout the country and has instituted religious and social outreach programs.²⁰ 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.²¹ Prime Minister Maliki has cultivated ties to AAH as a counterbalance to the Sadrists, though it is unclear whether this will develop into a formal partnership ahead of the 2014 parliamentary vote. Despite its turn to politics, AAH retains its militant capability and its close ties with the IRGC-QF. Its fighters are also active in Syria, particularly in the defense of the revered Shi'a Sayyida Zeinab shrine in Damascus.²²

Aside from *Dawa* and the Sadrists, another prominent Shi'a Islamist group is ISCI. Until early 2007, ISCI was known as the Supreme Council for the Islamic Revolution in Iraq (SCIRI).²³ SCIRI and its militia, the Badr Corps, were founded in Iran in the early 1980s as an Iraqi umbrella group to fight with Iran against Saddam's regime.²⁴ SCIRI was led by Ayatollah Baqir al-Hakim until his assassination by al-Qaeda in August 2003. Subsequently, from 2003 to 2009, the organization was led by Abd al-Aziz al-Hakim, Baqir's brother. ISCI was a dominant political force in Iraq during this time. Under pressure to disband its militia in 2003, SCIRI announced that the Badr Corps would be transformed into a political entity known as the Badr Organization.²⁵ Still, many Badr members were incorporated into the Iraqi Security Forces, where they retained a lethal capability.²⁶ The group has been closely aligned with Iran, and as a result does not enjoy broad support from Iraqis. Yet in an effort to distance itself from Iran, the organization changed its name to ISCI in 2007 and shifted its primary religious allegiance to Grand Ayatollah Ali al-Sistani.²⁷ Sistani, a quietist who believes religious leaders should not be involved in the administration of the state, is the most revered Shi'a cleric in Iraq and is the head of the Najaf *hawza*, or seminary.

After the death of Abd al-Aziz al-Hakim in August 2009, his son, Ammar al-Hakim, assumed control of the movement.²⁸ As discussed below, despite a growing divergence between ISCI and Iran, ISCI has seen its political influence wane in recent years, largely on account of the continued perception of close ties with the Iranian regime, its rejection of Iraqi Islamist exile parties, and the group's inability to broaden its constituency and check the power of its political rivals. ISCI has been further weakened by its split with Badr, which was announced in March 2012 and in part the result of leadership squabbles in the wake of their poor electoral performance in the 2010 par-

liamentary elections.²⁹ Another factor driving the ISCI-Badr split was a dispute over support for Prime Minister Maliki. Hakim and members of ISCI were wary of Maliki's consolidation and hesitant to support Maliki's bid for a second term as premier following the parliamentary vote. Badr, however, supported Maliki's return as for a second term.

The Shi'a political parties differ in their views of the role of federalism in Iraq. Prime Minister Maliki and his *Dawa* party have favored the creation of a strong central government in Baghdad. Like *Dawa*, the Sadrist Trend supports a strong central Iraqi government, but opposes an American presence in Iraq. ISCI has generally favored a weaker central government, with power diffused at the provincial or regional level. Though ISCI had previously pushed for the creation of a southern Shi'ite federation, it is no longer a vocal advocate of such a measure, perhaps on account of its waning influence within the southern provincial governments. Still, Prime Minister Maliki has resisted other federalism challenges. The Prime Minister used his influence over the judiciary and security forces to avert a federalism push by disaffected Sunnis in the provinces of Salah ad-Din and Diyala in late 2011 and early 2012.³⁰

Dawa and the Sadrist Trend emerged from the 2009 and 2013 provincial elections and the 2010 parliamentary elections as the predominant Shi'a political forces in Iraq. This has come at the expense of ISCI and Badr, which played dominant roles in the Iraqi government from 2003 to 2008 but have seen much of their influence and political power eroded in recent years. Seeking to reverse this trend, ISCI successfully revised its electoral strategy in the 2013 provincial vote and gained more than a dozen seats on provincial councils in southern Iraq.³¹

Since 2008, there have been two important shifts in Iraqi politics—a shift away from Islamist and sectarian movements in 2009 and early 2010, and a return to sectarian and Islamist identification as a key political driver more recently. By 2009, Shi'a parties, including *Dawa* and ISCI, 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 2007.³² This was particularly evident during the formation of electoral coalitions in the lead-up to the 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.³³ The success of the Iraqiyya coalition, which was a secular nationalist list comprised a number of Sunni political parties but led by a secular Shi'a politician, prompted the Shi'a parties to return to sectarian and Islamist identi-

fication as a means of shoring up political support. During the prolonged negotiations to form the government, the desire to maintain unity among the Shi'a Islamist parties trumped efforts to create meaningful cross-sectarian or secular alliances. Since that time, sectarian identity and Shi'a Islamism have a renewed and important role in Iraqi politics.

Sunni Groups

The Sunni political landscape has also shifted dramatically since 2009, as the influence of Islamist parties has waned in favor of more secular, nationalist groups. Growing sentiments of Sunni disaffection with Maliki's government and the fragmentation of the leading Sunni coalition, however, have again shifted Sunni politics and new players are emerging. AQI and other militant groups have also capitalized on these dynamics to rebuild their networks.

The primary Sunni Islamist political party in Iraq has been the Iraqi Islamic Party (IIP). The IIP has its earliest roots in mid-1940s or early 1950s, when Mohammed al-Sawwaf, an Iraqi studying in Egypt, met Muslim Brotherhood founder Hassan al-Banna.³⁴ 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.³⁵ Later, in 1960, the Iraqi Islamic Party was formally established following the decision by Abdul-Karim Qassem's government to allow the formation of political parties in Iraq.³⁶ 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.³⁷ Ayad al-Samarraie, who had been the Secretary General of the IIP since 1970, fled Iraq in 1980.³⁸

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* (and therefore the IIP) 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.³⁹ The IIP is currently led by Ayad al-Samarraie.

In recent years, the influence of the IIP has waned as a variety of other Sunni political parties have emerged. In the 2010 parliamentary election, the vast majority of Sunni political entities joined the Iraqiyyah List, a secular, nationalist coalition led by former Prime Minister Ayad Allawi. Iraqiyyah was comprised of a number of leading Sunni political parties, and performed

very well in the predominantly Sunni areas of central and northern Iraq. The IIP was the only political party that ran under the *Tawafuq* banner, and it saw its representation in the parliament shrink from 44 to just 6 seats. Iraqiyah won the most seats in the 2010 parliamentary election, but has seen its political fortunes diminish on account of political maneuvering by Shi'a blocs as well as internal divisions within the alliance.⁴⁰ Iraqiyah's prominent political leaders, such as Minister of Finance Rafa al-Issawi, parliamentary speaker Osama al-Nujaifi, and Vice President Tareq al-Hashemi, have been marginalized within the government. Hashemi and Issawi have even been more directly targeted by Maliki and no longer hold official positions within the government.⁴¹ Hashemi was convicted on charges of terrorism and sentenced to death in absentia, while Issawi has also come under similar pressure.

The December 2012 arrest of Issawi's bodyguards and subsequent intimidation attempts against Issawi sparked widespread anti-government protests in predominantly Sunni areas of western and northern Iraq. Sunni demonstrators have protested perceived unfair treatment by the Shi'a dominated government. The anti-government protests revealed the limitations of Sunni political leaders at the national level and have given greater prominence to local clerical and tribal leaders. Several leading figures in Anbar Province, such as Said al-Lafi or Abd al-Malik al-Saadi, are religious scholars, though they have resisted calls for violence.

Other Sunni Islamist militant groups remain active in Iraq and committed to violence. These militant groups have been largely degraded since 2007, as many Sunni resistance groups renounced violence and entered the political process. Still, a few groups retain the capacity to conduct attacks. These groups include al-Qaeda in Iraq (AQI) and the *Jaysh Rajal al-Tariqah al-Naqshbandia* (JRTN). Sunni militants, particularly AQI, have benefitted from the departure of U.S. forces, growing Sunni discontent with the Shi'a-led government, and the conflict in Syria and the security situation has worsened in 2013. This has led to growing concerns that these Sunni extremist groups will be able to regenerate and expand their operations.

AQI is a terrorist group that aims to overthrow the current government of Iraq and establish an Islamic state in its place. According to the U.S. military, AQI is comprised primarily of indigenous Sunni Iraqis and even elements of the Kurdish Islamist group *Ansar al-Islam*.⁴² AQI has been responsible for some of the deadliest car bomb and suicide bomb attacks in Iraq, as well as sectarian violence. AQI lost many of its strongholds in northern and western Iraq following the security offensives that began in 2007; however, it does still 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 professed their allegiance to the global al-Qaeda movement in 2004, the group is no longer able to retain operational links with al-Qaeda leaders based in the tribal areas of Pakistan.⁴³ The conflict in Syria and growing Sunni grievances has enabled a resurgence of AQI activity. AQI-linked attacks increased in number and lethality in mid-2013.⁴⁴ AQI's regional ties are also evolving. Syria's al-Qaeda affiliate, Jabhat al-Nusra, announced its formal ties to AQI in April 2013, and fighters and support for both groups flow in each direction across the Iraq-Syria border.⁴⁵

JRTN is a Sunni extremist group that was founded in December 2006 in response to the execution of Saddam Hussein.⁴⁶ JRTN is linked to by former Iraqi Ba'athist officials now living in Syria, including Izzat Ibrahim al-Duri, one of Saddam's closest deputies.⁴⁷ A main goal of the group is the return of the Ba'ath Party in Iraq.⁴⁸ Although the group's name indicates a link with the Sufi Naqshabandia order, this connection is largely perfunctory.⁴⁹ JRTN operates primarily in the northern Iraqi provinces of Ninewah, Kirkuk, Salah ad-Din, and Diyala, where it conducts attacks against U.S forces.

Kurdish Groups

The largest Kurdish Islamist political groups are the Kurdistan Islamic Union (KIU) and the Kurdistan Islamic Group (KIG).⁵⁰ 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."⁵¹ 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 KIG was established in 2001 as a splinter faction of the KIU. It is led by Mala Ali Bapir. 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).⁵² Bapir claims his group has abandoned violence and instead has said that "[the KIG's] policy is that we enter into fraternity and cooperation with all Islamic groups. We seek such fraternal relations with Islamic parties and organizations, Islamist figures, and groups that follow a Salafi tradition or a Sufi or a scientific tradition. In the Komele Islami, we believe that the group must be open-minded and seek fraternity with all those who call or act for Islam. If we see a mistake, we will try to correct it through dialogue and by creating a

fraternal atmosphere.”⁵³

The political influence of the KIU and KIG is overshadowed by the KDP and the PUK, who have dominated Kurdish political and social life for decades. Of the 111 seats in the Kurdish parliament, the KIU and KIG have only four seats apiece.⁵⁴ At the national level, the influence of the 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 the Change List (*Gorran*), a breakaway faction of the PUK, has shifted the balance of power slightly in the KRG, and has given the KIU and KIG another ally in the Kurdish Regional Government parliament with which to challenge the dominant Kurdish parties. Still, the Kurdish Islamist parties remain only marginal actors in Iraqi political life.

ISLAMISM AND SOCIETY

Iraq is comprised of several ethnic and religious groups. 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.⁵⁵ The vast majority of Iraqis, or 97 percent, are Muslims. Of that number, 60-65 percent of Iraqi Muslims are adherents to the Shi'a tradition.⁵⁶ 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.⁵⁷ Religious minorities, such as Christians, Mandaeans, and Yazidis, comprise the remaining three percent of Iraq's population; however, the Christian population in Iraq has declined dramatically since 2003.⁵⁸ The Jewish community in Iraq has also all but disappeared.

Divergent trends of secularism and Islamism also exist in Iraqi society. 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 to do under Saddam. 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. Movements like the Sadrist Trend also found a broad following among Iraqi Shi'a, particularly those in urban and poor areas, by providing essential services such as water, electricity, and gasoline.

As security deteriorated from 2004 to 2006 and the Iraqi state proved unable to capably govern, Shi'a and Sunni Islamist militant groups (such as JAM

and AQI, respectively) grew in strength, and they increasingly and violently imposed their strict interpretations of Islamic law. AQI established strongholds in the predominantly Sunni areas of northern and western Iraq, such as Anbar or Ninewah province. There, AQI brutally imposed harsh rules, including banning smoking and singing, prohibiting men from shaving their beards, forcing marriages between local women and al-Qaeda fighters, enforcing the wearing of strict Islamic dress by women, and maiming or killing anyone caught violating their radical laws.⁵⁹ Likewise, Shi'a militia groups like JAM enforced similarly strict rules in the areas of Baghdad and southern Iraq that were under their control. Sectarian violence soared during this time, as Sunni and Shi'a extremist groups also violently cleansed mixed areas of Baghdad. 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 more than 85,000.⁶⁰

By 2008, Iraqis of all sects and ethnicities had grown frustrated and fed up with the years of sectarian strife, during which time Islamist parties and militias dominated. Even as early as late 2006, 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 2008.⁶¹ This, coupled with the security offensive during the Surge that first cleared Baghdad and later the provinces surrounding the capital, significantly degraded AQI's capabilities and networks. During the Surge, U.S. and Iraqi forces 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.⁶² By mid-2008, when the last of the Surge forces left Iraq, violence had plummeted more than 60 percent.⁶³

The 2009 and 2010 elections saw the reorientation of Iraqi politics that reflected changes in society away from Islamism. Islamist exile parties like ISCI and the IIP had their influence wane.⁶⁴ 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.⁶⁵ 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 Islamist groups.⁶⁶ During the prolonged negotiations to form a governing coalition after the 2010 parliamentary vote, many politicians turned to identity and sectarian politics to garner support.

This has led to a highly polarized and sectarian political environment. At the same time, Iraq's leading Shi'a parties, *Dawa* and the Sadrist Trend, retain their Islamist character and have emphasized this identity to shore up support. Moreover, many Iraqis have been discouraged by the inability for the Iraqi government to provide basic services and reduce unemployment.⁶⁷ This may create a dynamic whereby disenchanting Sunnis are drawn to the rhetoric of extremist Sunni militant groups, while Shi'ites are drawn to organizations like the Sadrist Trend to provide social services.

ISLAMISM AND THE STATE

Iraq is a parliamentary democracy and not a theocratic republic like its eastern 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."⁶⁸ Still, 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;⁶⁹ and in November 2010, the Baghdad provincial council, which is dominated by *Dawa*, used a resolution from 1996 to similarly ban the sale of alcohol in a move that was seen as targeting Iraq's Christian minority, members of which are the primary merchants of alcohol in Iraq.⁷⁰ There have been a number of violent raids or attacks on venues believed to be selling alcohol.⁷¹ Reports of growing pressure to enforce modest or Islamic dress also surfaced in late 2012 in Baghdad and southern Iraq.⁷² These events have prompted growing fears of a rollback of freedoms and a return to the days when militias violently enforced strict interpretations of Islam in their neighborhood strongholds.

The Iraqi government's response to radical Islamist militant groups has varied. Islamist parties dominated provincial and national governments from 2004 to 2008. During that time, the state was unwilling or incapable of challenging 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.⁷³ 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 unfolded during the Surge, the Iraqi state also became more willing and able to challenge Sunni and Shi'a extremist

groups as their influence and capability waned.⁷⁴ 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 these 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.⁷⁵ 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.⁷⁶

Today, the Iraqi forces continue to robustly target Sunni extremist groups, such as al-Qaeda in Iraq. With the growing influence of the Sadrist Trend in the government, the targeting of Shi'a militant groups is less certain. Indeed, in an effort to garner Sadrist political backing during government formation in 2010, Prime Minister Maliki secured the release of hundreds of Sadrist detainees, many of whom were members of JAM.⁷⁷ A string of AQI attacks in mid-2013 resulted in the mobilization of Shi'a militant groups, including those affiliated with AAH.⁷⁸ Given rising sectarian sentiments, it is unclear whether the Iraqi state will maintain the political will to sufficiently check radical Shi'a militant groups (many of whom continue to receive Iranian assistance) or whether the political interests of dominant Shi'a parties will enable such groups to expand.

ENDNOTES

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