

A Victory to End All Victory: Iraq after the Islamic State



Loulouwa AL-RACHID

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Summary

The offensive on Mosul against Islamic State crystallises all of the political, social and security issues which determine the future of the Iraqi state. Will victory over the jihadists be sufficient to pacify Iraq and inject new momentum into its mainly dysfunctional political system? Reform of the system, which is paralysed by increasingly aggressive militias and the actions of a predatory political class attached to the *status quo* against a background of popular demands, is proving difficult. Intra- and inter-community tensions complicate the issues, between Shiite supremacy, Sunni isolation, and Kurdish rifts. Foreign powers, particularly the United States/Iran duopoly, could benefit from this breakdown. Ethnic and religious tensions, territorial fragmentation and the confrontation of international interests are all present. The Iraq of tomorrow is uncharted territory.

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Introduction

Iraq is expecting its final military victory against Islamic State (IS). Most of the territorial sanctuaries that the jihadists had conquered since the start of their “expansion” in 2013-2014 have been recaptured, one after the other, thanks to the monumental effort of the Iraqi armed forces. Symbolically, this victory will be sealed by the total liberation of Mosul, the large Sunni city in the north of the country, where Abu Bakr Al-Baghdadi’s caliphate was proclaimed in spring 2014.¹ The increased support provided by the international coalition against terrorism – particularly the intensified air strikes and the deployment of Western special forces and military instructors with the Iraqi armed forces, both regular and irregular (Kurdish and tribal militias, etc.) – has undeniably borne fruit in this all-out war

However, will this expected military victory over IS prove sufficient to pacify Iraq and inject new momentum into its mainly dysfunctional political regime? In more than one respect, the Baghdad regime, set up under the supervision of the US occupying power, has been symbolically “dead” since the Iraqi army handed Mosul over to the jihadists without a fight in June 2014. This paved the way for a war of secession of the Sunni regions in the west and north-west of the country. The regime, massively rejected by the population, is unable to restore order throughout the whole of Iraqi territory,² and even less so of exercising a monopoly on violence or national resources. The Iraqi political class, which is notoriously corrupt, however maintains its preference for the *status quo ante*, and only considers national reconciliation as a submission of the opponent’s will or strength. Will it raise hope in a society that has been scarred by violence since 2003, undermined by antagonistic ethnic and religious affiliations, and faced with growing economic difficulties due to declining oil revenues and the exorbitant cost of the war against terrorism? How will the intentions of the new US administration headed by Donald Trump and the

1. On 4 July 2014, Abu Bakr Al-Baghdadi announced the restoration of the caliphate, abolished by Kemal Ataturk in 1924, under the name of “Islamic State” in a sermon preached from the *minbar* (pulpit) of the Al-Nuri mosque in Mosul. He then proclaimed himself as the Prophet Mohammed’s successor, taking the title of Caliph Ibrahim. For the history of this political institution and its centrality in Islam, see N. Mouline, *Le Califat. Histoire politique de l’islam*, Paris, Flammarion, 2016.

2. At the start of 2017, the Iraqi government signed contracts with several US private security companies to secure the highway linking the capital to Basra, the large southern city, as well as the Baghdad-Amman route. These two roads are of vital importance for freight traffic and are regularly attacked by bandits of all kinds.

game of regional powers (Iran, Turkey, Saudi Arabia, etc.) affect Iraq after the war against Daesh?

A short-lived military victory?

The defeat of Islamic State (IS) in Mosul is unlikely to spell the end of the jihadist phenomenon, whose emergence in Iraq is concomitant with the US occupation and the political marginalisation of Sunni Arabs since 2003. Although IS has suffered heavy losses and most of its commanders have been killed, its fierce resistance and undeniable military expertise in terms of urban combat (use of drones, modified weapons, vehicle-borne improvised explosive devices or VBIEDs, underground facilities, etc.) undoubtedly jeopardise the country's future. Already redeployed over a few small and isolated pockets in desert areas in the Al-Anbar and Salahuddin provinces, as well as in the mountains in Diyala province, the jihadists continue to resort to spectacular attacks in large cities, including Baghdad, as well as in places with a strong Shiite presence.³ Thus, the suicide bombers are no longer solely foreign fighters, but increasingly Iraqis, a sign of Sunni radicalisation which will be difficult to reverse in the future. This strike capacity suggests a return for the next few years to Al-Qaeda's urban terrorism and insurrectional strategy in Iraq which relied on a complex network of secret and independent cells and branches.⁴ Each one of the jihadists' attacks exposes the dysfunction and corruption of the central government and its security apparatus, consequently pitting two camps, Sunni and Shia, against each other in the identity spiral. These attacks also worsen relations between the Shiite political forces themselves, who blame each other for the stalemate of the "political process". Preparations for the government and regional elections scheduled for spring 2018 – provided that they can take place with more than four million internally displaced persons – add to existing tensions.

3. On 3 July 2016, a truck driven by a suicide bomber exploded in Karrada, a mainly Shiite shopping district in the centre of Baghdad, killing more than 320 people. When Prime Minister Haider Al-Abadi went to the scene of the explosion, the inhabitants welcomed him by throwing rubbish and plastic bottles at him.

4. For the trajectory of jihadism in Iraq since 2003, see H. Abu Hanieh and M. Abu Rumman, *The "Islamic State" Organization: The Sunni Crisis and the Struggle of Global Jihadism*, Amman, Friedrich Ebert Stiftung, 2015, available at: <http://library.fes.de>.

Since the summer of 2014, the war against terrorism has had a very heavy human toll for the Iraqi civilian population.⁵ The claim made about a “clean” war – unlike that conducted by Bashar Al-Assad and his Russian ally to reconquer Aleppo and other parts of Syria, is largely contradicted by the reality of air strikes and heavy artillery fire in densely populated areas, for example the west bank of Mosul (an extreme case). The city’s inhabitants are caught between a rock and a hard place, the extremism of Islamic State and that of the imposing array of disparate forces intending to eradicate it. With strong air support from the international coalition, the latter are made up of both regular and irregular Iraqi troops (special forces from the Counter-Terrorism Service, the army, federal police, Peshmergas, Shiite, tribal, Christian, Yazidi and Turkmen militias, etc.) often competing with each other to claim the victory and its dividends. The distinction between fighters and civilians has been irreparably blurred. “Civilians fleeing the fighting leave everything behind them and end up in refugee camps. These makeshift shelters are usually ill-prepared to receive them due to a lack of adequate mobilisation by UN agencies and inadequate management by the Iraqi government, not to mention the scarce financial resources and the absence of political will, in addition to the usual corruption in aid distribution channels.” The reconquest of the territory from IS is resulting in extensive destruction: up to 80% of infrastructure for the city of Ramadi to the west of Baghdad which was liberated in December 2016.⁶ In Mosul, the nihilistic warfare of IS has already destroyed the old city: the last jihadists who were dug in there did not hesitate to reduce the Al-Nuri mosque to dust, so as to not see the Iraqi flag flying again over its famous leaning minaret, dating from the 12th century, and considered as the historic emblem of the city.

Fear reigns in a society where all men and women, including adolescents, are at risk of being reported, rightly or wrongly, as members or sympathisers of the jihadist movement and can be sent to detention centres where the practice of torture is far from unusual.⁷ It is known that the bulk of IS troops in Iraq were individuals socially and tribally embedded in their communities. Among IS’s most fanatical local supporters, many were motivated by greed rather than by an ideological endorsement of the caliphate’s project, in order to climb the social ladder

5. See L. Al-Rachid and P. Harling, “Ce qui se cache sous la ‘guerre contre le terrorisme’ en Irak”, *Orient XXI*, 20 April 2017, available at: <http://orientxxi.info>.

6. See “Satellite Imagery of Ramadi Shows Cost of Liberation from ISIS”, 6 May 2016, available at: <https://english.alarabiya.net>.

7. See Amnesty International, “Iraq: Tribal Militia Tortured Detainees in Revenge Attacks during Mosul Offensive”, 2 November 2016, available at: www.amnesty.org; and Human Rights Watch, “Iraq: Hundreds Detained in Degrading Conditions”, 13 March 2017, available at: www.hrw.org.

and get rich (land grabbing and seizure of other goods, smuggling and trafficking, etc.). Each family in Mosul has individuals among its members, who collaborated with those who ran the city, as in other Sunni areas in Iraq since 2013-2014. In the absence of institutions capable of supervising the post-IS score-settling, the process of returning to normalcy may be long and chaotic.

The worsening of communal divisions

Shiite maximalism

The war against IS is fundamentally shaking up Iraqi politics and widening the divisions. The “Shiite nation” galvanised by the war against the *takfiris* (Sunnis who excommunicate Shiites) now wants to impose itself on everyone, more triumphalist than ever. Thus, a distinctly Shiite culture is monopolizing the public space. Its countless religious rituals, iconography (posters with images of the Grand Ayatollahs, in particular the Iranians Khomeini and Khamenei, militia commanders and martyrs), its dress codes, its dialect and its accent deeply rooted in southern Iraq, in rural culture and in the variant of tribalism which distinguish it, are exploding and overflowing to the liberated Sunni regions. Many leading Shiite politicians openly claim sole ownership of the Iraqi state, in other words, the right to govern alone and to monopolize all the workings of the state and security apparatus on behalf of the demographic (Shiite) majority. Hence, a shift has occurred towards exercising their hegemony instead of the principle of “national concordance” which has prevailed since 2003, at least according to the official narrative. This principle legitimized coalition governments inclusive of the two other Iraqi “components” the Kurds and Sunni Arabs.⁸

8. Inspired by the consociationalist model, theorised by Arend Lijphart, which emphasises power-sharing and points of consensus to democratise deeply divided societies, the Iraqi “national concordance” was intended to prevent dictatorship by the Shiite demographic majority over the two country’s minorities, Sunnis and Kurds. In actual fact, it was dedicated to a logic of carving up the mechanisms of power and fuelled large-scale political corruption. Devoid of any constitutional basis, it results from an informal agreement between the political parties associated with the US occupation, and which since 2003, have been monopolizing power in the name of defending their respective communities’ interests. See N. Younis, “From Power-Sharing to Majoritarianism: Iraq’s Transitioning Political System”, in C. Spencer, J. Kinninmont and O. Sirri, *Iraq Ten Years On*. Chatham House, May 2013, pp. 19-21, available at: www.chathamhouse.org.

Decline of the Sunni Arabs

Having difficulty in getting rid of the accusation of pro-IS sympathies, Iraqi Sunnis keep a low profile and feel slightly inclined to change their name, address, or accent to go unnoticed. In many of the liberated regions, the return of those who fled the fighting depends on the goodwill of the Shiite militia leaders who have taken control. In addition, their political representatives are seen to be biggest losers in the post-Islamic State balance of power. More divided and discredited than ever, they have no other choice than to be co-opted by actors in the Shiite arena and their Iranian sponsors. The option of an autonomous Sunni region, modelled on Kurdistan, is re-emerging: whether in the form of several federated regions, more or less maintaining the current territorial borders of the three Sunni governorates (Nineveh, Salahuddin and Anbar) or a large “Sunnistan”. This idea has been put forward by a heterogeneous grouping of political and tribal elites from Mosul, Muslim Brotherhood representatives, as well as exiles, former Ba’athists, and veterans of the early insurgency against the US occupation who are now refugees in Jordan and the Gulf monarchies.⁹ Baghdad is fiercely opposed to it and accuses the promoters of this project of wanting to divide the country, which is a much exaggerated accusation given the realities on the ground. Up until now, Haïder Al-Abadi’s government has not for its part developed any political vision or discussed any new social contract to regain the confidence of the liberated Sunni population, apart from poor management of the monumental humanitarian needs. The post-IS outlines are not clear with regard to the terms for reconstructing infrastructure, its funding, and above all the thorny issue of territorial security control. While the recapture of Mosul will seal the fate of IS in Iraq and throughout the Levant, the way this large city will be administered and policed will equally determine Iraq’s political future.

9. Since the start of 2017, Sunni politicians have been organising conferences abroad (Jordan, Turkey, Switzerland, Brussels, etc.) and mobilising lobbies in Washington and in some European capitals, including France. They are discussing their political future, however without achieving a common vision or in being accepted by Baghdad as legitimate discussion partners. In the eyes of the Shiite majority, they are guilty of treason and collusion with hostile powers, such as Turkey and Saudi Arabia and for some of them, terrorists.

Kurdish gamble

The war also destabilised the Kurdish federated entity, despite the major Western military and financial support it enjoyed. Its leaders are also divided and must deal with a public opinion that is increasingly growing critical of their entrenched authoritarianism and nepotism. President Massoud Barzani (Kurdish Democratic Party – KDP) whose term ended in 2014, refuses to hold new elections and has suspended the Kurdish regional parliament. His clan and security apparatus rule unchallenged over the governorate of Erbil, where the capital of Iraqi Kurdistan is located, and that of Dohuk which borders Turkey with whom he has greatly strengthened ties. The economic crisis, particularly the inability to cope with the running cost of the civil service, is reigniting tensions with the other large Kurdish party, the Patriotic Union of Kurdistan (PUK). The PUK, which controls Sulaymaniyah, the border region with Iran, is not hesitating to turn to the Islamic Republic of Iran, which it has increased its trade and security exchanges with, to redress the balance of power with its Kurdish rival.¹⁰

Additionally, the war against IS is escalating the conflict between Kurds and Arabs for the possession of territory and oil resources, at the same time as it is encouraging all kinds of foreign interference. The conflict revolves around the issue of the so-called disputed territories, whose fate, whether attached to Baghdad or to the Kurdish regional government, should be decided by means of a referendum according to the Iraqi Constitution (article 140). Yet, these oil rich territories, particularly the governorate of Kirkuk, where the Kurdish flag has replaced the Iraqi one over government buildings, have *de facto* come under Kurdish military control. Indeed, in June 2014, the Peshmergas prevented these territories from falling into the hands of Islamic State's fighters and are now refusing to return them. Finally, the war has reinforced the presence and activities of another politico-military organisation in Iraqi Kurdistan, the Kurdistan Workers' Party (PKK), which originated in Turkey. This is conducting a long-term separatist guerrilla war against the Turkish state; its Syrian branch, the Democratic Union Party (PYD) has also established itself as the defender of Syrian Kurds, as a result of an uprising against Bashar Al-Assad. The PKK was already present in Iraqi Kurdistan, in the Qandil mountains, and expanded its operations after the fall of Mosul: PKK fighters took control of the Iraqi part of Mount Sinjar, which straddles

10. For the intra-Kurdish divisions inflamed by the war against IS, see Crisis Group, "Arming Iraq's Kurds: Fighting IS, Inviting Conflict", *Report*, No. 158, May 2015, available at: www.crisisgroup.org.

Syria and Iraq, protecting the Yazidi minority there from IS persecutions. Although the PKK is classified as a terrorist organisation by the Turks and their Western allies, it has consequently become a significant asset for Washington in the war against IS.

Although a member of the international coalition against terrorism, Turkey takes a very dim view of the rapid upsurge of this Kurdish movement, and has bombed its positions in both Iraq and Syria. It has also put pressure on Barzani's KDP to fight against it.¹¹ Finally, Iran could not afford to remain a bystander in this game of powers; it is involved directly or indirectly through the Shiite militias in the race for the control of Kurdistan – or even its division into zones of influence – and the Mosul region. Although pundits disagree on its nature, Iran's surreptitious support for the PKK aims to preserve a corridor of access to Syrian territory at the same time as containing Turkish influence.¹² The announcement by Massoud Barzani of the holding of a referendum on Kurdistan's independence in September 2017 further complicates this politico-military landscape marked by shifting alliances and arrangements. Some Iraqi Kurdish politicians consider that independence at this time would only be a promise of an intra-Kurdish civil war, inevitably inviting new foreign interference, similar to that which plunged South Sudan into chaos once the independent state was proclaimed.

11. In March 2017, skirmishes broke out in a Sinjar village between the Rojava, Syrian Peshmergas affiliated to the KDP, and those affiliated to the PKK, the YBS (Sinjar Protection Units), who refused to leave the region after its liberation from the yoke of IS. At the end of April 2017, the Turkish air force bombed the PKK's positions in both Iraqi Kurdistan and Syria, killing about 20 of its fighters.

12. See, "Proxy War? Complicated Allegiances in Sinjar Will Threaten Iraqi Kurdish Unity in Long Run", *Niqash*, 16 March 2017, available at: www.niqash.org.

The increased power of the militias

A sacrificed youth

The state and the Iraqi people are not only suffering from the brutality of IS jihadists, but also from those who are fighting them. In particular, the Shiite militias gathered under the official name of the Popular Mobilisation Forces (*al-hashd al-shaabi*) and theoretically provided with a unified command under the authority of the Prime Minister. These militias base their legitimacy on a *fatwa* issued on 13 June 2014 by Ayatollah Sistani, the highest Shiite religious authority in Iraq. In effect, he called on Iraqis to form a mass movement of volunteers to counter the threat after the fall of Mosul. This appeal amounts to a legal injunction: by making collective and defensive counter-jihad mandatory, Ayatollah Sistani – who has always been concerned about constitutional legality – finished by legitimating the increased power of the militias, some of which pre-dated IS and had fought against the US occupation in the past.

Several tens of thousands of young Shiites responded to the call. They are from the same youth as their Sunni opponents, poor and unemployed. Since the start of the 2000s, a large part of the Iraqi youth has been socialised into a popular culture, which trivialises, legitimises, and aestheticizes spectacular violence and slaughter (*al-thabih*). This culture has its heroes and villains (e.g. Shaker Wahib, the IS executioner and his Shiite counterpart, Abu Azrael, “the angel of death”), its iconography, its folklore (videos, hymns, banners, parades in military uniforms and off-road vehicles, etc.) and its charity organisations, and acts as a genuine multiplier of the number of fighters, occasional or regular, professional or amateur. This youth is mainly recruited in rural or semi-urban areas, on the margins of Iraqi society and economy, in population segments left outside of the system. Young Sunnis, like Shiites, are sacrificed by elitist political parties which only consider political participation and integration in active life through the co-optation of individuals selected for their family ties, loyalty, skills or ability to support them locally. In an economy inflated by the civil service (which has grown from 500,000 in 2003 to more than 3 million civil servants in 2010, plus 1.5 million civil service pensioners) there are virtually no employment opportunities for them outside the

patronage networks set up by the parties and the armed militias associated with them. The rise of IS has conveniently obscured these multiple conflict dynamics at the heart of Iraqi society, which as a whole, is left to fend for itself and condemned to find survival resources on its own outside the institutions or to emigrate abroad.

New leadership figures

Despite the large amounts of money – these amount to tens of billions of dollars invested in it by the United States and by Iraqi governments since 2003¹³ – the Iraqi army suffered a humiliating defeat against IS in Mosul in June 2014. It is this very failure, as well as the military emergency environment, which created the conditions for the emergence of all kinds of irregular armed forces. Although with a strong Shiite jihadist emphasis, the Popular Mobilisation Forces include the other religious and ethnic components which make up Iraqi society, even the smallest minorities (Yazidis, Christians, Turkmen, etc.) who have had no other choice than to take up arms to defend themselves. In many places, the country has now fallen under the control of a myriad of violent and predatory militias, determined to make their entry onto the official political scene at any cost.

Although the bulk of fighting against IS was conducted by forces belonging to the Counter Terrorism Service,¹⁴ the militias' contribution to the war effort was decisive, particularly in the defence of the small mixed towns and villages surrounding Baghdad, whose inhabitants are divided between Sunnis and Shiites. In Mosul, the militias participated in the encirclement of the jihadists by preventing them from fleeing to their other capital, the city of Raqqa in Syria. Those perceived by the United States as being less subservient to Iran were even allowed to fight inside Mosul despite hostility from the majority Sunni inhabitants.

Militia numbers are unknown, but according to several estimates, there may be hundreds of thousands of fighters spread between more than 50 militias, sometimes united and operating as one single man, sometimes uncontrollable and competing with each other. They are tied to Iran and to a great extent reproduce its *bassidj* model, – the most fanatical branch of the Islamic Revolutionary Guards – these militias differ from one another

13. See M. Knights, "The Future of Iraq's Armed Forces", *Al-Bayan Center Publications Series*, No. 8, March 2016, available at: www.washingtoninstitute.org.

14. Established and directly trained by the US military in 2003, these are special forces which count around 10,000 experienced men. They do not come under the authority of the Ministry of Defence, or the Ministry of Interior, but are directly linked to the Prime Minister. The fighting against IS has given them a real patriotic and heroic status in the eyes of the Iraqi people, all the more so as they are concerned about preserving human lives and limiting damage.

in terms of combativeness, discipline, and of course numbers and weapons. For instance, the powerful Badr Organisation led by Hadi Al-Amiri has a wide range of weapons at its disposal, including helicopters and tanks; its incorporation since 2003 into the army and federal police units, and then its running of the Ministry of Interior and Transport have given it privileged access to resources – financial and military – as well as to state infrastructure. It is followed by *Asaeb Ahl-al-Haqq* (League of the Virtuous) and *Hezbollah Iraq*, also of Iranian inspiration and used to harass the US troops before their withdrawal in 2011. *Saraya al-Salam* (Peace Brigades, the former Mahdi Army) of the Sadrist movement can compete in size with the Badr Organisation, but has stood back slightly from fighting against IS, preferring to concentrate on the defence of certain symbolic places for Shiites like Samarra, playing on nationalist pride when the other militias display excessive Shiite sectarianism, and above all put pressure on the government through its high concentration in Baghdad. Finally, the religious *marjai'yya* at Najaf and Karbala (the clergy headed by Ayatollah Sistani) have also established several armed militias (Al-Abbas Fighting Division, Soldiers of the *marja'iyya*, Imam Ali Fighting Division, etc.), funded with Marjaiyya's own money, that it is encouraging to participate more in fighting and distributing humanitarian aid to the displaced. To these leading militias should be added dozens of others, created by entrepreneurs of violence; these are often "franchises" of the former, under the command of Abu Mahdi Al-Mohandis. This former Islamist, exiled in Iran before 2003, is at the same time a leader of several armed militias and an influent member of Parliament.

The fighting against IS has hence caused a major *militia-isation* process of Iraqi political life and institutions, and across the Levant, a new trend of "transhumance" of Shia warriors. From 2012-2013, some of these militias have sent troops to fight alongside the Syrian regime, following the model of the Lebanese Hezbollah and the orders of their Iranian mentor.¹⁵ Then, they established themselves as fully-fledged actors in the regional game, following a subcontracting logic on behalf of Iran, but also on their own account, partly for money. The affair of the Qatari falconers, who came to hunt in southern Iraq in 2015 and were kidnapped by one of these Shiite militias, provides a perfect illustration of this, by intermingling criminal considerations and political calculus.

15. See P. Smyth, "The Shiite Jihad in Syria and Its Regional Effects", *Policy Focus*, No. 138, The Washington Institute for Near East Policy, 2015, available at: www.washingtoninstitute.org.

In particular, this affair was closely related to the evolution of the fights between the jihadists and the Lebanese Hezbollah in Syria.¹⁶

Although this Popular Mobilisation Force mainly reshuffles the decks between the Shiite political forces, it nonetheless upsets the intra-Sunni balance of power by encouraging the rise of new political and armed figures of leadership. To free themselves of accusations of sectarianism and abuses against civilians (looting, racketeering, mistreatment, and executions of men suspected of being affiliated to IS in detention centres, and finally displacement amounting to ethnic and religious cleansing¹⁷), most of the Shiite militias have Sunni auxiliaries, often from the tribal world, which allow them to control the liberated areas better. These Sunni units include remnant fighters from the tribal *Sahwas* (tribal awakening councils) formed and trained by the US military in 2006-2007 to defeat Al-Qaeda, and then co-opted by Nouri Al-Maliki when he was Prime Minister (2006-2014). They are nowadays without influence or autonomy on the ground (low numbers and weapons). Above all, they are all also compromised by abuses against the population, similarly having self-embarked on a vetting mission, drawing up lists of suspects, conducting raids, and authorising the inhabitants to return to their homes, selectively or for a fee, while others are blackmailed for access to humanitarian aid.

Decline of the cartel of former exiles

Given their sacrifices in the war against terrorism, the militias have become extremely popular in the eyes of the majority of Iraqis, who see their charismatic leaders as credible alternatives to save a country on the edge of the abyss. In fact, the political class is deeply discredited and often referred to as the corruption militia (*militia al-fassad*).

Consequently, the *Hashd al-Shaabi* constitutes a direct threat to the political establishment, firstly Al-Da'wa, but also the Islamic Supreme Council of Iraq, which the US occupation entrusted with the reins of

16. The Iraqi militia in question (Hezbollah Iraq) received a ransom amounting to several hundred million dollars sent by plane to Baghdad, but their hostage-taking also helped Iran to negotiate a ceasefire in Syria between its ally Hezbollah and the Islamists supported by Qatar, including Al-Nusra. This ceasefire allowed civilians in several villages encircled by both of them to be evacuated. See H. Hassan, "The Complex Backstory of the Qatari Hostage Deal", *The National*, 23 April 2017, available at: www.thenational.ae. Previously, another hostage-taking of Turkish construction workers in Baghdad helped to put pressure on Ankara to stop its support for the Syrian rebels and to not tolerate oil smuggling between the KRG and Syria to their advantage. See also, "Shiite Militia Releases 16 Turkish Workers Abducted in Iraq", *The New York Times*, 30 September 2015, available at: www.nytimes.com.

17. See "Iraq: Ban Abusive Militias from Mosul Operation. Unpunished Killings, Torture Put Civilians in Harm's Way", Human Rights Watch, 31 July 2016, available at: www.hrw.org.

power.¹⁸ These Shiite Islamic parties are now faced with a strong competition from armed actors who consider themselves wronged by quotas for monopolizing power and public resources (*muhassassa*) referred to above. Admittedly, the newcomers to politics from the militias are rather seeking to improve their position within the Green Zone system than to overthrow it. This highly-secure, small territorial enclave in the heart of the Iraqi capital was set up by the United States to protect, in addition to their enormous embassy, the Parliament, government departments, as well as the homes of the most influential politicians. Militia leaders are preparing their lists for the next elections, but disagree on the shape of the Iraqi state and what the objective of ultimately defeating IS means. Is it the defeat of terrorism; or of the Sunni insurgency that has been continuously radicalising by changing its face or name since 2003 due to the absence of a durable political solution; or just simply the defeat of the Sunnis in Iraq?

The militias have already achieved an ambiguous recognition of their status. Haïder Al-Abadi's government has brought their main leaders together in a Popular Mobilisation Forces Committee and granted them an annual budget of more than \$ 1.5 billion. The Iraqi parliament has also passed a law (November 2016) which legalises their existence and builds them up into a parallel defence mechanism along with the army and the federal police, formally under the Prime Minister's command, who is also the Supreme Commander of the Armed Forces. This law grants militia fighters the same status and privileges as soldiers and policemen (salaries, severance pay, benefits in kind, etc.) and at the same time ban them from politics. It is not certain that this institutionalisation resolves the issue: in Iraq, the military and paramilitary armed forces are locked in an inevitable paradoxical relationship of rivalry and complementarity against the backdrop of the state's weakness in the face of its enemies. Therefore, this situation forces the latter to more or less permanently share its sovereign powers. It will be difficult to challenge this new militia landscape even if the phenomenon of IS were destroyed; past attempts at disbanding the militias within the regular forces have magnified the lack of co-ordination, factionalism, and corruption among regular armed forces, rather than restoring the monopoly on violence to the state.

18. For the functioning of the Iraqi political parties, see L. Al Rachid, "Irak : la malédiction du trop-plein partisan", *Confluences Méditerranée*, 2016/3 (No. 98), pp. 124-135.

Furthermore, the poorest governorates in southern Iraq, which have supplied the bulk of the militia members, are increasingly concerned about their return which will certainly be accompanied by security chaos and racketeering of inhabitants and traders.

A political gridlock

A weak Prime Minister

The Prime Minister, Haïder Al-Abadi, who is favoured by western governments and Arab countries, has undeniably scored important points by maintaining unity and determination in the war against IS. Despite his affiliation with the Islamic Da'wa party, he is keen on cultivating an image of a “moderate” if not secular Shiite leader capable of defending a certain type of Iraqism against Iran and at the same time reassuring the Sunnis in Iraq and the neighbouring Arab states. His recent rapprochement with Saudi Arabia, whose Minister of Foreign Affairs he welcomed in Baghdad (25 February 2017) against all odds, his participation in the Arab League summit at the Dead Sea (end of March 2017) and then his visit to Riyadh (19 June 2017) attest to this desire to distance himself from Iran. He is rewarded by strong foreign support.¹⁹

At the start of 2016, the international financial institutions granted him substantial aid to deal with the budgetary deficit and to avoid breakdown in the functioning of many government agencies. Iraq's economy suffers indeed from the oil price shock which came at a time when humanitarian and security needs started sending expenditure through the roof. Since taking office, the Iraqi Central Bank's reserves have dropped from \$ 80 billion to \$ 49 billion in early 2017, while public debt has increased by \$ 35 billion. Admittedly, Al-Abadi has been able to benefit from foreign grants to initiate reconstruction programmes in some of the regions partially or entirely destroyed by the fighting, but these funds are far from being up to the scale of the challenge. Foreign support does not suffice to consolidate his position at the head of the government, especially vis-à-vis his partner-opponents, those of the National Alliance bringing together the main Shiite Islamic parties, as well as the Kurdish political parties, which have dominated the state authorities and Parliament since 2003. He has failed to implement the promised reforms of the state and the economy and remains a prisoner of corrupt and paralysing politicking. To his credit, his relative paralysis can be explained by the fact that he does not command the loyalty of a distinct parliamentary block and is therefore

19. At the end of March 2017, Haïder Al-Abadi was the first Arab Head of State to have been received warmly by President Donald Trump who had just taken over in the White House.

forced into a balancing game between the various components of the Shiite political chessboard, without forgetting the Sunni Arabs and the Kurds. Above all, he is faced with dangerous opposition from his own political party, the Al-Da'wa party, which has largely remained faithful to his predecessor, Nouri Al-Maliki. The latter completed two consecutive terms as Prime Minister (2006-2014) during which he strived to concentrate power in his hands and to subdue the legislative and judicial powers. Thence, he enjoys hitherto a great influence and controls powerful networks within what seems to be a "deep state". Al-Maliki has also well-established networks within tribes, businessmen, the media, small political groups and armed militias in the southern Shiite governorates.

Although purging the institutions of men appointed by Al-Maliki would be a tricky operation, a return of the latter to office of Prime Minister hardly seems possible. Hostility to his person brings together a large part of public opinion, the Sadrist movement and the *marj'aiyya* (the clergy) at Najaf, as well as part of the Kurdish *leadership* (Massoud Barzani). However, Al-Maliki has not given up. Aware of the fact that he embodies a strong pole of the Shiite political spectrum (he is the only politician to be able to boast of mobilising so many votes – 720,000 voters in Baghdad in the 2014 general election as opposed to slightly more than 5,000 for Al-Abadi – he continues to work behind the scenes. He relies on the leaders of the Shiite militias and plays on Kurdish divisions by cultivating links with the PUK and the Gorran party (the Party of Change²⁰), whose popularity in recent years has greatly disrupted the Kurdish two-party system. His relations with Iran are very close even if he holds Tehran responsible for his removal after the fall of Mosul. His ultimate ambition is to be at the head of a majority parliamentary block which would not only allow him to be a Prime Minister from the shadows, but also to change the rules of the political game. He aspires to change the Iraqi polity from a coalition government to a majority government and to renegotiate relations between the centre and the Kurdish and Sunni minorities to alleviate what seems to him as a financial and security burden for Baghdad.

20. Formed in 2009 by Nawshirwan Mustafa (1944-2017), a well-known member of the PUK, the Gorran party gradually made an electoral impact and weakened the Kurdish two-party system, denouncing clanism, corruption, and authoritarian tendencies. Enjoying a strong presence in Sulaymaniyah governorate where it now supplants the PUK, it embodies a liberal opposition within the Kurdish parliament while participating up to October 2015 in the Kurdish regional government. The Gorran party also has several members in the Iraqi parliament, which allows it to be fully involved in political negotiations in Baghdad. See M. Salih, *The New Politics of Iraqi Kurdistan*, Fikra Forum/The Washington Institute for Near East Policy, 16 August, available at: www.washingtoninstitute.org.

Finally, Haïder Al-Abadi is structurally doomed to remain a weak Prime Minister. He can be overthrown at any moment either by means of a vote of no-confidence in Parliament or street politics whereby an escalate of popular anger ends in armed clashes pitting against each other demonstrators, regular and irregular armed forces in a scattered order, re-enacting the scenario of a massive uprising against the government comparable to that of the March-April 1991 *intifada*.²¹ It would only require a spark (for example, a blunder by the law enforcement agencies) for the country to flare up, against the background of poor or inexistent public services – the electricity supply is particularly erratic.²²

Civil unrest

Prime Minister Al-Abadi has indeed been faced with a popular protest movement since the summer of 2015, which took to the streets of Baghdad and several other major southern cities to express rejection of the Shiite Islamist parties in power for more than a decade and the politicians associated with them. Each time, the latter participate in public events or visit the governorates, they are violently attacked. Haïder Al-Abadi and his predecessor, Nouri Al-Maliki, have both borne the brunt of this protest, to the point of cancelling many of their trips in the country.

Led by activists, journalists, and left-wing intellectuals who rely heavily on social media (Facebook is very popular in Iraq) and the student youth, the protesters demand a separation of religion and state and a drastic fight against the large-scale corruption which plagues all public administrations. They are more or less from the educated urban middle class, who do not feel represented in a system dominated by former exiles and militia leaders. Yet, this middle class has grown considerably since 2003 and has experienced a significant improvement in its living conditions: GDP per capita increased from \$ 440 in 2003 to more than \$ 6,000 in 2014. During the same period, the number of Iraqi cars

21. The *intifada* (“insurgency”) in 1991 broke out during the rout of the Iraqi army, fleeing Kuwait under the deluge of fire inflicted by the coalition led by the United States. In the Shiite south, angry soldiers then turned their weapons against the government and were joined by a part of the population. In the Kurdish north, the Peshmergas took control of the area and the public services. The response by Saddam Hussein’s government – like that of Bashar Al-Assad in 2011, consisted of bloody repression of the uprising. The Shiite country was reclaimed but Kurdistan permanently escaped the central government. This bloody episode profoundly marked Iraqi society and fuelled an imagined revolt against the tyrant always ready to be modernised.

22. In spite of tens of billions of dollars which have been invested to restore the electricity network since 2003, Iraqis only receive 5 to 8 hours of electricity per day. The failures in this industry have become symbolic of the political corruption. See L. Al-Khatteeb and H. Istepanian, “Turn a Light On: Electricity Sector Reform in Iraq”, *Policy Briefing*, The Brookings Institution/Brookings Doha Center, March 2015, available at: www.brookings.edu.

increased by half a million to more than 4.5 million. The country now has 29 million mobile phone subscribers (or 76% of the population). Above all, 70% of the population is under 35 years old and did not experience the Ba'athist dictatorship period. They do not feel concerned by the conflicts (ethnic, religious, Ba'athist versus exiles) which have been poisoning the political arena since 2003. The Al-Da'wa party's and other former exiles' history of opposing Saddam Hussein's regime, which they boast of, does not confer *ipso facto* a legitimate political status in their eyes. Furthermore, in Baghdad and in the southern cities, this middle class is mobilising against a government which has clearly been "Shiite" since 2003 and which bases its legitimacy on the defence of the Shiite ownership of the state. A slogan which became very popular says a lot about the gulf which separates this Shiite middle class from the political establishment: "In the name of religion, the thieves have robbed us!"

While ensuring they do not display positions hostile to religion, mainly by being very respectful of Ayatollah Sistani's authority, who supports them, the protesters have succeeded in breaking taboos such as the hegemony of the Shiite Islamic parties and the relationship with Iran, while practising an open and virulent criticism of the leading political figures. It is therefore not surprising that the Iranian media has opened fire on this Iraqi "civil society" accused of spreading atheism. They are supported by Nouri Al-Maliki in this, who considered that the "the protesters are attempting a coup against Islam." Ammar Al-Hakim, another Shiite leader from a political party at the centre of negotiations for power-sharing at the highest level, did not hesitate to state that, "the protests are part of the war conducted by Daesh (IS) against the Iraqi government," reusing the Ba'athist wording of "scum" and "rioters" (*al-ghawgha'*) used by Saddam Hussein during the crushing of the Shiite intifada in 1991.

This latest wave of mobilisation stems from an intra-Shiite divide. On the one hand, an ultra-orthodox camp, deeply rooted in the Iranian sphere of influence, which sees the Islamic Republic as a political model; the war against IS has been a golden opportunity for this camp, the crushing of Sunni Iraq strengthens the "Shiite nation" narrative and provides a major resource of both symbolic and material legitimacy (militia entrepreneurship). Nouri Al-Maliki and his allies from the militias embody this vision. On the other, a "civilian" camp (*madani*) in favour of the rule of law freed of ethnic and religious quotas, supported by Ayatollah Sistani, who sent his young, turbaned seminarians to support the protesters with banners demanding "separation of religion and the state". This camp intends to explore a strictly Iraqi cultural specificity and democratic path

as expressed in the slogan “Iran out, Baghdad free” (*Iran barra, Baghdad Hurra*).

Between these two camps, Prime Minister Haïder Al-Abadi’s position lacks clarity and keeps changing. Initially, he seemed to choose the civil society camp by embracing the need to reform the political process. From the summer of 2015, he abolished several ministries and about 100 general managers’ posts in the civil service. He has notably abolished the deputy PM and the three vice-presidential posts which were only used by their holders to ensure access to the state’s resources. Nouri Al-Maliki, who he criticised in virulent terms, not hesitating to compare him to the fallen tyrant (Saddam Hussein), was targeted by this measure even though the two other Vice-Presidents (Iyad Allawi and Osama Al-Nujaifi) also had to leave their posts. As for the MPs, Al-Abadi decided to lower their wages, as well as the size of the armies of bodyguards assigned to their protection. Under popular pressure, the parliament has finally voted on several crucial laws left open since 2005, including the law on political parties and on the freedom of the press. For its part, the Integrity Commission has indicted several dozens of senior officials, including ministers as well as the former Mayor of Baghdad. Some of these reforms require a revision of the Constitution (abolition of the Vice-Presidencies); others a change in the law (merging of some ministries).

The unknown Sadrist factor

Although, this popular protest has been continuing every Friday since the summer of 2015, the movement remains small despite the *a priori* unnatural support provided by Moqtada Al-Sadr’s powerful movement. He is the son of an Ayatollah assassinated by Saddam Hussein’s regime and who since 2003 has become the leading figure of the poor and underprivileged Shiite population. The latter is an atypical actor in the Shiite Islamic scene. Indeed, he occupies an intermediate position, half-way between the *establishment* in power since 2003 and the anti-system forces, somehow comparable to Sieyès’ “Third Estate” (Tiers-État) striving “to be something”. The Sadrists are able to mobilise the street better than all the other political parties. They also have weapons to oppose the camp formed by Nouri Al-Maliki and the Hashd militias. If the confrontation were to materialise, it would trigger an intra-Shiite civil war for the leadership of the government. This is why Al-Maliki repeats over and over that this war would be bloody: “man against man and weapon against weapon” (*al-rijjal bi-l rijjal wa-l silah bi-l silah*).

Moqtada Al-Sadr has been conducting an unpredictable policy of brinkmanship for a long time, while seeking to bolster the image of a disciplined movement, far from the excesses of the past and the crimes committed by his men against Sunni civilians after the bombing of the Shiite shrine in Samarra (2006). In 2003, the Coalition Provisional Authority designated the Sadrists as their enemies in the same way as the Sunni insurgents. They were excluded from the political scene, which greatly benefited the Al-Da'wa party and the ISCI.

Nowadays, the Sadrists have settled down; they have a foot in the street and a foot in the political process (a parliamentary bloc and several ministers, thousands of supporters in the ranks of the regular armed forces, and militia members). Admittedly, Moqtada Al-Sadr has neither the charisma nor the oratory skill of his Lebanese co-religionist Hassan Nasrallah, who inspires him a lot, but he enjoys immense popularity inherited from the aura of his father, Ayatollah Mohammad Sadeq Al-Sadr, assassinated in Najaf in 1999. This prestigious lineage singles him out: he is the only person on the political scene to generate such a mass hysteria around their person and to also seriously influence the government. His supporters are quick to chant: "O Qassem O Suleimani, this Sadr is divine!" (*ya Qassem ya Sleimani, hadha al-Sadr Rabbani*). Furthermore, his relations with Iran have always been problematic. Exiled for a time in Qom in order to escape the repression targetting his supporters under Nouri Al-Maliki's government, and the arrest warrant which personally targeted him in the investigation into the murder of a religious cleric (Abd Al-Majid Al-Khu'i) in Najaf in April 2003, who had returned from London with the US and British invading forces, he then seemed to receive favours from Tehran with the aim of making the US occupation of Iraq costly and counter-productive. His militia, the Mahdi Army (later to be renamed the Peace Brigades) would certainly not have been possible without Iran's, and its regional subcontractor, the Lebanese Hezbollah's financial support and military supervision. However, Tehran is notoriously suspicious of Moqtada Al-Sadr, criticising his political inconsistency, his sweeping statements, and above all his readiness to reactivate an Iraqi nationalism which is still hostile to interference from its Shiite neighbour. His willingness to develop links with the Gulf countries (today Saudi Arabia and the UAE and, in the past, Qatar) have only increased Iran's suspicion towards him.

Playing on the blind obedience to the leader which permeates his young supporters, Moqtada Al-Sadr harbors a position mixing demagogy, populism, and Shiite radicalism, at times reviving the Madhist overtones of his late father. He constantly swings between pragmatism and

revolutionary attempts. In other words, between increasing his share of power and resources by means of political manoeuvres in the Green Zone and the outburst of his supporters on this sanctuary of less than 10 km² in the heart of the capital that he intends “to snatch and uproot” (*shala’ gala*) in order to remedy all the country’s evils, according to the slogan that he popularised in spring 2016. After several proclaimed “millionaire” rallies and *sit-ins* at the gates of the Green Zone, Al-Sadr symbolically entered this sanctuary of politicking alone and then let his supporters storm the parliament (30 April 2016) before ordering them to disperse calmly. Once again, his brinkmanship strategy failed to change the *status quo*²³ in any meaningful way.

Al-Abadi’s failure in implementing real reforms, notably by setting up a government of technocrats above ethnic and religious affiliations, has far-reaching implications. He has squandered the immense support that civil society and Ayatollah Sistani provided him with to impulse changes in a leaderless regime, which has become a source of instability and violence. No more in Afghanistan than in Iraq, the democratic transition kit provided from abroad cannot produce tangible results, as long as a significant segment of the population, here the Sunni Arabs, continues to feel excluded and marginalised, while endemic corruption blocks any attempt at actual economic recovery. The Constitution adopted in 2005, the new institutions (parliament, independent commissions, High Court of Justice, etc.), as well as regular elections have not shaped nor regulated the Iraqi polity. Parliament remains ineffective; embezzlement and naked acts of brutality and violence (assassinations, torture in state or militia detention centres, looting, and collective massacres) remain unpunished and are becoming the norm rather than the exception. Iraqi society survives in a widespread cycle of violence which makes it brutal in return.

23. See R. Mansour and M. D. Clark, “Is Muqtada Al-Sadr Good for Iraq?”, 2 May 2016, available at: www.iraqstudies.com.

Iraq as an arena of increased US-Iranian tensions?

The Obama administration's legacy

Up until now, the United States and Iran, the two foreign powers competing on Iraqi territory seemed to more or less agree on a duopoly. It was a form of compromise allowing them to stabilize the post-Ba'athist entity that they have largely helped to shape by dividing up between them security tasks and zones of influence. Their ultimate objective was to prevent a sudden breakdown in the Iraqi polity and its narrative of pluralism²⁴ propelling all the actors, starting with the Shiite factions into a civil war of quite another scale.

Convinced that the United States did not have the means to shape Arab societies, the Obama administration accepted the failure of its predecessors in Iraq.²⁵ The fear of the politico-military spiral initially hastened the withdrawal which then justified a policy of influence behind the scenes in the Green Zone, by relying on what remained to Washington of levers within the political class and the armed forces, including the Counter-Terrorism Service (CTS) and the approximately 5,000 US troops kept in the country to train the Iraqi troops. This strategy, whose cost is relatively low for the US taxpayer, is tantamount to implicitly endorsing the *de facto* tripartite division of the country. More specifically, the United States continues to fund and directly arm the Kurdish Peshmergas without obtaining approval from Baghdad (a memorandum signed on 12 July 2016 in Erbil between representatives from the Pentagon and the Ministry of Peshmergas, whose content was deliberately left vague). They have reinforced their presence at military bases in the Sunni Triangle (Ain Al-Assad, Gayyara, etc.) and are trying to reconstitute the Sunni tribal militias, a pale copy of the *Sahwas* (tribal awakening councils) of 2006-2007, established and supervised by the US army to fight Al-Qaeda in the Al-Anbar province.

24. See L. Al-Rachid, "L'implacable politique-fiction irakienne", *Orient XXI*, 5 October 2016, available at: <http://orientxxi.info>.

25. See P. Harling and A. Simon, "Obama's Iraq Policy That Curious Feeling of *deja-vu*", *Synaps*, 4 October 2016, available at: www.synaps.network.

Above all, the historic agreement signed with Iran on the nuclear issue has endorsed a considerable shift in US policy toward Iraq. Although some of the Popular Mobilisation Forces militias fought against the US occupation for a long time, they were considered as allies in the war against terrorism after the fall of Mosul. The Islamic Republic of Iran could only welcome this shift and take full advantage of the new geopolitical situation produced by the US military withdrawal in 2011 and its consequence, the emergence of IS. Iran was now free to conduct an aggressive regional policy focused on the defence of Shiism; did this mean that it was the absolute master of the political process in Baghdad? Iraq certainly became a domestic policy issue for Tehran. The Revolutionary Guards, led by General Qassem Soleimani, have the upper hand on policy vis-à-vis Iraq;²⁶ they found in this country a second revolutionary wind and a vital economic area. In fact, they supervised the consolidation of trade between the two countries, made direct investments and acquired shares, particularly in the Iraqi banking sector, a technique which allowed them to particularly alleviate the burden of the international sanctions targeting their country. Their links with the Iraqi Shiite militias and their leaders are crucial, which give them indisputable military influence; furthermore, they are the only ones to be able to regulate the Iraqi Shiite political sphere, contain its dissensions and force all its actors to compromise. Including through control of the religious *marja'iyya* at Najaf: Ayatollah Sistani has been striving since 2003 to embody an independent pole, doubtlessly labelled a bit too hastily as “Iraqi nationalist”, but he is one of the last “great *marja*” (supreme clerical authority). After him, this religious authority is highly likely to be diluted between several Ayatollahs, a pluralism which Iran will know better than anyone how to take advantage of.

The shift towards containing Iranian influence

Will the Trump administration change this US-Iranian collusion in Iraq and at the same time become more interventionist in Syria, two countries whose political developments are increasingly intertwined? The beginnings of the new US team have been confused and unconvincing vis-à-vis Iraq: inapplicability of a decree suspending entry of nationals from seven mainly Muslim countries to the United States, including Iraq; promise to eradicate IS in Iraq and Syria in 30 days; stated desire to “confiscate” Iraqi oil to

26. Most of the Iranian ambassadors sent to Baghdad have come from the Revolutionary Guards Corps.

finance the US war effort. A more realistic foreign policy however seems to be emerging with less sweeping statements. The State Department, which is largely hostile to the new president, is now marginalised: it is no longer time for minimal commitment in the Levant and throughout the region. It is left to the Ministry of Defence, led by General James Mattis, to define the broad outlines of the new policy. Nicknamed “mad dog”, this veteran of the Iraq war has been noticed for his tendency to have a heavy-handed approach and his relative indifference to collateral damage.²⁷ He has already relaxed the rules of engagement for the US air force in the battle of Mosul with disastrous consequences for the civilian population as can be expected. Furthermore, in June 2017, the air coalition remained silent about air strikes using white phosphorus bombs on the old city of Mosul.

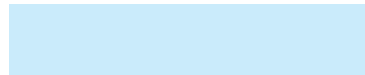
In Iraq, as in Syria and Yemen, a logic of militarisation of US policy in the Middle East therefore now prevails (commandos, increasing the number of US forces on the ground and direct participation in fighting, increased drones and air strikes²⁸). This logic is not unrelated to the considerable increase in the US defence budget (amounting to \$ 54 billion). Judging by his statements during his visit with great fanfare to Riyadh (21 May 2017), President Trump intends above all to contain the Iranian influence, not only in Iraq but throughout the Middle East. Iran and its main ally, the Lebanese Hezbollah, are now accused of terrorism in the same way as IS. While reinforcing the existing US military bases in Iraq (in particular the Al-Gayyara air base 60 kilometres south of Mosul on the strategic road leading to the Syrian border), his administration has impressed upon Prime Minister Al-Abadi the need to disband the Shiite militias and promote the emergence of a political majority relatively distant from Iran, bringing both the “moderate” Shiites and Sunnis as well as civil society representatives together. An economic component completes this scenario: the United States wants to regain economic importance in Iraq by proposing a sort of new “oil for reconstruction” formula, which would give them the lion’s share in contracts related to the rehabilitation of the conflict-damaged regions and infrastructure in general. Obviously, Iran does not want a breakdown in the Iraqi political process, which would risk plunging its Shiite protégés into a generalised conflict. Nevertheless, it will be reluctant to give up its role of tutelary power that it has exercised since 2003.

27. See D. Filkins, “James Mattis, a Warrior in Washington”, *The New Yorker*, 29 May 2017, available at: www.newyorker.com.

28. See A. Rashid “Trump in the Middle East: The New Brutality”, *The New Review of Books*, 28 March 2017, available at: www.nybooks.com.

Conclusion

Generally, the dismantling of the territorial sanctuaries of the Islamic caliphate portends serious complications. It imposes huge challenges in terms of political governance and humanitarian emergencies in Iraq and Syria. It is also likely to open up new avenues of geographical redeployments to jihadism, an extremely ideologically resilient phenomenon. Faced with this, the military-security tool has only produced partial success – or partial failure. Once again, Iraq and its broken political system will have little chance of achieving a lasting peace and restoring state capacity; they will continue to lend themselves to a game of confrontation and compromise between international and regional powers, duplicated locally by a race between political factions seeking to grab power. This configuration will likely prevail at the expense of the population for many years to come.



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