

MEETING SUMMARY

IRAQ BEYOND ‘MOSUL’: AVOIDING THE NEXT CONFLICT

Tuesday 21 November 2017, The Hague

Summary of key points

- i. The political situation in Iraq is fluid. While the state remains captured by the elites that came to power in 2003 and political life continues to center on Al-Maliki, Al-Sadr and – to a lesser extent – Al-Abadi, the mix of many young voters, a reduced salience of sectarianism and Shi’a/Kurdish infighting potentially opens the door to cross-sectarian political coalitions with more innovative policy ideas. Yet, real political change probably requires electoral reform, which is bound to encounter strong resistance.
- ii. The influence of Iran in Iraq tends to be exaggerated. There are strong nationalist and religious currents in Iraq that do not see eye to eye with its eastern neighbor. Opening the Arab world up to Iraq is likely to be the best ‘counter’-strategy. New proxy-wars are instead likely to tear Iraq further apart.
- iii. Both Erbil and Baghdad overplayed their hand in the Kurdish referendum with the result that a serious push from the international community to negotiate a new deal for an Iraq that is both Kurdish and Arab might make a difference. It needs to include a strong focus on intra-Shi’a and intra-Kurdish confidence and relationship (re)building.

Introduction

1. On Tuesday 21 November 2017, Clingendael’s Conflict Research Unit organized an intensive debate in The Hague between c. 70 experts, officials, policy-makers and opinion-setters on the question of how further conflict in Iraq can be avoided. Specifically, the event aimed to identify what the Netherlands’ government can do to help avoid more violence, including within the European Union and as part of the international community. This meeting summary offers a brief overview of key views and insights of the day. It is not necessarily complete and features no attribution. Its author is responsible for its contents.¹
2. The key issue appears to be as follows: On the one hand, a terrible period in Iraq’s history is drawing to a close. On the other hand, the conclusion of the fight against the Islamic State could just be the end of the beginning - instead of the beginning of the end - given the multitude of new challenges that have already appeared on Iraq’s horizon.

¹ The meeting was mostly conducted under the Chatham House rule. Speakers came from the Center for Shi’a studies, the East-West Institute, GPPI, Chatham House, the European University Institute, the Al-Bayan Center for Policy and Planning, the Iraqi Embassy to the Netherlands, the Dutch Foreign Ministry and the Clingendael Institute.

3. These challenges include further alienation of Iraq's Sunni community due to revanchist acts and inadequate reconciliation efforts, intense infighting among Iraq's Shi'a political elites, the lack of accountability of key Al-Hashd al-Sha'abi groups to the state and the question of Kurdish independence. They occur in a context of growing regional political rivalry between Iran, Turkey and Saudi Arabia, rising poverty rates in Iraq itself, significant development needs throughout the country and a nearly empty Iraqi treasury. The potential for further political upheaval, radicalization and violence is significant.
4. The event examined these challenges from the perspective of the center-periphery dynamics that have, inter alia, characterized governance in Iraq since 2003. In other words, it first analyzed the nature of political competition in Baghdad with a focus on matters such as the main political alliances and their agendas, the prospect for electoral reform, the significance of the role of Iran as well as of the Hashd al-Sha'abi. The discussion subsequently turned to developments in Iraq's periphery, i.e. its Sunni and Kurdish dominated areas, as well as the many smaller minorities in between, with a focus on the fragmentation of governance/security throughout Iraq's periphery, the Kurdish referendum and the Peshmerga.²

Key threads of the discussion

5. A major challenge for the Iraqi state since 2003 has been the combination of the fact that its neighbors (e.g. Iran and Saudi Arabia) as well as key domestic political constituencies (e.g. its Kurds and Shi'a) preferred to keep it weak – mostly for historical reasons - while these same actors have also undermined Iraqi national identity through the use of ethnicity, sectarianism and narrow 'in-group' politics.
6. The result has been a weak state that has so far not been capable of constructing an inclusive deal that is considered beneficial by its constituent parts. Its citizens struggle to maintain a sense of national identity and fall back on – voluntary or forced – non-state structures for survival and advancement. Now that the fight against the Islamic State is over, the elections of 2018 offer a new opportunity to put the Iraqi state on a firmer footing (the situation is not dissimilar to that of 2003), but such efforts will start from a weak basis.

Dynamics at Iraq's political center: Shi'a politics in Baghdad.

7. **Political competition.** Although Prime Minister (PM) Al-Abadi has gained significant credits by successfully concluding the fight against the Islamic State and by rapidly reducing the impact of the Kurdish referendum, his political basis remains weak. In the last elections his share of the vote, for example, was minimal, while his basis in the Da'wa party is also modest. This ensures that the major contention remains between Al-Maliki and Al-Sadr and their respective political configurations. The problem here is that Al-Maliki is largely discredited due to his divisive policies pre-dating 2014 as well as the string of victories of the Islamic State that occurred on his watch. As the architect of the Iraqi deep-state after 2003, he does still, however, hold significant power. Nevertheless, those in Iraqi politics in favor of

² The Sunni dimension of Iraq's challenges as a state remained underemphasized in both the program and the ensuing discussions, mostly because recent events merited a greater focus on Iraqi Kurdistan.

a strong central state, firm rule and the existence of parallel militias to ensure state security continue to see him as a viable proposition. While it is unlikely that he himself will return as an elected politician of prominence – a front man is more likely - he will continue to exercise significant influence nevertheless. The problem with Al-Sadr is that he is more part of the political establishment – that he frequently denounces - than he cares to admit and that he has so far been largely unable to effectuate meaningful change.

8. Several experts had trouble seeing a grand alliance emerging that brings these respective Shi'a political camps together,³ and, on a brighter note, suggested that this may enable cross-sectarian electoral lists. Yet, it was immediately noted that winning elections in Iraq does not necessarily get you into power.⁴ What matters is the period of coalition negotiations afterwards and this is where specific features of Iraq's electoral system (that promote fragmentation before the elections and consolidation afterwards) and requirements of sectarian representation come together in a closed-door process that facilitates elite deals and elite capture of the state.
9. In the eyes of many participants, this suggests a clear need for electoral reform (in particular of the Independent High Electoral Commission and redistricting), albeit with the caveat that it will require a real political fight and sustained pressure to happen. Those who would need to decide on such reform have, after all, the most to lose from it. It was also felt that the current anti-corruption drive offers a warning in the sense that it was rapidly politicized to become yet another tool in the arsenal of parties to beat their competition. Electoral reform might suffer a similar fate if it is not conducted in as neutral and independent a fashion as possible. An enhanced UNAMI might have a role to play.
10. In fact, a number of speakers and participants noted the difficulty for new entrants to enter the national political arena to compete, a low level of rotation among political elites and the structural capture of the state by the same group of elite players (the 'iron law of oligarchy', so to speak) as recurrent features of the Iraqi political system that impede reform and disable a more citizen-oriented governance style.
11. As a final electoral consideration, it was noted that Iraq's demography means that many young – and new - voters will play a role in the 2018 elections. While it is unclear how they will vote, it is clear that these 'new voters' are likely to care less about sectarianism and more about problems of insecurity and inadequate livelihoods. It is also clear that new political parties that express such preferences are few and far between. In short, in the abstract there is electoral potential for new parties that are less beholden to the sectarian representation of the existing political order.
12. **Iran.** The view prevailed that while Iran prefers a weak Iraq for historical reasons, its actual influence in Iraq tends to be exaggerated. Particularly the horrors of the Iran-Iraq war inform

³ Key factors that have influenced Shi'a coalition formation in the past do not stem hopeful either. These are: i) the level of coherence of (a) group(s); ii) the level of leadership strength and authority; iii) the experience of coalition politics of (a) group(s); and iv) the extent to which shared values enable groups to bridge political differences. See: https://www.clingendael.org/pub/2017/a_house_divided/2_understanding_shia_political_relation_and_coalitionbuilding_in_iraq/ (accessed 24 November 2017).

⁴ For example, in 2004/5 Al-Jafari won the elections but did not become PM, in 2010 Al-Maliki lost the elections but did become PM, while in 2014 Al-Maliki won the elections, but did not become PM.

Tehran's desire – and strategy – to ensure Iraq does not become a direct security threat and to prevent other countries from using it as such. This explains its strategy of maintaining a range of militias in Iraq as a parallel security force that could block, or at least impede, any moves against it. It is indicative of this strategy that Iraqi policy is run by the IRGC (instead of the Iranian Foreign Ministry) and that the Iranian ambassador to Iraq is usually a ranking (ex-) IRGC officer.

13. At the same time, Iraq features powerful sources of domestic strength and resistance against Iran that circumscribe its influence. These include in particular the political platform of Al-Sadr, the religious establishment in Najaf (with its concomitant preference for a civil state, instead of one ruled by clerics) and elements in various Iraqi Shi'a parties. In short, the fact that Iraq and Iran are largely Shi'a is fairly meaningless as vector for Iranian political influence in Iraq. A Hezbollah-type scenario for Iraq must therefore be considered unlikely. The Iranian strategy of spreading its influence across quite a wide range of political parties and militias is best seen as a hedging approach in the knowledge that Iraqi actors retain significant agency. The closest Iran-associated Iraqi militia - Kataib Hezbollah - is too small (c. 2-3,000 fighters) and lacks political clout for a Hezbollah style scenario.
14. A number of speakers and participants considered the recent 'thaw' between Iraq and Saudi Arabia as a positive development as this would increase Iraqi options away from Iran and towards the Arab States in the Gulf. Some opined that there was no need for Saudi Arabia to follow Iran's political-security strategy in Iraq as simply unlocking Iraq's Arab orbit might be enough to counter-balance Iranian influence.
15. **Al-Hashd al-Sha'abi.** Despite legislative changes that formally brought the Hashd under the auspices of the Iraqi PM and made it part of the army, the Hashd largely continues to exist as a separate entity. The general expectation is that a hardcore of mostly Iran-associated militias will maintain this profile irrespective of further legislative or political changes in the near future. It should be noted here that many pro-Sistani fighters joined pro-Iran groups and that their loyalty towards Iran post-Islamic State cannot be taken for granted by their commanders. Hence, not only are Iraq's Shi'a political parties fragmented, the pro-Iran Hashd groups are to a certain degree fragmented as well. The challenge for this group is to maintain its legitimacy after the end of the fight against the Islamic State. The 2018 elections offer both an opportunity for the Hashd, and a good gauge for the international community, in this regard, as political operators like Al-Maliki will seek to use the popularity of the Hashd to gain votes and to use votes gained in this manner to make the Hashd endure.
16. Another part of the Hashd is expected to disband upon Al-Sistani's issuing his expected 'thank you for services rendered' fatwa once the victory against the Islamic State is complete. The challenge for this group of fighters is to ensure alternative economic opportunities and livelihoods.
17. Participants expected what will happen with the majority of the Hashd to depend on the speed and credibility with which the Iraqi army restores its prestige (as this would facilitate absorption of Hashd fighters) and the direction of Iraqi politics after the 2018 elections (this could further strengthen the state and reduce the need for the Hashd).

18. Some speakers opined that they were less concerned about Hashd groups competing politically in the 2018 elections (despite the prohibition to do so) and more about these groups preferring to continue to exist in the political shadow on the basis of their current autonomy, strength and legitimacy. For example, they could turn into self-proclaimed ‘guarantors of (some sort of) political order’ – a bit like the Iranian model – and, in this manner, reduce their exposure to public opinion and political debate. It also needs to be recalled here that the current Hashd structure must be quite beneficial to some actors as there are a reported 150,000 fighters on the Hashd payroll, of which about half are estimated to be ghost soldiers.

Dynamics in Iraq’s periphery: Kurdistan and the disputed territories

19. **Fragmentation of local security.** The conversation at the event focused in particular on the disputed territories and highlighted how the fight against the Islamic State by national security providers (the Iraqi Security Forces, Hashd and Peshmerga) in ethnically mixed areas with their own local security providers (self-defense forces and (proxy) militias) has created a complex patchwork of local security control. Local security providers maintain relations of subservience, partial dependence, partial loyalty and/or alliance with national security providers that make security provision both highly fragmented and fluid.

20. This situation is likely to have two main repercussions. First, it (will) interfere(s) with reconstruction efforts as a patchwork of (in)security facilitates crime, increases the potential for violence and reduces mobility. Second, it also enables politicization of displacement and refugee return. Housing demolition and transfers of property are already going on in some of the disputed areas with the aim of creating stronger power bases and/or more reliable constituencies for electoral purposes.

21. So far, the Peshmerga and the Hashd have invested far more than the Iraqi Security Forces in building relationships and alliances with local security forces, which further ‘de-states’ the provision of security. They have their finger more on the local pulse, so to say. This means that national level reconstruction efforts, including those supported by the international community, will need to take account of local security fragmentation if they are to be successful.

Box 1: Knowledge Platform Security and Rule of Law

The Platform strives to increase the policy evidence base, programming effectiveness and knowledge creation in the area of security and rule of law in fragile- and conflict affected contexts. The Platform’s activities seek to re-conceptualize understandings of security and rule of law in such settings; innovate policy and facilitate mutual learning.

To this end, the Platform acts as a network for experts, policymakers, practitioners, researchers and the business sector. It provides for an informal meeting space – offline as well as online – and intellectual stimulus grounded in practice. The Platform was established by the Dutch Ministry of Foreign Affairs in 2012 as part of its knowledge policy.

<http://www.kpsrl.org/about-us>

22. **Kurdish referendum.** A key explanation for why former President Barzani – a very experienced politician – pushed ahead with the referendum despite all advice and resistance against it, is probably that he felt that this was his moment to write history as the

last Kurdish revolutionary leader (after the death of Jalal Talabani). The results of his persistence have, however, been catastrophic for the Kurds as they lost about 40% of their territory, over 60% of their revenue and acquired hundreds of thousands of newly displaced individuals. Furthermore, trust between the KDP and PUK has plummeted. As the Kurds have historically been strongest when they are united, this is a negative development with a view to their ability to negotiate a new deal with Baghdad.

23. A number of speakers and participants pointed out that both Kurdistan and Baghdad are in crisis today and in the process of overplaying their hand – one after the other.⁵ This may suggest the moment is ripe to negotiate a new settlement between Iraq's Arabs and its Kurds. A key problem here is that the same elite capture of the state that characterizes politics in Baghdad, has also occurred in Kurdistan. Shi'a elite infighting in the center, Kurdish infighting in the periphery and the PUK's internal crisis will raise appreciable challenges of representation and making compromises stick to such negotiations. Moreover, the 2018 elections may invite more heated rhetoric if parties think painting 'the other' in a corner is a vote-winning approach. This would make it more difficult to reach compromise.
24. **Peshmerga.** It was pointed out that the Peshmerga are simultaneously constitutionally mandated state security forces, the armed expression of the Kurdish desire for greater autonomy and militias of the two main Kurdish political parties. While some efforts were made to increase organizational discipline and depoliticize the Peshmerga, these have been only partially successful. The result is that the Peshmerga remain factional and underdeveloped in terms of their fighting potential – as was clearly on display in the immediate aftermath of the referendum when PUK Peshmerga units pulled out from the disputed areas in an uncoordinated fashion after light skirmishes with Iraqi forces.
25. Now that the fight against the Islamic State is practically over, a more critical look at security sector reform (SSR) efforts that benefit the Peshmerga is in order - especially at the role such support plays in the political-economy of the Kurdistan region of Iraq.

Conclusion

26. The central question of the event was how the international community can help prevent further violence in Iraq. On the basis of its discussions and analysis, speakers and participants developed a number of recommendations:
 - Engage in a sustained effort to ensure that Iraq's various 'independent commissions' (e.g. on integrity, human rights and elections) actually become independent. Particular emphasis should be put on the depoliticization of the Independent High Electoral Commission. Strengthening UNAMI to enable more political dialogue can help.
 - Push for redistricting the electoral map of Iraq with the objective of aligning the size of districts to increase democratic legitimacy and accountability. UNAMI might also play a role in this regard.

⁵ Baghdad, for example, allowed the Hashd to play a significant role in pushing the Peshmerga back and in retaking the disputed territories. This had the result that they have emerged even stronger than they were before.

- Exercise strategic patience with the Hashd until the 2018 elections as no serious reform is likely to be possible before this time.
- Engage in balanced security sector reform with an important accent on local security mechanisms. Balanced means taking account of the dynamics and relations between the Iraqi Security Forces, Peshmerga, Sunni tribal militias and the Hashd. Including local security mechanisms means promoting SSR in a way that is sensitive to security realities and interests 'on the ground'.
- Gradually reduce elite capture of the state, in particular by working on the enabling conditions that allow new political parties and actors to enter the political scene independently and effectively. This may require providing initial funding for new political actors on the basis of criteria like representation, inclusiveness and transparency.
- Engage Turkey and the Arab States to open up towards Iraq so that both the country and its people can benefit from more diversified social and economic mobility options.

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Selected further readings

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Al-Khoei, H., E. Geranmayeh & M. Toaldo, *After ISIS: How to Win the Peace in Iraq and Libya*, ECFR, 2017, Online: <http://www.ecfr.eu/profile/C437/>