



Iraq: How to stabilize a vortex?

Summary report



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Introduction

On Wednesday May 6th the Knowledge Platform Security & Rule of Law organized a one-day expert discussion in The Hague on the deeper causes of the current Iraqi conflict and feasible approaches towards its resolution. Organized in three thematic sessions, “The regional dimensions of the conflict”, “The domestic dimensions of the conflict” and “The phenomenon of the Islamic State”, the presentations and discussions throughout the day centered on the question of whether Iraq could and would remain a unitary state going forward. The aim of the day was to assess what policies and practical measures by the international community could help bring the conflict in Iraq to a peaceful resolution.

This report is a headline synthesis of the discussion’s held during this event, and only reflects the Knowledge Platform Security & Rule of Law Secretariat’s impressions. In accordance with Chatham House Rule, no direct attributions have been made.

*Besides this report, a blog post was written, drawing on much of the discussion of May 6th:
[‘Not all is what it seems: Five inconvenient ‘truths’ of the Iraqi crisis’](#)*

On the regional dimensions of the conflict

The participants agreed that Iraq's key regional neighbors (Saudi Arabia, Iran and Turkey) all see a unitary Iraq as being in their interests, although they hold differing views on what kind of state they would like to see Iraq become. This attachment to the Iraqi state is, however, not necessarily true for non-state actors such as the Islamic State or some of Iraq's Shi'a militias. While it is undeniable that the Popular Mobilization Committees (an Iraqi state-sponsored umbrella organization composed of primarily Shi'a militias) and direct Iranian military involvement (along with its support for some of the aforementioned militias), did prevent further Islamic State gains in the summer of 2014, these non-state actors are by and large undermining the long-term viability of the Iraqi state. Several important questions were raised during this session:

What is the long term strategy and role of non-state actors?

Shi'a militias, Kurdish peshmerga, and Sunni fighters in Iraq should be thoroughly assessed in both terms of goals and capabilities. While some may seek preservation of a narrowly-defined Iraqi state, others may seek greater autonomy or independence. Some of these actors are more reactionary and may not have a well-defined long term strategy.

In terms of capabilities, there are large differences between the different militias, with some approaching military-grade organization and others comprised of volunteers with weapons who had heeded the call of Ayatollah Sistani.

What are the incentives and disincentives to integrate militias into state apparatuses for both the militias and their external backers?

Iran should want to have Shi'a militias integrated into Baghdad's control, as it does not want to shoulder the burden indefinitely, but it may not be able to carry through on this. In addition a number of these militias mobilized at the behest of Grand Ayatollah Sistani and may go home when he, and not Prime Minister Abadi, says it is time to do so.

What is the extent of agency of Iraqi domestic actors in the face of pervasive and often intense regional influences?

While the focus is often on how external powers influence Iraqi domestic actors, we must also recognize that these same domestic actors often reach out to these powers seeking support in a variety of ways. Iraqi Kurds, for example, have proven themselves to be especially adept at lobbying Western governments through their extensive diplomatic networks.

On the domestic dimensions of the conflict

The current crisis in Iraq, as was aptly put in the discussions, is a *crisis of trust* in the Iraqi state. Iraqi Sunnis in particular have come to view the Iraqi state as an instrument of oppression by Iraqi Shi'a, especially under former Prime Minister Maliki's second term. Under Maliki's leadership, the Iraqi state was hollowed out to serve sectarian interests, which weakened its ability to respond politically and militarily, to the point where it required

outside intervention when the threat of the Islamic State loomed largest in the summer of 2014. Several important questions were raised during the session:

Is what has taken place in Iraq state collapse or a collapse of governance? Or has governance just fragmented?

Iraqi state institutions do still exist, though not in areas where the Islamic State holds sway. The Islamic State, however, was a response to the maligned governance practiced under Maliki. While there will be a need to focus on rebuilding Iraqi state institutions in liberated areas, the more important question of governance over and for all of Iraq's citizens requires much deeper consideration.

What does the debate over decentralization/dissolution mean on the ground?

In order to make the debate relevant for not just elites, concrete devolved powers will need to be spelled out to entice Iraqi Sunnis back into the political fold. Participants largely agreed that decentralization was likely necessary for the continuance of the Iraqi state, but also that the act of decentralization paradoxically requires a strong central government. Prime Minister Abadi has made some moves in this direction, by empowering the parliament at the expense of his own executive office. One of the key policy questions for Prime Minister Abadi will be over the creation of the National Guard, which he may enact without parliamentary approval. He remains still deeply constrained by his own party, political (religious) constituency and the dysfunctional Iraqi state at large he inherited from his predecessor.

Participants also challenged the dominant narrative of Iraqi Shi'a as a cohesive bloc that is beholden solely to Iran. Understanding the interests, motivations, and size of bases of support is critical to assessing Iraqi Shi'a groups' ability to be a positive force for a unitary and inclusive Iraqi state. For Iraq to survive, it must have an answer to Iraqi Shi'a who ask 'Why are we fighting for Sunnis?'

On the phenomenon of the Islamic State

Discussions on the Islamic State focused little on its ideological appeal and instead analyzed the group as a reaction to systemic failure of the Iraqi state and corrupt elites. Approaching the Islamic State with a sectarian lens only has limited utility, since it ignores the abuse of authority by Iraqi politicians and security services against the Sunni population. In addition, the sectarian lens underestimates the nature of the Islamic State's control of its territories, where it acts like a *mukhabarat state*, meaning one that is tightly controlled through fear and repression via secret security services, much like Saddam's Iraq and Assad's Syria.

It is also important to recognize that Syria, unlike Iraq, represents a growth market for the Islamic State. In Syria the Islamic State has the potential to take more territory from an embattled regime and it can exploit the local weaknesses of other rebel Syrian groups. In Iraq the Islamic State has probably captured about as much territory with a population either sympathetic or passive to its aims as it can. Without a solution to the crisis in Syria, Iraq will remain under threat from the Islamic State, including its potential future permutations.

Policy considerations

As the event concluded, several broader considerations crystalized from discussions held by the participants. Though many of these considerations will be familiar to policy makers, they bear repeating given the complex nature of the crisis in Iraq:

- The formula for an effective international response to the crisis in Iraq should run along the lines of *'An Iraqi solution with regional buy-in and international support'*. For example, the international community could help to promote local consultation feedback loops to national stabilization efforts;
- Iraq is not ready for Security Sector Reform, but international policy makers should already begin thinking about it since they support the Iraqi Security Forces already;
- A fragmented security situation calls for tailor-made responses/interventions by international actors, meaning there is no one-size-fits-all intervention that can address all of Iraq's problems. Different problems will require different and nuanced solutions;
- Geopolitical influences in Iraq are too strong to ignore and change will only happen when the key regional players are on board.

For the last session, participants were asked to brainstorm responses to the question, "What confidence building measures would make a difference at the national level in the next six months?" Responses included:

- Strengthen the ability of the Iraqi government to deliver services that matter to its citizens. Ensure such a process is rapid, transparent and focuses on capacity building;
- Release of arbitrarily detained Iraqis;
- Consider and support the National Guard 'solution' as a "best worst" interim option for a security force in Sunni areas;
- Leverage Grand Ayatollah Al-Sistani's support for Prime Minister Abadi to include Iranian-backed non-state actors in the reconstruction of the Iraqi state in a manner that respects cross-sectarian interests;
- Promote efforts, both at the elite and grassroots level, towards a common vision of the Iraqi state.



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