Syria, Iraq and the Struggle for Power: Intertwined Futures
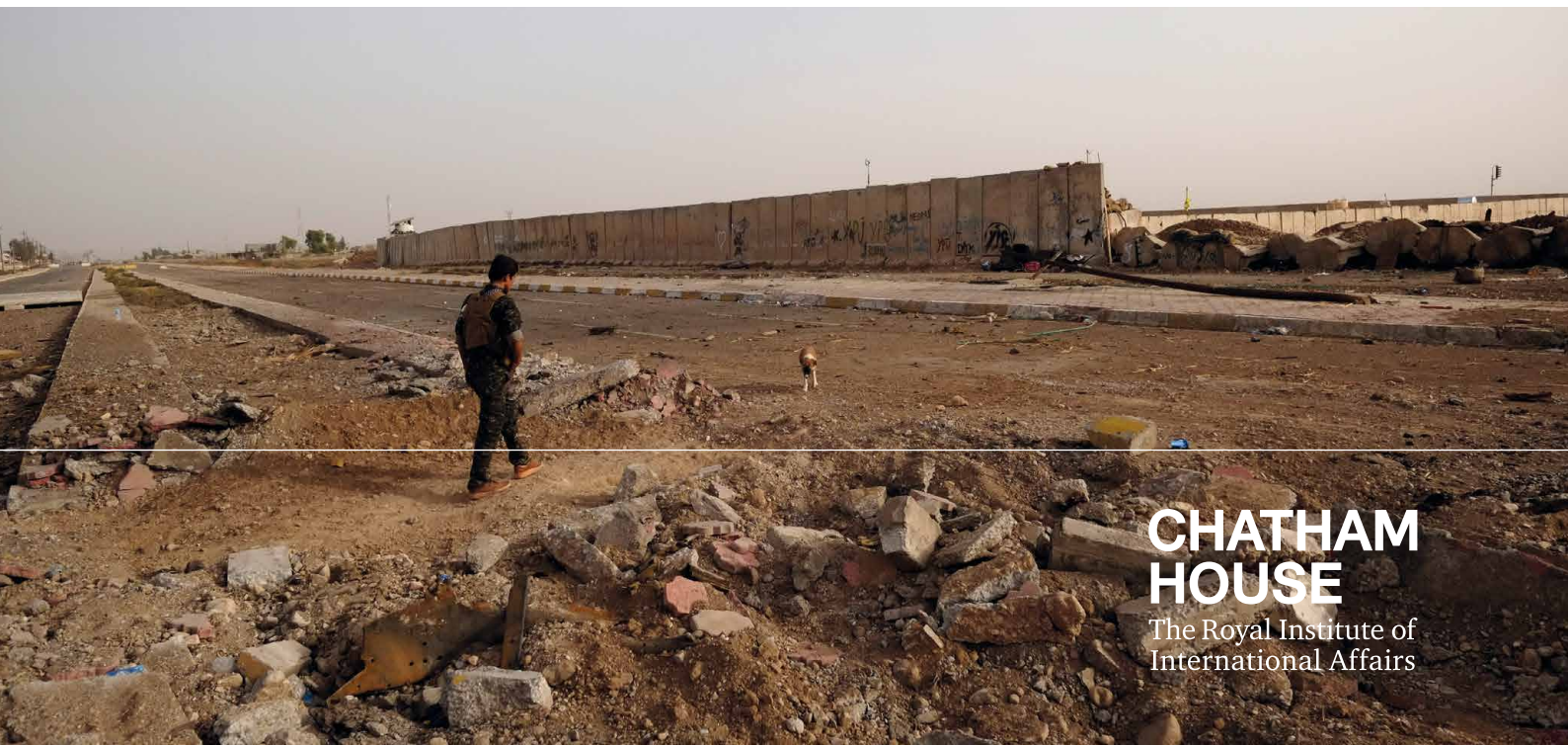
Summary

- The Syrian government facilitated the flow of extremists and foreign fighters through its territory, permitting them to use Syria as a transit point for jihad in Iraq following the US-led invasion in 2003. It was a process aimed at undermining the US project.

- Nouri al-Maliki's authoritarian policies in Iraq, coupled with US, Gulf Arab and Turkish support for militants in Syria, enabled jihadists across both Syria and Iraq to exploit local Sunni grievances and the security and political crises to strengthen their hold and eventually declare the so-called Islamic Caliphate.

- The confused and contradictory policies of the Obama administration in Syria and Iraq further complicated the crises. Having realized they had miscalculated in Syria and failed to oust Assad, the US attempted to channel blame away from itself and onto its Arab and Turkish allies due to the increased power of jihadists.

- The rise of ISIS provided Iran, already the most influential external actor in domestic Iraqi affairs, with an opportunity to play a more hands-on role in the war against jihadists and increase their leverage in Syria and Iraq.

- Iran played a decisive role in turning back the tide against opposition forces in Syria. The push back was later given a strategic revival with Russia's direct military involvement in Syria in September 2015, but it was initially bolstered by a Lebanese and Iraqi Shia deployment in the summer of 2012.

- With all eyes now on the military campaign to liberate Mosul, many Iraqis remain deeply concerned over Iraq's post-ISIS future. In both Sunni and Shia areas of Iraq, there is no clear vision of what political or security settlement will be in place after ISIS is defeated.

- The establishment of the Popular Mobilization Forces (PMF) has permanently changed the political and security landscape in Iraq. Many groups within the PMF will capitalize on their battlefield successes and translate that to increased political power following the defeat of ISIS. Others will shy away from the formal political process, preferring to remain independent security players that will resist any attempt to demobilize or integrate them into the security services.

Introduction

> The spark has been lit here in Iraq, and its heat will continue to intensify – by Allah's permission – until it burns the crusader armies in Dabiq [Aleppo, Syria].
>
> Abu Musab al-Zarqawi[1]

Years before the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS) declared its caliphate, the expansion of its 'jihad' from Iraq into Syria was expounded upon by Abu Musab al-Zarqawi, the Jordanian leader of several jihadist groups and umbrella networks that preceded ISIS. He used Islamic scripture to explain the advance and the goal of this jihad. On 10 June 2014, this goal was realized with the military takeover of Iraq's second city, Mosul, and the 'destruction' of a section of the border between Syria and Iraq. Although jihadists had long maintained a presence in western and northern Iraq, the fall of Mosul and large sections of Anbar, Salahuddin and Diyala provinces meant ISIS established formal control of around one-third of Iraq, in addition to their strongholds in eastern and northern Syria. ISIS's military success was celebrated on social media with the hashtag #SykesPicotOver referring to an agreement reached between Britain and France during the First World War that aimed to carve up the Middle East into spheres of influence.

Just three years earlier, in 2011, the Islamic State of Iraq (ISI) group – a forerunner to ISIS – was nearly defeated. Many former Sunni insurgents and 'resistance' fighters, had long since turned their guns on the jihadists for their extreme brutality, and their leadership was decimated by US airstrikes and raids in 2010. However, a combination of factors, including the onset of the Syrian conflict, Iraqi Prime Minister Maliki's increasingly authoritarian policies, systemic corruption and the withdrawal of all US combat troops in Iraq had created an environment in which al-Qaida could once again thrive. Its leadership ruthlessly exploited Iraq's socio-political environment and weakening central government authority in both Iraq and Syria. As a result, from 2011 to 2014, the Iraqi jihadists used the conflict in Syria to regroup and reorganize before launching a military offensive across Iraq.[2] In practice, it made the border between the two countries redundant.

The recent turmoil in Syria and Iraq, in large part, was fuelled by the 2003 US-led invasion of Iraq, which propelled the formerly-exiled Shia opposition into power in Baghdad. As such, Iraq became the first Arab state in almost a thousand years to be ruled by Shia Arabs. However, the presence of a large US military force stationed in Iraq deeply concerned both Tehran and Damascus, which were fearful that they would be the next target of regime change. After all, in his State of the Union address in 2002, President Bush declared Iran to be part of an 'axis of evil'; Syria was singled out by the US ambassador to the UN in a 'beyond the axis of evil' speech for its chemical weapons and ballistic missile threat.[3] Consequently, Tehran and Damascus sought to undermine the US military presence in Iraq by supporting militia groups, which were, in fact, inimical to one another. While Iran provided material support mostly to Shia militias, Damascus hosted and provided passage to Ba'athist opposition groups and jihadists who were intent on subverting the new political order. The Syrian leadership was firmly opposed to the new Iraqi government and the continuing deployment of US troops in the country. As a result, the relationship between Syria and Iraq became more antagonistic. However, hostility between the two states was nothing new and had been rooted in the competition between the Iraqi and Syrian Ba'ath parties.

---

[1] Quoted in every edition of '*Dabiq*', the English-language magazine published by ISIS.

[2] Chulov, M. (2014), 'Isis: the inside story', *Guardian*, 11 December 2014, http://www.theguardian.com/world/2014/dec/11/-sp-isis-the-inside-story (accessed 21 May 2016).

[3] Bolton, R. J. (2002), 'Beyond the Axis of Evil: Additional Threats from Weapons of Mass Destruction', *The Heritage Foundation*, 6 May 2002, http://www.heritage.org/research/lecture/beyond-the-axis-of-evil (accessed 21 May 2016).

During the 1990s and reign of Saddam Hussein, Syria had been home to much of the Iraqi opposition and even hosted one of the first major opposition conferences following the 1990 Iraqi invasion of Kuwait; attendees included Iraqi Islamist, Kurdish, secular, nationalist and leftist opposition groups. However, after 2003, Damascus hosted the new Iraqi opposition – the Ba'athists – and other foreign Arab nationalist and resistance groups in order to thwart the US mission in Iraq. Consequently, this meant turning a blind eye to, and facilitating, the flow of extremists and foreign fighters who would use Syria as a transit point for their jihad in Iraq. Just as it had before the 2003 war, Syria continued its open-door policy for the Iraqi opposition – but this time the opposition took a very different form. During Saddam Hussein's reign, Syria viewed Iraq as a geopolitical competitor. It had not only supported Iran during the eight-year Iran–Iraq war, but had hosted the Iraqi opposition. Although the political environment changed following the US-led war against Iraq, the Syrian government nonetheless viewed the new US-led order in Iraq with equal concern and hence supported the new opposition.

Changing regional environment

If Damascus could succeed in making the US project fail in Iraq, officials in Washington would be wary of exporting democracy to Syria in future.

At the behest of the Syrian government, the grand mufti of Syria declared jihad against the US in Iraq as an obligation upon all Muslims and issued a *fatwa* – for both men and women – to use any means necessary to fight US coalition forces, including suicide operations.[4]

Believing that any Iraqi government formed under US occupation would be a threat, Damascus refused to recognize the US-appointed Iraqi Governing Council, the first interim Iraqi government headed by Ayad Allawi, and even the first democratically-elected Iraqi government led by Ibrahim al-Jaafari. Diplomatic relations were not restored until more than three years after the war, in November 2006, ending a 26-year break.[5]

Despite restoring diplomatic relations with its neighbour, Syria viewed the US presence in Iraq with trepidation and continued to support groups that were intent on either hastening a US exit or undermining the Iraqi government. Its support of terrorist groups operating in Iraq continued to be a source of tension between the two governments. For example, the Iraqi government openly accused the Syrian government of sponsoring terrorism in Iraq. After a car bomb in Baghdad in 2007, which killed more than 130 people, Iraqi government spokesman Ali al-Dabbagh claimed that '50 per cent of terrorism enters Iraq from Syria'.[6] In response, Iraq threatened to file a complaint against Syria with the UN Security Council. Politicians in Baghdad – with the help of the United States – had gathered circumstantial evidence that linked plans devised in Syrian training camps to terrorist attacks carried out in Iraq, including confessions from arrested suspects. At the time, the US military claimed that 85–90 per cent of foreign fighters entered Iraq through Syria.[7] However, neither the US nor the Iraqi authorities could produce sufficient hard evidence to prove direct Syrian government complicity.

[4] Lister, C. (2015), *The Syrian Jihad: Al-Qaeda, the Islamic State and the Evolution of an Insurgency*, London: Hurst and Company, p. 34.
[5] Abboud, A. (2007), 'Iraq-Syria relations strained anew', *Middle East Online*, 4 February 2007, http://www.middle-east-online.com/english/?id=19430 (accessed 12 Feb. 2016).
[6] BBC News (2007), 'Iraqi PM vows to end bomb terror', 4 February 2007, http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/world/middle_east/6328859.stm (accessed 21 May 2016).
[7] Neumann, P. (2014), 'Suspects into Collaborators', *London Review of Books*, 36(7), pp. 19–21.

In September 2009, after another car bombing campaign in Baghdad, Turkey mediated between the two countries and hosted Syrian and Iraqi officials, where they discussed 'intelligence issues on a technical level'.[8] Again, Iraq could not provide concrete evidence of direct Syrian government involvement.[9]

There was a clear pattern of behaviour. The Syrian government had demonstrated its opposition to Saddam Hussein's Iraq by lending support to opposition groups. In the post-2003 environment, the Syrian government continued to support opposition groups in Iraq, to undermine the US presence. In other words, the Syrian government exercised influence over its neighbour, which it had long-considered hostile to its interests, irrespective of its government, by sponsoring opposition groups. However, the cycle was broken by the conflict in Syria, which fundamentally changed the difficult relationship between Baghdad and Damascus. Despite mutual mistrust, Iraq–Syria relations took a 180-degree turn towards an alliance after the Arab Spring in 2011 and the largely peaceful protests that spread across Syria.

Impact of Syria's conflict on relations

The Arab Spring in Syria, which started in March 2011 and the conflict that followed fundamentally altered the relationship between the Syrian and Iraqi governments. It also brought about a significant change in the interaction between both countries' populations, gave rise to the conditions that allowed ISIS to prosper and led to the establishment of new paramilitaries in Iraq.

> In many respects, the Syrian regime had helped create an environment in which armed opposition groups could flourish.

Following popular 'Arab Spring' protests in Tunisia, Egypt, Libya and Bahrain, protestors took to the streets in the southern Syrian city of Deraa in March 2011. What started out as a series of protests originally aimed at addressing local grievances quickly spread across the country, following the regime's brutal crackdown. Syria's civilian-led Arab Spring protest morphed into an armed conflict following the regime's heavy-handed security measures. There were reports early on in the violence that armed opposition groups formed and carried out attacks against Syrian security forces, changing the nature of the conflict.[10]

In many respects, the Syrian regime had helped create an environment in which armed opposition groups could flourish. Previously, Assad had permitted transnational extremists to use Syria as a base for carrying out attacks inside Iraq against US and Iraqi forces. However, he imprisoned many battle-hardened jihadists who had fought in Iraq and returned to Syria. The regime had a long-established practice of supporting groups that appeared inimical to its own interests: it would actively support their activities in neighbouring countries but at the same time, restrain them in Syria.

During the uprising, Assad granted amnesty to many battle-hardened jihadists whom he calculated would join the more extreme rebel groups. At the same time, he cracked down on pro-reform

---

[8] Today's Zaman (2009), 'Ankara mediates Iraq-Syria talks on bombing row', 16 September 2009.
[9] According to an Iraqi official present in the meeting, when Iraqi intelligence officials presented the evidence – including coordinates of suspected jihadist bases in Syria, sim-cards retrieved from killed and captured militants and recorded confessions – Syrian intelligence dismissed it all by saying 'we cannot trust your evidence or your judiciary'.
[10] Landis, J. (2011), 'Western Press Misled – Who Shot the Nine Soldiers in Banyas? Not Syrian Security Forces', *Syria Comment*, 13 April 2011, http://www.joshualandis.com/blog/western-press-misled-who-shot-the-nine-soldiers-in-banyas-not-syrian-security-forces/ (accessed 21 May 2016).

activists and developed a narrative that would appeal to the West: Syria was not under threat from popular protests, but terrorism. However, by doing so, he turned the narrative into a self-fulfilling prophecy.[11] His security-focussed approach to the anti-government protests contributed to the radicalization of elements of the opposition. It was a ruthless – and ultimately successful – strategy that has paid dividends.

As Assad responded to the unrest with brutal violence, Iraqis – both Sunni and Shia groups – mobilized to confront the threat over the border and exploit the opportunities it presented. Iraq's Sunni and Shia communities viewed the conflict in Syria through different lenses. Whereas Iraqi Shias saw an emerging threat to the political order, which had placed them in a dominant position, many Sunnis saw it as an opportunity to overthrow the Baghdad government. Former Iraqi intelligence officer Mohamed al-Bajara was confident that a rebel victory in Syria would empower the Sunni community in Iraq. 'When Iran loses [sway in] Syria, that means they'll lose influence here. The new regime in Syria will be Sunni. So in these provinces, our backs will be protected by a Sunni regime.'[12]

Though the Iraqi government officially took a neutral position towards Syria, it identified a clear danger from the growing jihadist threat, and Baghdad supported Tehran's efforts to keep Assad in power. Baghdad's undeclared policy towards Syria reflected a shift in the governing Shia elite's security calculations, as they sensed a real threat emerging from elements of the Syrian armed opposition and its links with ISI.

After decades of supporting Iraqi opposition groups, the Syrian government began to co-operate and co-ordinate more closely with Baghdad. It amounted to a significant change in policy and an acknowledgment that it recognized the new order in Iraq as a lifeline. Syria's growing dependency upon Iran for military, financial, diplomatic and material support brought about this volte face.

Iraq became an important conduit through which Iran could transfer material support to the Syrian regime. In spite of UN sanctions imposed upon Iran, Tehran reportedly used Iraqi airspace to transport weapons to Syria. The US lobbied Baghdad to prevent arms transfers, but Iraq insisted the flights only carried humanitarian aid. Baghdad argued that the US failed to provide any actionable intelligence that would warrant a legitimate interception of the suspected cargo.[13] It was not the first time that the absence of actionable intelligence had prevented the Syrians from operating with impunity.

The Iraqi government also provided Assad with vital economic support – directly and indirectly. Baghdad sold fuel oil to Syria at a discount of over 50 per cent below the market price, in a deal that not even Iraq's foreign ministry was aware of.[14] In addition to the fuel aid, Iraqi traders purchased hard currency at preferential rates – up to $400 million on some days – at Iraqi Central Bank auctions, and much of this currency ended up in sanctions-hit Syria and Iran for resale.[15]

[11] Barabandi, B. and Thompson, T. (2014), 'Inside Assad's Playbook: Time and Terror', *Atlantic Council*, 23 July 2014, http://www.atlanticcouncil.org/blogs/menasource/inside-assad-s-playbook-time-and-terror (accessed 21 May 2016). See also Salloum, R. (2013), 'From Jail to Jihad: Former Prisoners Fight in the Syrian Insurgency', *Der Spiegel*, 10 October 2013, http://www.spiegel.de/international/world/former-prisoners-fight-in-syrian-insurgency-a-927158.html (accessed 21 May 2016).

[12] Hauslohner, A. (2013), 'Sectarianism in Iraq stoked by Syria war', *Washington Post*, 16 May 2013, https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/middle_east/sectarianism-in-iraq-stoked-by-syrian-war/2013/05/16/b74161da-bc98-11e2-9b09-1638acc3942e_story.html (accessed 21 May 2016).

[13] Gordon, M. (2012), 'U.S. Presses Iraq on Iran Flights Thought to Carry Arms', *New York Times*, 5 September 2012, http://www.nytimes.com/2012/09/06/world/middleeast/us-presses-iraq-on-iranian-planes-thought-to-carry-arms-to-syria.html (accessed 21 May 2016).

[14] Saigol, L. and Peel, M. (2012), 'Iraq sends crucial fuel oil to Syria', *Financial Times*, 8 October 2012, http://www.ft.com/cms/s/0/58b9de0e-1143-11e2-8d5f-00144feabdc0.html#axzz49WzZM2fR (accessed 21 May 2016).

[15] Kami, A. (2012), 'Iraq becomes dollar source for sanctions-hit Iran, Syria', *Reuters*, 1 February 2012, http://www.reuters.com/article/us-iraq-sanctions-idUSTRE81018820120201 (accessed 21 May 2016).

Reflecting widespread fears of a Sunni rebel victory in Syria, and the morale boost that this would give Sunni opposition movements and militant groups in Iraq, minister of transport and Shia Islamist member of the Islamic Supreme Council of Iraq, Bayan Jabr, warned his partners in the summer of 2011 that 'this war will soon reach the gates of Baghdad'.[16] Iraqi Shias now saw the conflict in Syria as an extension of their own struggle in Iraq and, therefore, sought to merge the two conflicts into one battleground. Senior Iraqi Shia politician and commander of Saraya Ansar al-Aqeeda paramilitary unit Sheikh Jalal al-Din al-Sagheer[17] informed the author that 'Syria for Iraq is a crucial security concern. Syria provides Iraq with access to the Mediterranean Sea, which is of immense strategic concern for us. For the Shia, Syria is also unique because it is a nexus between Iran, Iraq and Lebanon, Turkey. We don't just have to protect our home by fighting on our own door step, it is in our interest to fight them away from our home in Syria too.'[18]

The sensitivities amongst Iraq's communities were heightened by the withdrawal of all US combat troops at the end of 2011. While in many ways, it helped assuage Assad's fear of US-inspired regime change in Syria, it further polarized Sunni and Shia communities in Iraq and gave the conflict in Syria an even greater importance in the ensuing struggle. For example, the US failure to leave behind a strong national military force coupled with Prime Minister Maliki's increasingly authoritarian policies further polarized the population, along ethno-sectarian lines. The conflict in Syria on the one hand, played upon the concerns of Iraq's Shia elite, while on the other, gave hope to Sunni communities, which felt increasingly marginalized from the political process. This led to a toxic domestic environment, whereby Maliki overcompensated by deploying heavy-handed measures to address manageable security and political threats, which led some Sunni groups to again take up arms.

Prime Minister Maliki's policies

There is little dispute that Maliki's policies were divisive and contributed to the success of ISIS, at the same time there has been too much attribution given to Iran's influence over his policies. The fact that the Gulf Arab states backed opposition groups in both Syria and Iraq cemented the fear in Baghdad that they were up against a common enemy.

In June 2011, a heated diplomatic incident in Damascus within the first few months of the crisis gave an early indication of the sectarian polarization and regional proxy dimension that would later define the conflict. Qatar's ambassador to Syria – shortly before the Arab Gulf states cut diplomatic ties with Assad – hosted a dinner for the Syrian foreign minister and other Arab diplomats to discuss the escalating crisis. During the debate, Iraq's ambassador to Syria provoked his Saudi counterpart by accusing the 'same parties' of 'conspiring against both Syria and Iraq'. When the enraged Saudi diplomat dared the Iraqi ambassador to 'name those parties', the Syrian foreign minister interjected and said, 'the Iraqi ambassador means Al-Qaeda, the Salafis and others, not Saudi Arabia.'[19] Though it was left unsaid, the implication was clear: Saudi Arabia's support of Salafi groups and extremist jihadists was to blame for the crises in both Iraq and Syria.[20]

[16] Author's interview with Bayan Jabr. Baghdad, 3 August 2015. In reference to his early prediction, which became a reality, Jabr's latest book is titled *The Gates of Baghdad*.

[17] Sagheer's unit is one of dozens that form the Iraqi state-sponsored PMF created in June 2014 after the fall of Mosul. He also sent men to fight in Syria.

[18] Author's interview with Sheikh Jalal al-Din al-Sagheer. Baghdad, 31 July 2015.

[19] Al-Rai (2011), 'Saudi-Iraqi diplomatic clash after accusations of conspiracy against Syria', 6 June 2011, http://www.alraimedia.com/ar/article/foreigns/2011/06/06/266365/nr/nc (accessed 21 May 2016). Author's translation.

[20] See Moniquet, C. (2013), 'The Involvement of Salafism/Wahhabism in the Support and Supply of Arms to Rebel Groups Around the World', European Parliament Policy Department, 11 June 2013, http://www.europarl.europa.eu/RegData/etudes/etudes/join/2013/457137/EXPO-AFET_ET%282013%29457137_EN.pdf (accessed 21 May 2016).

In 2014, Iraqi Prime Minister Maliki was explicit about the sectarian and regional polarization: 'There are two main axes here in the Middle East: Sunni and Shiite. A few Persian Gulf countries and Turkey are behind the first one, while the second one is the Iranian–Arab axis, which extends across Iraq and Syria and into Lebanon. Four or five years ago, we told the United States that Turkey and a few Gulf countries were trying to destroy the Shiite axis.'[21]

Maliki blames the Saudi government for exporting intolerance and sectarianism through the spread of Wahhabism – which forms the ideological foundations of groups such as Al-Qaeda and ISIS – and also Saudi media for framing the conflict in Syria in sectarian terms. He argues that the Saudis, Qataris and Turks wanted to create a sectarian Sunni state in Syria and ultimately push towards toppling Baghdad's Shia-dominated government.[22]

The impact of Maliki's policies

In late 2011, Maliki undertook a series of political moves, which had a profound effect on Iraq's security environment and gave further cause to Sunni communities to resist the central government. What started out as an Arab Spring series of protests in not only Sunni-dominated areas, but also cities in the south was transformed into an insurgency by a harsh political response. Therefore, it is unsurprising that the conflict in neighbouring Syria, and early gains made by the Syrian opposition, inspired Iraq's Sunni communities.

> Against the backdrop of an increasingly bloody and sectarian conflict in neighbouring Syria, protesters burnt Iranian flags to denounce Tehran's influence, raised pictures of the then Prime Minister Erdogan in support of Turkey and used the Ba'athist-era Iraqi flag in sit-ins to demonstrate their rejection of the post-2003 political order.

Maliki's first political target was one of Iraq's most senior Sunni politicians, Vice President Tariq al-Hashemi in December 2011. Iraq's counterterrorism forces, which reported directly to Maliki's office and bypassed the Ministry of Defence's chain of command, arrested al-Hashemi's bodyguards on terrorism charges.[23] It was a move aimed at intimidating al-Hashemi and signalled that he was under threat. Consequently, al-Hashemi fled Baghdad, but was tried in absentia and sentenced to death.

In December 2012, Maliki arrested the bodyguards of former Finance Minister Rafi al-Issawi, another senior Sunni politician, again on terrorism charges. The moves against al-Hashemi and al-Issawi were intended to undermine the Sunni leadership and help consolidate Maliki's own grip on power. The arrests caused distress amongst Iraq's Sunni communities, which felt under direct assault. Protestors mobilized en masse in several Sunni-dominated cities and accused Maliki and the Iraqi government of marginalization and discrimination. Against the backdrop of an increasingly bloody and sectarian conflict in neighbouring Syria, protesters burnt Iranian flags to denounce Tehran's influence, raised pictures of the then Prime Minister Erdogan in support of Turkey and

[21] Bednarz, D. and Brinkbaumer, K. (2014), 'Iraqi Prime Minister Maliki: I Am Not Familiar with Fear', Der Spiegel, 21 March 2014, http://www.spiegel.de/international/spiegel-interview-with-nouri-al-maliki-on-upcoming-elections-in-iraq-a-959478.html (accessed 21 May 2016).
[22] Author's interview with Nouri al-Maliki. Baghdad, 20 December 2015.
[23] AFP (2011), 'Iraqi vice-president Tareq al-Hashemi defiant in the face of terror charges', 20 December 2011, http://news.nationalpost.com/news/iraqi-vice-president-hashemi-defiant-in-face-of-terror-charges (accessed 12 Feb. 2016). For an account of how Maliki used state apparatuses to coup-proof the army and create loyal forces, see Dodge, T. (2013), *Iraq: From War to a New Authoritarianism*, London: Routledge.

used the Ba'athist-era Iraqi flag in sit-ins to demonstrate their rejection of the post-2003 political order. Though largely peaceful, the protesters in Anbar province shutdown Iraq's main international highway to Syria and Jordan.[24] In essence, Maliki's policies had fomented popular protests, but at this stage, they had remained largely peaceful.

An International Crisis Group report in August 2013 summed up the dilemma faced by Iraq's Sunnis:

> Belittled, demonised and increasingly subject to a central government crackdown, the popular movement is slowly mutating into an armed struggle. In this respect, the absence of a unified Sunni leadership – to which Baghdad's policies contributed and which Maliki might have perceived as an asset – has turned out to be a serious liability. In a showdown that is acquiring increasing sectarian undertones, the movement's proponents look westward to Syria as the arena in which the fight against the Iraqi government and its Shiite allies will play out and eastward toward Iran as the source of all their ills. Under intensifying pressure from government forces and with dwindling faith in a political solution, many Sunni Arabs have concluded their only realistic option is a violent conflict increasingly framed in confessional terms. In turn, the government conveniently dismisses all opposition as a sectarian insurgency that warrants ever more stringent security measures. In the absence of a dramatic shift in approach, Iraq's fragile polity risks breaking down, a victim of the combustible mix of its long-standing flaws and growing regional tensions.[25]

Meanwhile, ISI sought to exploit the political crisis in Iraq and the conflict in Syria. For example, by August 2011, Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi, the leader of ISI, dispatched one of his key military commanders, Abu Mohammed al-Jolani, to Syria to form Jabhat al-Nusra. In Iraq, ISI successfully launched what it called a 'Breaking the Walls' campaign, in July 2012, aimed at freeing inmates from prisons across Iraq in a series of coordinated attacks. This culminated in the July 2013 mass break-out from the notorious Abu Ghraib prison, west of Baghdad, where militants freed 500 inmates and killed 65 Iraqi security personnel.[26]

One month later, the first high-profile 'spillover' from the Syrian conflict into Iraq occurred when rebels in Syria took control of the Rabia–Yaroubiya border crossing, forcing soldiers of the Syrian Army to take refuge inside Iraq. Iraqi government forces reportedly engaged the Syrian rebels from across the border and killed six Syrian rebels. When the Iraqi government attempted to transport the Syrian soldiers back through another border crossing, militants attacked the convoy in Iraq, killing 62 Syrian and 9 Iraqi soldiers. There were conflicting reports on whether jihadists crossed the Syria–Iraq border or were Iraq-based militants, but whatever the case, the war had officially reached Iraq, as many Iraqis had feared – or hoped.[27]

In April 2013, the security situation in Iraq further deteriorated after a series of separate clashes took place between Iraqi government forces and protesters, armed groups and jihadists and left hundreds dead. The first clash took place in Kirkuk when an Iraqi soldier was killed by armed protesters near camp Hawija, which was run by Ba'athist–Sufi insurgent group Army of the Men of the Naqshabandi Order. When the protesters refused to hand over the suspects, government troops raided the camp, and killed at least 38 Sunni protesters and insurgents.[28] This proved to be a pivotal moment in the

---

[24] Wicken, S. (2012), 'Demonstrations Against Maliki After Issawi Bodyguard Arrest, *Institute for the Study of War*, Iraq Update 52, 27 December 2012, http://www.understandingwar.org/backgrounder/iraq-update-52-demonstrations-against-maliki-after-issawi-bodyguard-arrest (accessed 21 May 2016). See also Wyer, S. (2013) 'Mapping the Iraq Protests', *Institute for the Study of War*, 11 January 2013, http://understandingwar.org/political-update-mapping-iraq-protests (accessed 21 May 2016).

[25] International Crisis Group (2013), *Make or Break, Iraq's Sunnis and the State*, Middle East Report No. 144, 14 August, pp. i–ii.

[26] Lewis, J. (2013), 'Al-Qaeda in Iraq Resurgent: The Breaking the Walls Campaign, Part I', *Institute for the Study of War*, September, p. 20.

[27] Abbas, M. (2013), 'Iraq's Border Becomes New Fault Line in Syrian War', *Al-Monitor*, 5 March 2013, http://www.al-monitor.com/pulse/originals/2013/03/iraq-syria-border-skirmishes.html (accessed 21 May 2016).

[28] Bradley, M. and Nabhan, A. (2013), 'Iraq Raids Protesters' Camp', *Wall Street Journal*, 23 April 2013, http://www.wsj.com/articles/SB100014241278873248742045784420211612436322 (accessed 21 May 2016).

political struggle between Maliki and the Sunni communities. The response of the Iraqi armed forces persuaded protestors that armed resistance presented the only means of achieving their political goals. Leading Sunni cleric Sheikh Abdul Malik al-Sa'di, began publicly calling for protesters to arm themselves as 'self-defense has become a religious and legal duty.'[29] In doing so, some of Iraq's Sunni groups, notably ISI, among others, increased the frequency of their attacks in Iraq.

Shia community motivations to join Syrian conflict

Although Shia communities in Iran, Iraq and Lebanon are aligned in supporting the Assad regime, their motivations differ. While there is a clear religious justification for doing so, including the protection of shrines, there are also clear political drivers too.

Syria plays a crucial role in Iran's 'resistance axis' and the more general security order in the Middle East. Aware that this axis, an Iranian-led alliance of states and groups that oppose Israeli and Western interests, would be broken if rebels managed to topple the Assad regime, and coinciding with Arab, Turkish and Western support for the armed Syrian opposition, Tehran mobilized its elite revolutionary guards to support Assad and push back the assorted mix of nationalist, Islamist and jihadist militants gaining ground across Syria. Head of Iran's Supreme National Security Council Saeed Jalili, warned that 'Iran will not tolerate, in any form, the breaking of the axis of resistance, of which Syria is an intrinsic part'.[30]

Many Western and Arab analysts and diplomats predicted the imminent fall of Assad. However, Iran's action in Syria played a decisive role in turning back the tide against the opposition. The push back was later given a strategic revival with Russia's direct military involvement in Syria in September 2015, but it was initially bolstered by an Iraqi Shia deployment in the summer of 2012.[31]

Although Iraqi Shia mobilization was spearheaded by Iran, the Iraqi Shias needed little persuasion to join the battle. For the fighters who volunteered to travel to Syria, it was an existential battle against the same forces they were fighting at home. A popular song for the Iraqi fighters in Syria titled 'Long Live the Resistance' captured the mood:

> The Shia aren't a crescent, we are the sun that will shred the darkness of your terror… Tomorrow Damascus will affirm: 'Long Live the Resistance', this land was protected by the hands of the Shia resistance… We are not [fighting] for Bashar, our concern is the Shia.[32]

Although many analysts believed that Iraqi Shias deployed to support the Assad regime, the head of one of the most powerful paramilitary units, the Badr Organisation, Hadi al-Ameri explained to the author:

> People think we are fighting in Syria for Assad. What they don't understand is that we are fighting in Syria for ourselves. Saddam massacred my family, he executed my brothers… but if today I had to fight with Saddam against Daesh, I would do so proudly.

> Westerners are convinced that this is a Sunni versus Shia war. They realized too late when Daesh attacked Erbil [August 2014]. Obama and the international community woke up. This is a war against terrorism. Daesh does not represent Sunnis. We are doing Sunnis an injustice if we claim that Daesh represents them.[33]

---

[29] Ibid.

[30] Goodarzi, J. (2013), 'Iran and Syria at the Crossroads: The Fall of the Tehran-Damascus Axis?', Viewpoints No. 35, *The Wilson Center*, p.1.

[31] Smyth, P. (2015), 'The Shiite Jihad and Its Regional Effects', *The Washington Institute for Near East Policy*, Policy Focus 138, February. See also Fulton, W. et al (2013), 'Iranian Strategy in Syria', *American Enterprise Institute and Institute for the Study of War*, May.

[32] YouTube (2013), 'Long Live the Resistance' by Ali al-Dalfi, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=q11gEvdElk8 (accessed 21 May 2016). Author's translation.

[33] Author's interview with Hadi al-Ameri. Baghdad, 19 December 2015.

Religious symbolism and significance was a key driver for much of the Shia recruitment. The Sayyida Zainab shrine in Damascus is one of several sacred sites for Shia Muslims and the threat of its destruction played a central role in motivating fighters to travel to Syria to defend it. In February 2006, jihadists demolished the Askari shrine in Samarra, Iraq, which led to a sectarian backlash in the country. Therefore, Iraqi Shias deployed in and around the Sayyida Zainab neighbourhood, determined to prevent a repeat of the Samarra attack.[34] Although shrines in Islam are revered by many Shia, Sunni and Sufi Muslims, they are viewed as temples of polytheism and apostasy by Salafis.

The systematic targeting of Shias and their religious and political symbols was a core part of al-Zarqawi's early strategy in Iraq, as laid out in a detailed letter sent to Al-Qaeda's leadership in 2004.[35] By provoking a violent reaction from the Shias, Zarqawi hoped to ignite a sectarian war in Iraq that would provide his men with the environment and opportunity they needed to flourish.

In addition to the specific threat to one of the symbols of Shiism, Syria plays an important role in Islamic eschatology, in both Sunni and Shia scripture, as the setting for the final battle in the prelude to Armageddon.

In 2012, a poll published by the Pew Research Center revealed that half or more of all Muslims surveyed in the Middle East and North Africa, as well as South and Southeast Asia, believed that 'the return of the Mahdi will occur in their lifetime.'[36] Although the reading of medieval apocalyptic scripture through a contemporary political lens is nothing new in the region, the religious significance of Syria – for both Sunni and Shia Muslims – adds yet another dimension to the multi-layered political, sectarian and proxy conflicts.

Both Sunni and Shia militias believe they are fighting in a crucial campaign in preparation for the coming of the Messiah. Zarqawi's successor, Abu Ayyub al-Masri, claimed 'we are the army that shall hand over the flag to the servant of God, the Mahdi.'[37] In August 2012, a lecture by Shia cleric Sheikh Jalal al-Din al-Sagheer caused controversy when he linked the 'end of times' to the Kurdish struggle for independence.[38] He argued that the signs that would trigger the final world war and the emergence of the Mahdi – the Muslim Messiah – included the Kurds forming their own independent entity, the Turks invading al-Jazira,[39] and an earthquake striking Damascus – which Sagheer suggested could be a nuclear explosion.

Lebanese Hezbollah also played a key role in advising and organizing the Iraqi Shia recruits to fight Syrian rebels, followed by a much more active and assertive military role. In August 2013, following the deadliest bombing in Beirut since the Lebanese civil war ended two decades ago, Hassan Nasrallah, the leader of Hezbollah, was defiant about the group's military role and vowed to increase it:

> If we had 100 fighters in Syria, now they will be 200. If we had 1,000, they will be 2,000. If we had 5,000 they will be 10,000. If the battle with these takfiri terrorists requires that I and all Hezbollah should go to Syria, we will go.[40]

---

[34] Sayyida Zainab is the daughter of Imam Ali, the first Shia Imam, and the sister of Imam Hussein who was killed in the Battle of Kerbala in 680 AD. She was taken prisoner by the Caliph to Syria where she died. One of the most popular war songs during the campaign to recruit and fight for this shrine included the lyrics: 'Zainab will not be captured twice' in reference to the Battle of Kerbala.

[35] February 2004 Coalition Provincial Authority English translation of terrorist Musab al-Zarqawi letter obtained by United States Government in Iraq, U.S. Department of State Archive, http://2001-2009.state.gov/p/nea/rls/31694.htm (accessed 21 May 2016).

[36] Pew Research Center (2012), 'The World's Muslims: Unity and Disunity', 19 August, pp. 57–58.

[37] McCants, W. (2015), *The ISIS Apocalypse*, p. 32.

[38] Francis, B. (2012), 'Shiite Cleric's Comments Stoke Baghdad-Erbil Tensions', *Al-Monitor*, 22 August 2012, http://www.al-monitor.com/pulse/pt/contents/articles/politics/2012/08/shiite-clerics-rogue-slur-to-kurds-stokes-anger-across-iraq.html (accessed 21 May 2016).

[39] Upper Mesopotamia, which today corresponds to northwest Iraq, northeast Syria and southern Turkey.

[40] Kalin, S. and Karouny, M. (2013), 'Defiant Hezbollah leader says ready to fight in Syria', *Reuters*, 16 August 2013, http://www.reuters.com/article/us-lebanon-explosion-idUSBRE97E0S520130816 (accessed 21 May 2016).

Table 1: Timeline of Shia militia development in Syria

Phase	Time	Action	Background
1	Summer–Winter 2012	Local militias develop	The Syrian military assists in the establishment of localized/sectarian units to help control and defend specific zones. Liwa Abu Fadl al-Abbas (LAFA) is officially announced.
2	Summer 2012–Spring 2013	Hezbollah/IRGC/Iraqi Shia advisers arrive	Smaller units from Hezbollah, Asaib Ahl al-Haqq (AAH), Kataib Hezbollah, and later Kataib Sayyid al-Shuhada (KSS) are publicly announced as having been deployed.
3	Spring 2013	Iraqi and Lebanese units and recruits train and arrive in Syria	New trainees and experienced fighters from Iraq begin to be deployed in Syria. In May, Hezbollah officially states it is active in Syria during the battle of al-Qusayr. Internet-based recruitment begins in Iran.
4	Late Spring–Early Summer 2013	New Shia militia groups emerge	Groups (likely fronts) developed from LAFA such as Liwa al-Imam al-Hussein (LIH), Liwa Dhulfiqar and the RRF are announced in Syria. Iraqi groups such as the Badr Organization and Harakat Hezbollah al-Nujaba (HHN) officially announce their presence in Syria. AAH announces the creation of Liwa Kafil Zainab. Internet and direct recruitment begins in earnest in Iraq.
5	Autumn 2013–Early 2014	New offensives and new groups emerge	More organizations announce their presence in Syria. These groups include subunits of HHN, Saraya Talia al-Khurasani, and Faylaq Waad al-Sadiq. Developed from LAFA, Syria-based Liwa Assad Allah al-Ghalib (LAAG) is publicly declared. Offensives launched in September target Damascus and East Ghouta. In November, Hezbollah and Iraqi Shia elements advance in northern Damascus and Qalamoun. Recruitment drives in Iraq and Lebanon are conducted, usually around Shia holidays such as Ashura and Arbain.
6	Winter 2013–Spring 2014	Iraqi Shia forces redeploy to Iraq	Coinciding with Iraqi Prime Minister Nouri al-Maliki's Anbar offensive, Iraqi Shia forces are flown from Syria back to Iraq.
7	Spring–Autumn 2014	Hezbollah adopts a larger role	With Iraqi Shia redeployments, Hezbollah moves more forces, including newer recruits, into Syria. Hezbollah forces in Qalamoun build a 'quasi-security zone'. Afghan Shia units are increasingly deployed. By midsummer to late September Kataib Sayyid al-Shuhada launches new recruitment drives to bring Iraqi Shia fighters to Syria.

Source: Washington Institute for Near East Policy.

US policy in Syria and Iraq

As noted earlier, the US war in Iraq in 2003 brought about a new order in the country and the regime change zeal among President George W. Bush's inner circle put Syria on high alert. When the Arab Spring started in Syria and the regime looked to be under tremendous pressure, the US started to shift its position towards encouraging Assad's departure. Not wanting to be caught flat-footed again, as they were with the overthrow of President Hosni Mubarak in Egypt, the US soon called for Assad to stand aside.

A December 2006 diplomatic cable from the US Embassy in Damascus revealed how desperate some US diplomats were to destabilize the Syrian government and increase opportunities to expose its vulnerabilities. One of the weaknesses identified in the cable was Assad's increasing tilt towards Iran and his desire not to alienate his Sunni Arab neighbours by 'being perceived as aiding Persian and fundamentalist Shia interests'. To expose this, the cable advocates playing on the 'exaggerated' Sunni fears of Iranian influence and working more closely with Saudi Arabia and Egypt 'to better publicize and focus regional attention' on those concerns.[41] In other words, the US should actively promote and stoke sectarian tensions to weaken the Syrian government. The same cable, written five years before the Arab Spring, also illustrates US diplomatic efforts to unite the Syrian opposition.

---

[41] Wikileaks cable: 'Influencing the SARG in end of 2006', https://wikileaks.org/plusd/cables/06DAMASCUS5399_a.html (accessed 24 May 2016).

However misguided the Bush administration plans for Syria were, the confused and contradictory policies of the Obama administration in both Syria and Iraq, in 2011, further complicated the crises. Keen to weaken Iranian influence in the region, the US began supporting the Gulf Arab and Turkish effort to arm the Syrian opposition in early 2012. The CIA established a 'rat line' from Libya, after the fall of Gaddafi, to funnel weapons into Syria via southern Turkey. With the help of British intelligence and funding from Turkey, Qatar and Saudi Arabia, the Americans began arming Syrian rebels, some of whom would later join or fight alongside Al-Qaeda and ISIS. This covert operation was only exposed after a Senate Intelligence Committee investigation into the September 2012 attack on the American consulate and CIA annex in Benghazi, Libya, which led to the killing of the US ambassador.[42] As well as using Libyan army stockpiles to arm the Syrian opposition, CIA officials also helped Saudi intelligence purchase weapons from Croatia to send to Syrian rebel groups, including groups that US officials were concerned had ties to radical jihadists. This operation was also bankrolled by Saudi Arabia.[43]

> However misguided the Bush administration plans for Syria were, the confused and contradictory policies of the Obama administration in both Syria and Iraq, in 2011, further complicated the crises.

In stark contrast with its operations in Syria, the CIA stepped up its efforts in supporting Maliki's elite counterterrorism forces and took control from the Pentagon, which had previously supervised them. The US was concerned about the rise of Al-Qaeda in Iraq and ramped up its support for counterterrorism forces to help contain the threat.[44] The US was supporting opposition forces that in some cases fought alongside Al-Qaeda in Syria while increasing support for forces that were confronting Al-Qaeda in Iraq. This confused policy led to internal disagreements and divisions within the Obama administration.

While the extent of the influence of Islamist groups in the early phases of the uprising is disputed, a declassified Defense Intelligence Agency (DIA) report, written in August 2012, warned that Al-Qaeda in Iraq[45] had supported the Syrian opposition 'from the beginning' and – alongside other Salafi groups and the Muslim Brotherhood – were 'the major forces driving the insurgency in Syria'. Though the declassified document remains heavily redacted, it focuses on the ideological, political and tribal interlinkages between Syria and Iraq. A subsection on the Syrian conflict's effects on Iraq proved to be eerily prophetic:

> The [Syrian] opposition forces will try to use the Iraqi territory as a safe haven for its forces taking advantage of the sympathy of the Iraqi border population, meanwhile trying to recruit fighters and train them on the Iraqi side, in addition to harboring refugees… If the situation unravels there is the possibility of establishing a declared or undeclared Salafist Principality in Eastern Syria (Hasaka and Deir Ezzor), and this is exactly what the supporting powers to the opposition want, in order to isolate the Syrian regime, which is considered the strategic depth of the Shia expansion (Iraq and Iran).[46]

---

[42] Hersh, S. (2014), 'The Red Line and the Rat Line', *London Review of Books*, Vol. 36, No. 8, pp 21–24.

[43] Mazzetti, M. and Apuzzo, M. (2016), 'U.S. Relies Heavily on Saudi Money to Support Syrian Rebels', *New York Times*, 23 January 2016, http://www.nytimes.com/2016/01/24/world/middleeast/us-relies-heavily-on-saudi-money-to-support-syrian-rebels.html (accessed 24 May 2016).

[44] Entous, A., Barnes, J. and Gorman, S. (2013), 'CIA Ramps Up Role in Iraq', *Wall Street Journal*, 11 March 2013, http://www.wsj.com/articles/ SB10001424127887324735304578354561954501502 (accessed 24 May 2016).

[45] Al-Qaeda in Iraq is what the Americans officially called the Islamic State of Iraq. Al-Qaeda in Iraq was subsumed under the Islamic State of Iraq when it was first announced in 2006.

[46] Judicial Watch (2015), 'Defense, State Department Documents Reveal Obama Administration Knew that al Qaeda Terrorists Had Planned Benghazi Attack 10 Days in Advance', 18 May 2015, http://www.judicialwatch.org/wp-content/uploads/2015/05/Pg.-291-Pgs.-287-293-JW-v-DOD-and-State-14-812-DOD-Release-2015-04-10-final-version11.pdf (accessed 24 May 2016).

When questioned specifically about this intelligence assessment – released by court order after a Freedom of Information Act request was filed – and whether or not the Obama administration turned a blind eye to the extremists in Syria, former director of the DIA, Michael Flynn, told Al-Jazeera, 'the intelligence was very clear and now it's a matter of whether or not policy is going to be as clear and as defining and as precise as it needs to be and I don't believe it was… I don't know if they turned a blind eye, I think it was a decision… a wilful decision to do what they're doing.'[47]

Having realized they had miscalculated in Syria, the US attempted to channel blame away from itself and onto its Arab and Turkish allies. During the October 2012 vice presidential debate, when estimates of the death toll in Syria ranged between 25,000 and 30,000, Joe Biden said the US was working closely with its allies to arm the Syrian opposition:

> We are working hand in glove with the Turks, with the Jordanians, with the Saudis and with all the people in the region attempting to identify the people who deserve the help so that when Assad goes, and he will go, there will be a legitimate government that follows on, not an al-Qaida-sponsored government that follows on.[48]

The Americans – like their regional allies – were convinced that Assad's fall was imminent. In early 2013, Iraq's prime minister said both Biden and Secretary of State Hillary Clinton told him that Assad would fall 'within two months' and he replied 'it wouldn't even happen in years'.[49]

In October 2014, after the rise of ISIS and other Al-Qaeda-inspired fighters in Syria and Iraq, and when the death toll in Syria was around 200,000, Biden changed his tune and attempted to pin the disaster on the very same allies he previously said were working 'hand in glove' with the Americans:

> Our allies in the region were our largest problem in Syria. The Turks were great friends and I have a great relationship with Erdogan, [whom] I just spent a lot of time with, [and] the Saudis, the Emiratis, etcetera… What were they doing? They were so determined to take down Assad, and essentially have a proxy Sunni–Shia war, what did they do? They poured hundreds of millions of dollars and tens, thousands of tons of weapons into anyone who would fight against Assad – except that the people who were being supplied, were al-Nusra, and al-Qaeda, and the extremist elements of jihadis coming from other parts of the world.[50]

Finally acknowledging the failures of the Syrian opposition and its backers, the 'Assad must go' rhetoric changed, in December 2015, when Secretary of State John Kerry declared in Moscow that the US and Russia see the Syrian conflict 'fundamentally very similarly' and that 'the United States and its partners are not seeking regime change as it is known in Syria'.[51] The idea now is to have a political transition that would *eventually* lead to the ousting of Assad. However, the implication of pushing for Assad's departure has had a profound and long-lasting impact upon Iraq, which will continue to shape its future.

[47] YouTube (2015), 'Head to Head – Who is to Blame for the Rise of ISIL?', *Al-Jazeera English*, 13 August 2015, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=-EghwCDNyiY (accessed 21 May 2016).

[48] NPR (2012), 'Transcript and Audio: Vice Presidential Debate', *National Public Radio*, 11 October 2012, http://www.npr.org/2012/10/11/162754053/transcript-biden-ryan-vice-presidential-debate (accessed 24 May 2016).

[49] Al-Arabiya (2013), 'Iraq's Maliki says fall of Syrian regime unlikely, Assad "smarter" than Saddam', 9 February 2013, http://english.alarabiya.net/articles/2013/02/09/265360.html (accessed 24 May 2016).

[50] YouTube (2014), 'Vice President Joe Biden stated that US key allies in the Middle East were behind nurturing ISIS', 2 December, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=25aDP7io30U (accessed 24 May 2016).

[51] Reevell, P. (2015), 'US Not Seeking "Regime Change" in Syria, John Kerry Says After Meeting with Russian President', *ABC News*, 15 December 2015, http://abcnews.go.com/International/john-kerry-meets-russian-president-vladimir-putin-seek/story?id=35782171 (accessed 24 May 2016).

The impact of the Syrian conflict on Iraq

The conflict in Syria, which enabled ISI to recover, re-boot into ISIS and take land in Iraq, has given rise to the Popular Mobilization Forces (PMF). The PMF are now an integral part of the Iraqi security system. Though many of the individual groups had already existed, the PMF as an organized body emerged in response to the threat that ISIS poses to Iraq. However, as popular and well-resourced security units, they arguably pose a threat to the integrity of the Iraqi state. There is little doubt that the spillover of the Syrian conflict into Iraq has had a profound effect on its political future.

Popular Mobilization Forces

The factors that enabled the creation of the PMF include the lack of army capacity, opportunity for Iran to play a more hands-on role in the fight against ISIS and Grand Ayatollah Ali al-Sistani's call to the Iraqi people to mobilize in defence of Iraq. Because the Iraqi army had crumbled in the face of the ISIS advance, and systematic corruption within the Iraqi security services, an alternative security force was needed to help the Iraqi government contain the ISIS threat.

The PMF was formed as ISIS sought expansion in Iraq in 2014. It is a state-sponsored paramilitary umbrella for various militia groups already active in Iraq and Syria. For Baghdad, the formation of the PMF in 2014 was an acknowledgment that the Iraqi army was incapable of confronting ISIS expansion. In April 2014, Maliki told his Shia partners that he authorized the creation of 20 armed groups to secure the outskirts of Baghdad because these irregular groups could fight a guerrilla war and are 'better than the army'.[52]

> The dire security situation in Iraq provided Iran, already the most influential external actor in domestic Iraqi affairs, an opportunity to play a hands-on role in the fight against ISIS in Iraq and increase its leverage.

With the fall of Mosul and Tikrit in June 2014, and Baghdad itself in danger, the government responded by forming a paramilitary committee that would be able to provide the Iraqi capital with unconventional capabilities – and, more important, ideological and motivated fighters – that could stand against ISIS. For months before the fall of Mosul, hundreds of Shia militiamen were returning from Syria to help bolster the Iraqi Army that was confronting an increasingly powerful jihadist movement. Within hours of the fall of Mosul, Iranian Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC) General Qasim Suleimani was in Baghdad, meeting with the Iraqi leadership and making sure that the capital's defenders would be able to withstand an expected assault. In stark contrast to the US, which initially withheld military assistance from Baghdad, the Iranians mobilized immediately by providing Iraq with much-needed support.

The dire security situation in Iraq provided Iran, already the most influential external actor in domestic Iraqi affairs, an opportunity to play a hands-on role in the fight against ISIS in Iraq and increase its leverage.

---

[52] Minutes of a meeting of the National Alliance – parliamentary bloc of Iraq's Shia parties – published by Nibras Kazimi, an Iraq analyst and blogger at *Imara wa Tijara*.

Al-Sistani's call

The response from the Shia clerical leadership in Najaf to the fall of Mosul was unexpected and significantly changed the dynamics on the ground. During a Friday prayer sermon on 13 June 2014, Sistani's representative called for all able-bodied Iraqi citizens to pick up arms and join the Iraqi security services to defend Iraq. The last time the Shia clerical leadership issued a similar call to arms was in 1914 after the British invaded Iraq. The popular and immediate response to Sistani's call boosted morale after the humiliating defeats in northern Iraq and tens of thousands of Iraqis flocked to army recruitment centres across Baghdad and southern Iraq to volunteer.

Much of the regional and international media misread Sistani's fatwa as a Shia call to arms to fight against Sunnis or an open invitation to form and join militias. However, Sistani issued a clarification within 24 hours of the fatwa, emphasizing that Iraqi volunteers must join the Iraqi security services in their fight against ISIS and refrain from armed activities that are 'outside the legal frameworks'.[53] Responding to accusations that the fatwa was intended as a defence of Shias, Sistani clarified that when he asked Iraqis to stand up and defend 'Iraq's sacred sites' he did not just mean the Shia shrines, but also Sunni mosques, Christian churches and other places of worship too. ISIS is a threat to everyone in Iraq and it is the responsibility of all citizens to defend the country.[54]

Although the fear of a Syrian opposition victory was universal among Iraqi Shias because they equated the Syrian opposition with jihadism, the response to the threat was far from united. Grand Ayatollah Ali al-Sistani – Iraq's highest-ranking Shia cleric and spiritual leader for Shias across the world – discouraged youth from travelling to Syria to fight. Muqtada al-Sadr, the leader of the Sadrist movement, outright forbade his men from joining the campaign in Syria. Whether this was due to the lack of religious justification, political considerations or the priority of the fight in Iraq, the difference of opinions would later be reflected within the PMF in Iraq.

Challenges that the PMF poses

There are no accurate figures for the total number of fighters that make up the PMF, but estimates put the amount between 60,000 and 80,000, with between 10,000 and 15,000 of those directly affiliated with the IRGC and beyond the control of the Iraqi government. Those forces will be a serious security challenge for Baghdad and Prime Minister Abadi has already warned that Iranian-run militias in Iraq would be seen as a 'hostile act' engineered by Tehran.[55] However, unlike in Lebanon, there are serious limitations to Iran's influence that emanate from the Shia-dominated state, including other powerful Shia militant groups – such as Sadr's Peace Brigades – and also the traditional Shia religious establishment in Najaf led by Sistani. Tensions have already flared between these groups, with the notable case of the kidnapped Turkish construction workers in Baghdad in September 2015. Sistani issued a strongly-worded statement condemning the outlaws responsible and called on all political parties to support the Iraqi security forces and 'do what they can to put an end' to destabilizing actions that undermine the authority of the state and weaken the elected government.[56] It was a not-so-subtle reference to the IRGC-backed militias widely believed to have been responsible for the kidnapping.

[53] 'Statement on the current situation in Iraq', website of the Office of Grand Ayatollah Ali al-Sistani, 14 June 2014, http://www.sistani.org/arabic/in-news/24912/ (accessed 22 May 2016). Author's translation.
[54] Author's conversation with Grand Ayatollah Ali al-Sistani. Najaf, 14 June 2014.
[55] Pecquet, J. (2016), 'Obama's anti-IS envoy: Shiites saved Iraq', *Al-Monitor*, 11 February 2016, http://www.al-monitor.com/pulse/originals/2016/02/shiite-militants-iraq-islamic-state-obama-envoy-mcgurk.html (accessed 24 May 2016).
[56] 'Statement on kidnapping of foreign workers in Baghdad', website of the Office of Grand Ayatollah Sistani, 12 September 2015, http://www.sistani.org/arabic/archive/25165/ (accessed 24 May 2016). Author's translation.

Abadi publicly called out the PMF in February 2016, vowing to crack down on 'ghost' PMF members who are on the payroll but not fighting ISIS. It is an issue that plagues the Iraqi security forces and Abadi's blunt criticism was a rare admission that, contrary to public opinion, the PMF also has issues with corruption. Abadi claimed the PMF increased their numbers beyond the agreed provisions and an adviser to the prime minister said that only around half of the officially-registered 120,000 PMF members were actively fighting.[57] In another move that was widely interpreted as an attempt to contain the PMF, Abadi appointed a retired federal police general as deputy chief of the PMF commission for administrative and financial affairs on 9 February 2016.[58] This new position has wide-ranging responsibilities including oversight of all other PMF directorates, this means assuming key responsibilities from the other deputy chief of the PMF commission, Abu Mahdi al-Mohandis, who is tasked with executive and military affairs. Mohandis has close connections to the IRGC and remains a powerful figure within the PMF.

The liberation of Ramadi, in December 2015, was a significant test for the Iraqi security forces but also hugely symbolic because the PMF groups were not allowed to enter the fight. Instead, local Sunni tribesmen took part in the offensive alongside government forces to recapture the city from ISIS. The Ramadi campaign helped restore some confidence in the army and counterterrorism forces after the previous defeats. In the military campaign to liberate Mosul that was launched on 16 October 2016, the PMF, who are currently active on the southern axis of the campaign, were given clear orders by the Iraqi government to stay out of the city of Mosul. Whether or not the PMF participate in the liberation of Mosul itself, they will remain a force to be reckoned with for the foreseeable future. In the 2016 Iraqi budget, the PMF was allocated around US$1 billion. However, due to low oil prices and uncertainty over Iranian willingness to plug the gap, some experts believe the PMF will receive only about US$250 million, even less than they were allocated in 2015.[59]

Shia militancy and the future of Iraq

One of the long-term challenges to the Iraqi state is not only Sunni insurgency but Shia militancy that both supports and undermines the authority of the central government. A key component of the resistance to ISIS has been the plethora of Shia militia groups, several of which operate semi-autonomously from the state. While there are clear tensions and divisions between these groups – and, on an individual level, between some of those forces and the Iraqi government – the PMF is recognized by many Iraqis as the main reason that the tide has turned against ISIS. The PMF also enjoys widespread popularity amongst Shia Iraqis because it is seen as not just more successful than the army in defeating ISIS but impenetrable by ISIS – in stark contrast to Iraq's security institutions.

It is expected that some of the most powerful of the PMF groups, those directly tied to the IRGC – which differentiate themselves from the other PMF groups with the 'Islamic Resistance' label – will demand political rewards and concessions for defeating ISIS. Some will also contest the next provincial and general elections to be held in Iraq, in 2017 and 2018, respectively, in a strong position to take a larger share of the Shia vote from the traditional Shia Islamist parties. Others will prefer to stay

[57] AFP (2016), 'Iraq PM offers cash-strapped Kurds salaries for oil', *Agence France-Presse*, 15 February 2016, https://www.yahoo.com/news/iraq-pm-offers-cash-strapped-kurds-salaries-oil-210217592.html (accessed 24 May 2016).
[58] Al-Mada (2016), 'Abadi appoints Mohsin al-Ka'bi as Deputy Hashd leader for administrative and financial affairs', *Al-Mada Press*, 17 February 2016, http://www.almadapress.com/ar/news/64968/العبادي-يعين-محسن-الكعبي-نائبا-لرئ (accessed 24 May 2016). Author's translation.
[59] Kazimi, N. (2015), 'Downsizing the Popular Mobilization Units', *Talisman Gate*, 30 December 2015, https://talisman-gate.com/2015/12/30/downsizing-the-popular-mobilization-units/ (accessed 24 May 2016).

out of the formal political process but continue playing an independent security role, and are likely to resist any government attempt to demobilize or integrate them into the security services.

Once ISIS is defeated, Grand Ayatollah Sistani is also expected to issue a second fatwa that will call for the demobilization and integration of the PMF into the official security services. This is because his first fatwa in June 2014 was a conditional and temporary measure to confront the existential threat posed by ISIS.

Whatever plans Baghdad may have for the demobilization and/or integration of the PMF into the security services, the political prospects for some PMF groups look good. Two options are currently in discussion: the formation of a separate 'Islamic Resistance' front to contest in the elections or a merger with Maliki's electoral bloc. The second option is believed to be the current preference of the IRGC and Maliki's supporters feel confident that the former prime minister could easily win over 50 per cent of the Shia vote in the next general elections, due to the support from Iran and the widespread domestic popularity of the PMF.[60] However, rival politicians affiliated to other Islamist parties – including sections of the Dawa Party that support the current Prime Minister Abadi – are less certain that the PMF groups could win such a large share of the Shia vote, arguing that Iraq is still a long way from elections, and that Shia voters will make a distinction between the successful battlefield commanders and the traditional Shia Islamist parties. They hope that even if they lose some share of the vote to PMF groups, it will not be significant enough to fundamentally shift the balance of power.

With all eyes now on the military campaign to liberate Mosul, many Iraqis remain deeply concerned over Iraq's post-ISIS future. In both Sunni and Shia areas of Iraq, there is no clear vision of what political or security settlement will be in place after ISIS is defeated. ISIS is believed to have lost over 50 per cent of the territory it once controlled in Iraq, and over 20 per cent of its territory in Syria but the lack of a clear strategy going forward makes any victory or peace fragile at best. Furthermore, the conflicts in Syria and Iraq remain inextricably linked and major setbacks in either country will have a knock-on effect on the other.

---

[60] Author's interview with senior Iraqi Shia politician who wished to remain anonymous. Baghdad, 6 February 2016.

About the Author

Hayder al-Khoei is research director of the Centre for Shia Studies in London and a visiting fellow of the Middle East and North Africa Programme at the European Council on Foreign Relations.

He was formerly an associate fellow of the Middle East and North Africa Programme at Chatham House. He received his BA in Politics and International Relations from Kingston University and his MA in International Studies and Diplomacy from SOAS, University of London.

Acknowledgments

Independent thinking since 1920