Quo Vadis Iraq? II
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Draft Article
For the September 2016 Conference
Program for the Advancement of Research on Conflict and Collaboration (PARCC)
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Abstract

Today’s Iraq is one big crisis area. A deep chasm separates the Kurdish Regional Government (KRG) and the Shi’i-hegemonic government in Baghdad. Far worse is the crisis between Baghdad and most of the Iraqi Sunni population. The crisis looks and, quite possibly, is intractable. Iraq’s second largest city and some 25% of its territory are still occupied by a brutal fundamentalist Islamic group that enjoys support from part of the population. While most of the Sunni areas are in a state of open war, the Shi’i hinterland is suffering from deep neglect and depression due to a combination of depressed oil prices and incredible official corruption in Baghdad. Governance in territories under Baghdad’s control is so bad that the capital city is witnessing repeated joint Shi’i-Sunni mass-demonstrations. Sunni-Shi’i relations are at an all-time low since the Shi’i revolt against Saddam Husayn in March 1991. Shi’i-Kurdish relations, too, are at an historical low since 2003. Worse still: rivalries inside each camp: the Shi’i, the Kurdish and the Sunni ones are deep, making any consensus within each camp extremely difficult. All the attempts by Prime Minister Haydar al-Abadi to curb corruption and find a common ground with his Sunni and Kurdish citizens were defeated by his Shi’i supporters, apparently with some Iranian intervention. The overall political, social, and economic picture is the least inviting for anyone attempting at reconciliation. While the Kurdish Arab disagreements are presenting a challenge to any mediator, they pale by comparison to the difficulties of mediating the Sunni-Shi’i divide. And yet, the cost of failing to
resolve or at least ameliorate the present political conflicts is so high that regardless of the daunting task the international community must intervene and try to resolve at least the most acute conflicts. My recommendation is to begin right away with finding some remedies to the most pressing problems through recruitment of fighter to government-sponsored Sunni militias, reconstruction, refugees’ settlement and mediation.

“Right away” because by now already anywhere between 3.4 and 4.4 million Iraqis are refugees, mostly in Iraq, mostly Sunnis. The liberation of Mosul which is expected to take place no later than early 2017 will likely create one million more refugees, all of them Sunnis. The cities of Tikrit, Ramadi and Falluja are ruined following their liberation, and one should expect the same to happen in Mosul. If what has happened until now may be defined as a disaster, in the near future Iraq is facing an even greater humanitarian disaster, mostly a Sunni one. At the same time, while some Sunni tribal units are already fighting on the government (and American) side, most tribes are keeping aloof, pending some understandings with and guarantees from Baghdad and Washington. Without effective international financial support and mediation, even once ISIS is pushed out of Mosul, there will be no Iraq. The regional and international shock-waves of the total disintegration of Iraq will be greater than those of the disintegration of Syria. The article is trying to explain how we reached this situation and suggest the best approach for recruitment, reconstruction, resettlement and mediation.

**Introduction**

By 2016 the Sunni-Shi’i conflict in Iraq seems to fit perfectly into Louis Kreisberg’s definition of an intractable conflict, a conflict that defies resolution. By comparison, the Shi’i-Kurdish dispute is far less acute as it is in most part so far non-violent and it does not evolve around the question who rules Iraq. And yet, it
seems just as difficult to resolve. Both conflicts are the legacy of some eighty years of Sunni minority hegemony in the Iraqi state, but more contemporary developments rendered those conflicts more difficult to resolve. Due to its obsession with absolute control the Sunni-hegemonic Ba'th regime exacerbated the estrangement between the regime and the two other communities. The rise of Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini to power in Tehran further pushed the majority of the Iraqi Shi'is and the Ba'th regime away from each other and turned what was until 1979 an Iraqi-Iranian geostrategic conflict into a religious one. Then came Saddam's Islamization Faith Campaign. His intention was two-fold: to win the support of the general religious public opinion and to strengthen the Islamic common denominator between Sunnis and Shi'is through the mutually-accepted Qur'an and the imposition of the mutually-accepted Shari'a in many walks of life. The result was a very different one: due to the way it was carried out, the Campaign in fact encouraged Sunni Salafi circles and increased the gulf between Sunnis and Shi'is.

Then came the American occupation of Iraq. While it ended a brutal dictatorship, it also turned the tables on the Sunni Arabs. The latter was unavoidable as by the beginning of the 21st century sectarian identities were stronger than ever in Iraq, and

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1 For a detailed analysis see Amatzia Baram, *Saddam Husayn and Islam 1968-2003: The Ba’th from Secularism to Faith* (Washington, DC, the Woodrow Wilson Center and Johns Hopkins University Press, November 2014), pp. 291-348. Regarding the Salafi circles also four telephone interviews with Miroslav Zafirov, a senior Bulgarian diplomat who served for a few years in Iraq between 2010 and 2015, and e-mail exchanges February11; May 27; June 4; July 23, 2016.
in perfectly-democratic elections most Shi’is were bound to vote for Shi’i candidates. By then the Sunni Arabs represented probably 20%, while the Shi’i Arabs represented slightly more than 50% of the total populations. The problem was that core decisions made by the Coalition Provisional Authority in Iraq antagonized the Sunnis further and sent ex-Ba'athis and Salafis into each other's arms. This turned a small-scale insurgency into a major challenge to the new, democratic system and the Coalition forces in Iraq. By 2009 the military Surge of early 2007, including American cooperation with Sunni tribes against al-Qaeda Iraq (AQI) that had begun already in earnest in September 2006 decimated the insurgency. However, subsequent American mistakes and the policies of the government of PM Nuri al-Maliki helped AQI (now ISIS or Islamic State, IS) win again support in the Sunni areas. In June 2014 IS conquered Mosul and Ibrahim ‘Awad Ibrahim al-Badri al-Samarra’i (AKA "Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi"), its spiritual leader, declared himself Caliph.

There is no intention in this article to resolve the conflict between those who believe that, based on the WMD information available at the time, the American intervention in Iraq was a necessity, and those who see it as a disaster. The intention in this article is to discuss the main mistakes made by two American administrations while in Iraq, explain why those were mistakes, what consequences those mistakes had until the fall of 2016, how the Iraqi political scene looks today, and what can the international community do to help resolve the conflicts between Shi'i-dominated
Baghdad, on the one hand, and the Kurds and Sunni Arabs on the other. This article is not discussing the other option: Iraq’s disappearance as a result of a three-way divorce.

**Historical and Contemporary Background**

“Ripeness”, “fatigue”, or war-weariness, are key factors. Likewise, as Pruitt puts it “readiness” for difficult compromises is crucial. Others’ key factors, such as asymmetry of power and “risk perception” if the conflict is ended or if it continues, are relevant. And yet, in the Iraqi case, even if all other factors are promising, governance and leadership represent the master-keys, and both are almost non-existent in contemporary Iraq. A few examples can demonstrate the problem. Prime Minister Haidar al-Abadi, officially defined as the supreme commander of the armed forces, is paying the salaries of the various militias assembled under the umbrella of the Shi’i Popular Mobilization Force (PMF, *al-hashad al-sha’bi*) but most of them are not reporting to him. The Iraqi state military is indeed controlled by the PM but it hasn’t yet recovered from the ailments of the Maliki premiership. For example, its registers contain tens of thousands of “ghost soldiers”, names of non-existent troops. Their salaries are still being paid by the state, but who is receiving them? Corruption is endemic and devastating, and recognized by all. Abadi’s attempt, supported by Grand Ayatollah Ali al-Sistani, to curb it, including by dismissing his ministers and appointing professionals instead failed. This led to the protest occupation of the Green Zone, mainly the
parliament, by Muqtada al-Sadr’s Saraya al-Salam, unopposed. To prevent it from happening again Abadi needed the protection of another militia chief. The Shi’i militia chiefs and politicians are squabbling and unable to agree on much, except for one thing: even though Abadi and parts of his Da’wa Party are ready to consider it, almost all the Shi’i politicians and heads of militias are against any meaningful concessions to the Sunnis. As a result of the 2014 ISIS occupation of Mosul and much of al-Anbar, Shi’i fears of Sunni power are higher than ever. The government’s prestige is sagging also because it is unable to prevent almost daily car-bomb explosions, the worst so far in the middle-class Karada Sharqiyya neighborhood in early July 2016. Finally, Bagdad is penetrated thoroughly by the Iranian Quds Force. As a result, the government’s decision-making freedom is very limited.

The non-ISIS Sunni camp, too, is split many ways along personal, political and organizational lines. While it is possible to tell what most Sunnis are ready to settle for, this is by no means a consensus position. By comparison, the Kurds look like a coherent, united block, but they too are split two or three ways. To all this one should add the sheer drop in oil revenues from around $100 to around $50 per barrel. The result is that it

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2 See “Iraq bombing: Baghdad death toll rises to 250” Al-Jazeera, July 6, 2016, [https://www.google.co.il/webhp?sourceid=chrome-instant&lrz=1C1CHZL_enIL705IL705&ion=1&espv=2&ie=UTF-8#q=Iraq+bombing%3A+Baghdad+death+toll+rises+to+250](https://www.google.co.il/webhp?sourceid=chrome-instant&lrz=1C1CHZL_enIL705IL705&ion=1&espv=2&ie=UTF-8#q=Iraq+bombing%3A+Baghdad+death+toll+rises+to+250) accessed August 22, 2016.
is difficult to imagine a less inviting atmosphere for a mediator who will try to embark on serious give-and-take negotiations.

**American Mistakes - The Bush Administration:**

The three main mistakes made by the Bush administration once in control in Baghdad were the dismissal, rather than restructuring of the Iraqi military; the far-too-deep de-Ba'thification of the government bureaucracy and technocracy, and the rejection of Sunni tribal shaykhs who were interested in cooperation with the powerful American "tribe". All three decisions left the Sunni Arabs feeling discriminated against and under threat.

The advantage of the dissolution of the Iraqi armed forces\(^3\), was that any new military was certain to be more docile, and far better controlled by the new, democratically-elected, Shi'i-hegemonic political elite. The new army was most unlikely to perform a military *coup d'état* against the government and, indeed, no such meaningful attempt was ever made. But the new army on its heavy armored divisions and small but modern air-force also lost Mosul in June 2014 in 24 hours to the tiny and lightly-armed rag-tag forces of ISIS (and see more below). Worse: when Saddam’s army was dissolved, the Shi'i conscripts were happy to go home while most Shi'i officers and sergeants were absorbed immediately into the new army. The retired Sunni professional soldiers and officers however were forced to leave. Individually, they lost their life careers and livelihood and an honorable profession. As pointed out by an experienced observer, many of them were treated as conspirators, even targeted. Some of the former Sunni generals just wanted the Iraqi

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\(^3\) *"Coalition Provisional Authority Order Number 2: Dissolution of Entities", The Coalition Provisional Authority, August 23, 2003.*
government to stop harassing them and their families whenever they travelled in and out of Baghdad4.

Collectively this came on top of the humiliation of losing Sunni hegemony in Iraq and palpable fear that by peeling off the only Iraqi defensive shield the US was selling their Iraq down the river to Tehran. Many of the retired officers joined insurgent groups. More than a decade of extensive regime-sponsored Islamization, including support for loyal radical Islamists under Saddam Husayn and his Number Two 'Izzat Ibrahim al-Duri, conditioned his party members and army officers to see in radical Islamists acceptable allies5. The decision to disband the military came contrary to a pre-invasion decision to keep most of it intact, albeit following a necessary purge and re-organization. It was made mainly by Ambassador Paul Bremmer, the American Chief Executive of the Coalition Provisional Authority with the Pentagon's consent, as a result of Kurdish and Shi'i pressures6. This was still a mistake. Many Sunni army officers either joined or cooperated with the radical Islamist al-Qa'ida in Iraq (AQI, later The Islamic State in Iraq, later ISIS, now: Islamic State) led until 2006 by the Jordanian fanatic Abu Mus'ab al-Zarqawi. AQI's anti-Shi'i atrocities helped turn the glowing ambers of the Sunni-Shi'i conflict from Saddam's days into an open fire. Following the 2006 destruction of the Samarra-based 'Askari shrine, one of the four Shi'i holiest places in Iraq, the rest of the

4 Sterling Jensen, e-mail message August 3, 2016. Jensen served for a few years in Iraq as adviser and interpreter for the American forces.
5 For details about Saddam's Islamic Faith Campaign see Amatzia Baram, Saddam Husayn and Islam 1968-2003), ibid. Also the interviews and e-mail exchanges with Miroslav Zafirov, ibid; Baram, "Saddam's ISIS: Tracing the Roots of the Caliphate", Foreign Affairs, April 8, 2016; Baram, "Saddam and the Rise of ISIS: the Faith Campaign’s Long Aftermath", in Foreign Affairs, June 5, 2016.
6 A conversation with Paul Bremmer, Washington, DC, November 3, 2014. More than the Shi`a, the Kurds threatened that if Saddam’s military was not retired they would not cooperate with Bremmer, whatever that meant.
necessary inter-sectarian fuel was provided by the radical Shi'i militias, led by Muqtada al-Sadr's *Jaysh al-Mahdi*.

Dismissing mainly Sunni educators, technocrats and experts who were Ba'th members at the rank of *firqa* and above, but often also lower ranks, left many unemployed and bitter. Retired Sunni fighter-pilots were assassinated, apparently at the order of the Iranian Quds Force, and even many Sunni university professors were targeted. Few joined armed insurgent groups but many sympathized with them and provided them with intelligence and logistical services. The number of retirees is not known: according to an interview with a senior Pentagon official who asked to remain anonymous 30,000 people were affected\(^7\). According to other sources the number was far greater\(^8\). Whichever the case, those were very large numbers of educated and experienced Sunni technocrats left unemployable and bitter.

Last but not least: The U.S. administration failed to appreciate the importance of the tribes in Iraq. This for several reasons. During the Ba'th rule (1968-2003) the Iraqi tribes received only scant attention in Middle East historians' and anthropologists' production. Until 2002 only one article dealing with the interaction between the Iraqi tribes (Sunni and Shi'i tribes alike) and the Ba'th regime appeared in the American and British academe, as well as non-academic press, and even that quite late\(^9\). One explanation for this omission was the general perception that

\(^7\) Washington, DC, November 2005.
\(^8\) Within the education sector alone, the Historical Review of CPA Achievements states that 12,000 teachers, headmasters, and headmistresses were removed from the Ministry of Education and schools. In addition, all ex-Ba' thi civil servants in any government ministry, university professors, medical practitioners, the Ministry of Defense and other administration officials were retired. Shi'is were re-hired very quickly. See "De-Ba'athification" From Wikipedia, *the free encyclopedia*, [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/De-Ba%27athification#Public_Servants](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/De-Ba%27athification#Public_Servants), accessed July 2, 2016. My assessment is that no less than 50,000 were retired.
the Ba’th regime, a modernizing, socialist and nationalist one was hostile to tribal affiliation, values and leadership. On the surface this was indeed the case, but the political practice was far more complex and in most part below the “radar screen” of students of Iraqi society and politics. Another explanation was that the tribes were no longer the tribes as scholars know them from the monarchy era. They may not even fit snugly into the definition of tribes. And yet, some elements of tribal identity and affinity and, in a variety of ways organization still existed. Some super-tribes (or federations, qaba’il) like the Dulaym remained only as ethereal identities with very little or no organizational content. Many smaller units though were still operational. Their shaykhs too were different from the classical image: many were highly educated, some with a Ph.D, some engineers, some entrepreneurs. Saddam was made aware that tribal organization was still relevant already in 1969 and decided to jump on the band wagon and direct it where he wanted it to go. He manipulated tribes, changed leaderships, sometimes created new tribes, but the tribes too manipulated him as best they could10. For a quarter of a century or so all this went un-noticed by Western scholarship.

Another reason for the limited awareness of the importance of tribal groupings in Iraq was that American officials serving in Iraq felt that they were tasked with the mission of building a “new Iraq”: a secular, thoroughly modern, liberal-democratic state, modeled on Western Europe or the United States. Reportedly to them, and specifically to Ambassador Paul Bremmer, the American Chief Executive of the Coalition Provisional Authority for cooperation, tribal shaykhs, while treated with respect, represented “the old Iraq” and thus they were reluctant to work with them systematically on building “the new Iraq”. This was a mistake, and it was pointed out to the administration that the

nature of society cannot be changed overnight and under Saddam tribes were still important identity groups, and many could be persuaded to side with the new system. In 2004 this position changed to some extent: a group of American diplomats traveled from Baghdad’s Green Zone to Tikrit to meet with scores of Sunni tribal shaykhs who were known for their cooperation with the insurgency. The shaykhs were promised safe conduct by the Americans, but they risked their lives by going to Tikrit all the same: they knew well that the Islamist and Ba'hist insurgent would try to assassinate them once their mission was made public. At the meeting the shaykhs again suggested cooperation against Abu Mus`ab al-Zarqawi and his AQI terrorists. They were rejected again because they were reluctant to work with the Iraqi, Shi'i-dominated government in Baghdad and insisted on working only with the Americans. Instead of serving as mediators and, later, honest brokers, the US diplomats were not authorized to accept the offer and the meeting ended in failure. The shaykhs were deeply concerned about their tribal authority: the insurgents were chipping away at their tribes, because they managed to peel-off growing numbers of young tribal men. When the Americans rejected cooperation many tribes chose or returned to the other side and became or continued to be involved in the insurgency. Only in September 2006 a fully-systematic and successful province-wide US military-tribal cooperation against AQI was launched in Ramadi. By then Shaykh Sattar Abu Risha, who reportedly had collaborated with AQI, was sending his fighters to kill AQI terrorists in response to the assassination of a few of his family members. Captain Travis Patriquin (former Special Forces) who was killed later in an IED explosion, who served as the Civil

12 Wayne White, a retired senior official in the State Department, reported to this author in 2007 that the “new Iraq” versus the “old Iraq” were precisely the words Bremmer used when, in 2003, he turned down an offer by a group of tribal shaykhs to cooperate in fighting the insurgency. The same official reported also of the meeting in Tikrit in 2004, see below.
Affairs Officer, and his commander, Colonel Shawn (Sean) McFarland (MacFarland), Commanding the first brigade, first armored division, identified an opportunity and recruited Shaykh Sattar and his albu Risha tribe. Incrementally, many tribes joined the Albu Risha's "Awakening" (al-sahwa) assembly of tribal anti-AQI militias. To understand the reasons why tribes joined the American forces in their fight against al-Qaeda it is also useful to bring the case of Albu Mahal and Albu Nimr. Both tribes came into conflict with al-Qaeda already in 2005 over Syria-Iraq smuggling operations: al-Qaeda demanded very high tax. Albu Nimr also had an old account to settle with Saddam and his intelligence services. Both tribes asked the Marines near the town of Al-Qaim on the Iraqi-Syrian border for support. Following a costly mistake, in November 2005 the Marines launched Operation Steel Curtain. This time there was close cooperation with Albu Mahall and Albu Nimr. Al-Qa'ida and the two tribes that supported it were defeated this time roundly and sent to Akashat in the deep desert. Ever since the tribal unit that was established, the Hamzah Forces, was given de-facto control over that.

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13 Based on interviews with American officers and interpreters who asked that their names not be mentioned. The interviewees had served in Anbar in 2005-2007 including one who was a member of the US team that negotiated with Abu Risha and worked with him later, the United States, throughout June 2009. The reported contacts that Shaykh Sattar Abu Risha had with AQI are in dispute. According to Dr. Sterling Jensen they were at most indirect, through the Nu'man Brigade for Road Security, and the Nu'man Brigade likely had ties to Zarqawi. According to Jensen Abu Risha was in fact hostile to AQI (E-mail message, August 3, 2016). See also James Kitfield, “The battle for Mosul has already begun, but what matters is the day after” Yahoo News, August 8, 2016, https://www.yahoo.com/news/battle-mosul-already-begun-matters-00000323.html, accessed August 29, 2016.
section of the border as well as over the Iraqi army unit that was stationed there\textsuperscript{14}.

Each tribe had its own reasons to join the Awakening, but common to all were three reasons. One was the wild nature of AQI and its Salafi interpretation of the shari`a that was alien to the local culture. Another was the economic and security benefits (contracts, security jobs, weapons, direct American fighting support). Finally: the tribes were aware that if a neighboring (or rival) tribe joins the Awakening and wins lavish American and Baghdad government support, this will leave other tribes at a disadvantage. Under General David Petraeus, together with the military Surge of over 20,000 soldiers (five brigades), and with a change of tactics, by mid-to-late 2009 AQI was decimated\textsuperscript{15}.

\textbf{American Mistakes: The Obama Administration:} Three main mistakes were made by the Obama administration. First was its support for Maliki for a second term as prime minister. This policy was apparently adopted reluctantly, as the elections' victory of the USA-favorite Ayad Allawi did not give him a sufficient parliamentary margin to create a ruling coalition. The administration was reluctant to be seen as meddling in Iraqi affairs and was most of all very keen on leaving Iraq altogether. And yet, they


made a mistake. They should have insisted on giving Allawi his constitutional right to be the first to try and create a coalition. Had he failed, which was likely to happen, they should have helped Allawi to reach a far better deal than he actually did. Then they should have helped a far more moderate and popular traditional Shi'i politician like Vice President ‘Adel ‘Abd al-Mahdi, to become premier. Instead, they ignored Maliki’s serious transgressions and helped him into his second term as PM. As a senior adviser to the US Civil Administration, and then to the US embassy in Baghdad writes, even before the 2010 general elections, Maliki:16

“sacked professional generals and replaced them with those personally loyal to him. He coerced Iraq’s chief justice to bar some of his rivals from participating in the elections in March 2010. After the results were announced and Maliki lost to a moderate, pro-Western coalition encompassing all of Iraq’s major ethno-sectarian groups [led by Ayad al-Allawi], the judge issued a [non-constitutional, AB] ruling that awarded Maliki the first chance to form a government, ushering in more tensions and violence”.

Then, “Within hours of the withdrawal of U.S. forces in December 2011, Maliki sought the arrest of his [Sunni] longtime rival Vice President Tariq al-Hashimi, eventually sentencing him to death in absentia. The purge of Finance Minister Rafea al-Essawi followed a year later. He also broke nearly every promise he made to share power with his political rivals”.17

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17 Ali Khedery, Ibid.
As a Commander in Chief, Khedery continues, Maliki used to bypass the military chain of command including the ministry of defense by “making all commanders report to him” (rather than to the minister of defense). He used “the U.S.-trained Iraqi counterterrorism and SWAT forces as a praetorian guard”. Likewise, he used “the secret intelligence organizations, prisons and torture facilities”. Through them he “bludgeoned his rivals”. He coerced the courts and refused to issue a new and comprehensive amnesty law that could help quell Sunni-Shi‘i sectarian unrest. His close links to Iran, his “control [of] the judiciary, police, army, intelligence services, oil revenue, treasury and the central bank” were un-democratic and rendered Sunni-Shi‘i rapprochement impossible. “Maliki’s most ardent American supporters”, reports Khedery, “ignored the warning signs and stood by as an Iranian general [Qasim Suleimani] decided Iraq’s fate in 2010”. And he concludes: “Under these circumstances, renewed ethno-sectarian civil war in Iraq was not a possibility. It was a certainty”.18

Probably the most damaging blow dealt to any chance of Shi‘i-Sunni rapprochement and a water-shed in sectarian relations was an army raid on a Sunni Arab anti-government protest camp (a sort of a sit-in demonstration) near the northern town of Hawija, south of Kirkuk. The raid took place on April 23, 2013, and the violence om site between the two sides lasted for three days, A total of 42 people were killed and at least 153 others injured, with most of them being protesters - only 3 soldiers were confirmed dead and 7 others wounded. Then violence spread in northern and central Iraq. At least 712 were killed during April, including 117 members of the security forces. The Iraqi military claimed that they

were fighting insurgents. Some insurgents of the Naqshbandi Army very likely joined the fray, but the initial raid on a peaceful demonstration was the trigger. The government tried to make some amends but it had little effect.\textsuperscript{19} The attack against Sunni Parliament Member Ahmad al-‘Alwani came next an in a similar context: the suppression of peaceful anti-government demonstrations. In late December 2013 Maliki sent police and military units to arrest al-‘Alwani, a leader of Ramadi anti-government protests. They killed at least one family member and five body guards. This event shocked Ramadi. The larger picture was grim. Following a continuous decline in the number of terror casualties between 2008 (6,787) and 2011 (2,771), in 2012 the number rose steeply to 3,238 and more than doubled in 2013 to 7,157 casualties.\textsuperscript{20}

It has to be said that not all the violence was the government’s: the insurgents took advantage of the Sunni distress and carried out terror activities more than in 2009-2011. Likewise, not all Sunnis were estranged. Some of them still saw Maliki as a reasonable, non-sectarian politician\textsuperscript{21}. Maliki had a real problem because his Shi’i constituency was deeply worried about and frightened of potential Sunni power, and he was adamant on staying in power. And yet, in 2009-2012 the Sunni insurgency was at its lowest since 2003 and this was the time to re-unite Iraq. Allawi, maybe even Abd al-Mahdi would have tried it. Maliki gave up already before the 2010 elections.


\textsuperscript{21} E-mail interview with Dr. Sterling Jensen, August 3, 2016.
The second mistake of the Obama administration was the neglect of ties between the US embassy and military on the one hand-side and the Sunni-Arab tribes who had helped them defeat AQI on the other. This policy begun already in 2009, during the Bush administration, and it was continued in 2010-2011. If any American official believed that the tribes joined the fight against AQI as a result of their deep commitment to liberal democracy and admiration for the US this was not the case. They joined the American forces because their narrow interests coincided with those of the Americans. This marriage of convenience was clear to the commanders who initiated it. Maliki objected to continued American ties to the Sunni tribes, but this was not a sufficient reason to end those ties. Iraq was not yet a stable democracy, and someone had to insist on Sunni civil rights and government inclusion policy. After the US invested so much in the new Iraq, Sunni-Shi'ı rapprochement and integration were the only guarantee for stability and so they were American interests. Ties with the Sunni tribes therefore should have continued even if low-key.

Last but not least was the pre-mature evacuation of every combat American soldier from Iraq. In his second term Maliki added to the sense of Sunni frustration a harsh policing action, including the use of firearms against peaceful Sunni demonstrators. Once the American military left Iraq Maliki did not keep his promises to recruit a large number of Sunni tribal troops to the service of the state and began to persecute and prosecute shaykhs and commanders of the Awakening and Sons of Iraq. Many Sunnis reached the conclusion that Maliki was all-out against them and their leaderships and they looked west for help from the Syrian Sunnis whom they hoped would rule Damascus soon. While the Sunni sense of Baghdad and Washington betrayal may have been overplayed, there may be no doubt that there was more than a grain of truth in it. A very typical

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22 Interviews with a senior Iraqi military officer who fled Iraq in 2006 but remained in close touch with his community. In his view those were dangerous Sunni delusions, but they were real all-the-same. He asked not to be named. The US, April-May 2011.
conversation between a BBC reporter and tribal shaykhs in Anbar exposed this profound sense of betrayal. After continuous ISIS murderous attacks against him and his family Sheikh Sabah al-‘Issawi (from albu ‘Issa) was worried about the mortal danger to his three wives and 19 children. Sheikh Abdullah Humedi al-Boesa al-‘Issawi told the journalist: "We blame President Obama for not keeping his promises". Under Maliki "Sunnis have been displaced. They are being slaughtered. He [Obama] misled us. The Americans have no credibility. We no longer trust what they say." On Baghdad he said: "The government believes that when weapons are given to Sunni tribes, they will be handed over to Daesh … Some of them believe that all Sunnis support Daesh. The origin of this fear is sectarian."23

In their desperation they looked for help west, from the Syrian Sunnis whom they hoped would rule Damascus soon24. Maliki also tolerated if not actually encouraged an unprecedented degree of corruption both in the military and in the state bureaucracy at large. Even some two years after Mosul fell, Minister of Finance Hoshiyar Zebari estimated that there were “as many as 30,000 ghost soldiers in Iraq’s military” and that “corrupt officers are pocketing their salaries”. Decent officers were forced to pay from their pockets for ammunition and even armor support for their units, other officers demanded money for promoting underlings, and yet others with no qualifications at all were buying military ranks and command posts.25


24 Interviews with a senior Iraqi military officer who fled Iraq in 2006 but remained in close touch with his community. In his view those were dangerous Sunni delusions, but they were real all-the-same. He asked not to be named. The US, April-May 2011.

The combined result of all these mistakes was, on the one hand, growing Sunni-Arab frustration and support for AQI, later ISIS, and, on the other, the diminishing ability of Baghdad’s government to defend the country. This fast-deteriorating security situation was ignored by Washington. In June 2014 ISIS conquered Mosul and very soon afterward it completed the conquest of most of Anbar, Nineveh and Salah al-Din with parts of Diyala. The capital was surrounded from three sides: west, north, south and much of the east. Finally: Irbil, the capital city of the Kurdish Regional Government (KRG) was on the verge of falling. IS could never claim the active support of the majority of the Sunnis, but it has been an exclusively Sunni organization and it enjoyed the passive support of so many Sunnis that in Iraq, as different from Syria, it should be seen as representing a structural problem. It may be argued therefore that by 2014 Sunni-Shi’i and Sunni-Kurdish hostilities reached a level not seen since March 1991, when both the Shi’a and the Kurds revolted against Saddam Husayn.

Another internal development, but one for which American mistakes can hardly be blamed, is the great tension and competition between the various Shi’i political factions and militias that sometimes

HTTPS://WWW.THEGUARDIAN.COM/WORLD/2016/FEB/19/POST-WAR-IRAQ-CORRUPTION-OIL-PRICES-REVENUE.
reached the level of armed clashes. This phenomenon reached its peak in 2008 when PM Maliki sent his troops to liberate Basra from the control of Muqtada al-Sadr and his *jaysh al-mahdi*. Bitter internal rivalries, though, continued to plague Iraqi-Shi’i politics at least until the Fall of 2016.

The most central power playing behind the scenes of this Shi’i-on-Shi’i struggle has been Iran. What does Iran want to achieve in Iraq? Is it interested in a Shi’i-Iraqi community united politically? Is it interested in a Shi’i-Sunni and Shi’i-Sunni-Kurdish rapprochement and national unity? As Winston Churchill said of Russia, Iran is “a riddle wrapped in a mystery inside an enigma”. But Churchill also added: “[P]erhaps there is a key. That key is Iran’s national interest”. Iran needs Iraq as a buffer state against the Sunni-Arab world as well as a territorial connection to Assad’s Syria and to Lebanon. This means that the Sunni areas and the KRG must remain under the control of a Shi’i-dominated Baghdad. An independent Kurdistan is more likely to become a Turkish satellite than an Iranian one, so for Iran this is a less-than-desirable outcome. The most convincing demonstration of this geo-strategic principle was provided by Tehran in August 2016 when it admitted that it allowed (probably not for the first time) the Russian air force to use its territory to bomb Syrian Islamist targets. This permission included Iranian permission to the Russian bombers to fly over the north of Iraq. This also means for Iran that Shi’i-controlled Baghdad should not be allowed to become too independent. It would seem, then, that divisions among a large number of Shi’i

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factions in Iraq, none of them strong enough to monopolize power, is serving Iranian interests. Between June 2014 and Fall 2016 Teheran has been helping both the Shi‘i-hegemonic government in Baghdad and the KRG to push back the terrorists of IS because they see in IS a threat. Kurdish secession however does not fit well into their calculations but a weak KRG that depends on them, even if only partially, does. It will make sense for them therefore to help bridge the gaps between Baghdad and Irbil, but in a way that will leave both sides dependent on Tehran’s mediation and arbitration. This will also dissuade the Iranian Kurds, now in a low-intensity revolt, from seeking autonomy, let alone independence. It is not clear to me whether or not Teheran has an interest in curbing the horrendous corruption of the Iraqi government system. Whatever the case may be, at least Iran has not invested and most likely will not invest any political currency in preventing corruption in Iraq. Furthermore, because a government of professionals means less power for the Iraqi pro-Iranian Shi’i politicians, by the Fall of 2016 Iran is still opposing any attempt by Prime Minister al-Abadi to appoint a government of non-political professionals to curb official corruption this way.

In addition to Shi‘i-Sunni and Shi‘i-Shi‘i rivalries, in the Kurdish area there are acute tensions between two of the three main political parties (KDP, PUK, and Goran) as well as between the Kurds as a group and minorities like the various Christian sects, Sunni and Shi‘i Turkomans and the Yazidis. In the Kurdish-controlled territory in Iraq, which is much larger today than before June 2014, the most influential international power is Turkey. Economic and political relations between Turkey and the KRG are very close. Even now, that oil revenues are very limited, Turkish contractors are paramount in Kurdistan and Kurdish oil is going to the world market through a new oil pipeline that is crossing Turkish territory. For the
first time there is Turkish ambivalence regarding Kurdish independence. Since a mid-July 2016 visit of KRG President Mas`ud Barazani to Ankara the Turkish government is not openly against Kurdish independence of Iraq, as it probably recognized the potential of a loyal and dependent Kurdish state as a useful buffer zone against Shi`i Iran. At the same time, though, for powerful traditional geo-strategic reasons, this new position is very far yet from support for such independence.

Kurdish Independence?

As an ideal and strategic political goal almost all the Kurds are in favor of independence. Although the PUK, which is on better terms with Baghdad than is the KDP, is less enthusiastic, still, there is hardly any Iraqi Kurd who is not dreaming of independence. Since the 1920 San Remo Congress the Kurds have never been so close. And yet, even when Mas`ud Barazani announced that he would conduct a national referendum over this issue, he added that its results will only be considered a recommendation. Declaring independence is fraught with dangers even though an optimistic scenario is possible too. The Kurds will lose their sovereign rights over the whole of Iraq which means in the first place: their right to an equitable share in the super-rich oil reserves of the south (from February 2014 Baghdad stopped all support for the KRG but this is a provisional measure). They will have to be satisfied with oil and gas resources in the KRG and the other areas the Kurds will control, which means that independent Kurdistan will be more adamant than now on controlling Kirkuk and its oil reserves. This, of course, will


28 Cengiz Çandar, ibid.
pitch them as never before against Baghdad. Their easy territorial access to the water of the Gulf will come under question. Baghdad may be vindictive and make this access difficult. The worse-case scenario is that a declaration of Kurdish independence will free the hands of some Shi’i militias to try and encroach on Kurdish territories, at least in the controversial areas. Sistani’s position is that Iraq should remain united, and the militias may find in it encouragement to confront the Kurds. On a small scale this already happened in Tuz Khormato (see below). Baghdad though may not object very strongly to Kurdish independence: my information is that at the grass-root level many Shi’is see the partnership with the Kurds as a burden, and see an Arab Iraq as a better solution. Baghdad may not wish to deny access to the Kurds to southern Iraq because it will likewise need easy access to the north, to Turkey, and because Kurdistan is the most popular summer tourism site for Baghdadis and southerners.

The Turkish position is crucial. Assuming that Turkish support is available, and this is far-fetched today, the Kurds will be dependent as they are now on Turkey for access to the Mediterranean for their oil exports. If the Syrian Kurds manage to establish an autonomy that will reach the Mediterranean, a distant dream right now, (presently, even the westernmost Syrian Kurdish “canton” of Efrin is far from the coast), their territory too may serve for the same purpose, but relations between the main Kurdish political powers in

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29 Personal interviews conducted by UNAMI Bulgarian diplomat Miroslav Zafirov with Grand Ayatollahs Najafi and Fayad, Sistani’s most senior supporters in Najaf. They insisted that in the face of “divisions and sectarianism” Iraq must remain unified and strong. E-mail from Zafirov Sept. 8, 2016. Sistani also implied objection to Kurdish secession by advocating Iraqi unity in some of his fatwas.
Iraq and Syria are tense. Dependence on Turkey will grow because strategically-speaking the Kurds will need a counterweight to Iran and its close ally Shi'i-controlled Baghdad. Economically-speaking an independent Kurdistan may expect a continuation of the activities of Turkish companies, but this activity depends on Kurdish oil revenues. They may expect an increase in investments from Saudi Arabia and the Gulf Emirates both due to economic and political incentives. The Saudis and the Emirates will also try to push the (Sunni) Kurds and the Sunni Arabs into each other's arms, to off-balance Shi'i-controlled Baghdad. Iran will try to prevent Kurdish independence, but once this is an established fact Iran's position will be uncertain. One thing is certain: Tehran will try to turn Kurdistan away from a Turkish and into an Iranian buffer state.

Finally: without super-power support Kurdistan will be vulnerable. All these calculations may explain the Kurdish hesitation to declare independence. Much will depend on the post-ISIS arrangements between Baghdad and Irbil. If the Kurds will end up reasonably unhappy, they will prefer to stay as part of Iraq.

**The Kurdish-Arab Complex**: The Kurdish – Arab complex will be discussed here only very briefly. The conflict between Baghdad and the Kurds is far less acute than between Sunnis and Shi'is. After all, since 2003 there haven't been any serious military confrontations between the Kurds and the Shi'i-hegemonic government in Baghdad. Still, in November 2015 and again April 24, 2016 armed clashes already took place between the Peshmerga and Shi'i militias in Tuz Khormatu. The city, located 55 miles south of Kirkuk, is multi-ethnic, with a majority of Shia Turkmen and minorities of Sunni Turkmen, Arabs, and Kurds. It was liberated by the Kurds from IS occupation but later some Shi'i militias moved in as well. To the Kurds even the distant margins of Kirkuk are *terra irredenta* that was liberated with Kurdish blood. To Baghdad this is Arab Iraq and
the beginning of returning the rest of the north and its oil reserves to Baghdad's control. Iran sees this area as part of its western security buffer. If it helped reach a ceasefire it was because it sensed a Kurdish victory. Kurdish-Shi'i relations there remained volatile\(^{30}\). Tuz Kurmato is only the tip of the iceberg: every area the Peshmerga liberated from IS they see as part of the future KRG. This includes not only Kirkuk but, also, areas north of Mosul along the Turkish border. If they help liberate Mosul, there is a good chance that they will also claim those areas. Baghdad, for its part, is adamant that only the areas controlled by the KRG before 2014 will be recognized.

At present, the Kurdish leaders would prefer an expanded autonomy over independence. If their most important demands are met, they will give up other demands and remain in Iraq. Their demands are in the financial/economic, oil and territorial realms. Economically they expect the state to provide them with 17% of Iraq's total oil revenues, after the center's defense and bureaucracy expenses are deduced. Until now Baghdad agreed only to 12% of the revenues, and presently none is being paid. On top of that the Kurds expect the state to include the cost of keeping the Peshmerga militia in the central government's security budget. A compromise solution here is easy to reach. As for oil, the Kurdish demand is to allow them to sign contracts independently of Baghdad, though the full revenues will go to Baghdad, to become part of the total national revenue. This demand is more difficult to meet not so much in and of itself (provisionally de-facto this is

\(^{30}\) Mahmut Bozarslan, “Why Tuz Khormato clashes were more than just local skirmishes” in *Almonitor*, May 5, 2016, accesses August 18, 2016. [http://www.al-monitor.com/pulse/originals/2016/05/turkey-iraq-tuz-khurmatu-new-sunni-shiite-front.html#ixzz4HgR5cXLM](http://www.al-monitor.com/pulse/originals/2016/05/turkey-iraq-tuz-khurmatu-new-sunni-shiite-front.html#ixzz4HgR5cXLM)
anyway the present arrangement) but because it will become a precedent. Next, a Sunni autonomy, if one is created, will demand the same. Indeed, even three southern governorates like Basra, Dhi Qar and Maysan, where most of Iraq's oil reserves are to be found, may come with a similar demand and Baghdad will lose control over Iraq's oil contracts. Here a compromise looks impossible, but a definite decision may simply be deferred, allowing the de-facto arrangement to continue with the necessary streamlining.

Most difficult are the questions of Kirkuk and some other territories that the Kurds are demanding to annex to the KRG. Since 2003 the Kurds demanded to annex Kirkuk, where there are Iraq's second largest oil reserves. Kirkuk is also important historically for the Kurds. The Iraqi constitution stipulates a referendum among its inhabitants to check their wishes, but Baghdad postponed the referendum as it was aware that it will be pro-Kurdish. The Kurds insist that they will not give Baghdad a square inch of the land liberated with Kurdish blood. Naturally, Baghdad is up in arms against this claim. So far no Turkoman autonomy in Kirkuk was considered. Finally, settling the Kurdish-Shi'i (or Kurdish-Arab) dispute will require the creation of a united Kurdish and a united Shi'i position. The latter will be far more difficult to achieve than the former. Such positions will have to emerge during the negotiations and the mediators will have to try and help resolve those internal disagreements as well. In addition to the superpowers and the UN, to resolve this dispute it will be necessary to involve Turkey and, possibly, also Iran. It is not clear whether the partial rapprochement today between Turkey on the one hand-side, and Russia and Iran on the other, can help a compromise agreement to evolve. In the end the negotiator's principle must be in the end to leave both sides reasonably unhappy. Paradoxically, because there are many areas of conflict, successful mediation will have to deal with all at the
same time and offer compensations/rewards in one area, to get
concessions on the other. By far the single most effective
superpower in trying to mediate this conflict will be the US, but this
only if mediation will begin now. The military aid it is providing now
for both sides is crucial to their fight against IS. After Mosul is
liberated the US will still have massive influence on the Kurds, but
there is no telling how much clout the US will still have with the Iraqi
government. The mediator should be therefore a senior American
diplomat or an ex-military commander with the best access to the
White House. As leverage he or she can use long-term American
commitment to keep providing the Peshmerga long-term with the
same weapons the US is providing now.

The Sunni-Shi’i Complex:

By the Summer-Fall of 2016 by far the most pressing problem in Iraq is
ISIS control of some 25% of Iraqi territory including Mosul. This is the
territorial incarnation of the Sunni-Shi’i struggle. The Sunni politicians are
split over some demands (see more below) but the majority of the
community has a few clear expectations from Baghdad. If those
expectations are met by Baghdad, many Sunni tribes will join the war
against ISIS.\(^{31}\) In such a case in a post-ISIS Iraq there is a very good
chance that the Sunni community will at long last find its place and no
longer try to rock the boat as it has been doing off-and-on since 2003.
The Sunni expectations are constitutional, as they are based on articles
117-121 of the constitution, even though the precise contours of such an
autonomy are not detailed there. Maliki rejected the idea totally and dealt
it a crushing blow when he sent the police and army to arrest Ahmad al-

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\(^{31}\) These conclusions are based on interviews in the US in 2014-2015 with visiting Sunni Iraqis who are well acquainted with their community’s wishes but who asked that their names not be mentioned due to security considerations.
‘Alwani in Ramadi in December 2013 accusing him of terrorism. Al-
‘Alwani and Shaykh ‘Abd al-Razzaq al-Shammari were among the most
active leaders who advocated a Sunni autonomy.

or at least not in any clash with the principles of the Constitution, but
they are difficult to meet. The most important one is to allow the
Sunnis to create an autonomous "region" out of three governorates
(al-Anbar, Salah al-Din, Ninneweh). The details, however, are more
difficult to agree upon. First, the national budget will allocate an
equitable share to cover the region’s expenses between
administration and development. As was the case with the Kurds,
almost all the budget came from southern oil revenues. The Sunni
autonomy will have complete freedom of decision how to spend and
invest the money without Baghdad’s intervention. It will have its
own police force (which it had any way since 2006) but also its own
National Guard to give people a sense of security against Sunni
terrorists, Shi‘i militias and Iranian intervention, for example through
the Quds Force. Indeed, in September 2014, very soon after he
became prime minister, Abadi recognized the value of this idea.
When he met with shaykhs from some 40 Sunni tribes of Anbar,
including from the Dulaym, Shammar, ‘Anza, Jubbur, ‘Aqaydat
(‘Uqaydat) and al-Hamdan, he announced the decision to establish
al-Haras al-Watani (National or Patriotic Guard) also called al-jaysh
al-jadid (The New Army) that will “replace” the existing army in the
Sunni provinces. It was meant to include between 120,000 and
200,000 fighters and recruitment was to begin in the Ninneweh
(Mosul) Province. The government believed that “forming the NG
Forces will solve most present problems … will establish long-term

32 See for example about the brutal arrest of parliament member Ahmad al-Alwani, “Iraq MP
Ahmed al-Alwani arrested in deadly Ramadi raid”, BBC, December 28, 2013,

33 Miroslav Zafirov, UNAMI, e-mail communication, September 9. 2016.
security in Iraq”. Due to political gridlocks, however, Abadi’s good intentions, though, remained unfulfilled. In addition, the Sunnis expect to have a real say in Baghdad regarding the wider national Iraqi policies. It will be remembered that after Maliki became a second-term prime minister in 2010 he did not keep his commitment to share power with Allawi’s largest Sunni block.

It needs to be emphasized that the wish for autonomy is new to the Sunnis. Until around 2009-2010 they still believed that they would be able to turn the tables on the Shi‘is and therefore they rejected any ideas of autonomy. Gradually the hope that a Sunni-controlled Syria would come to their aid dissipated and even the 2014 military success of ISIS did not revive it. With no hope for a Sunni-dominated Iraq most Sunnis changed their attitude towards autonomy. Last but not least, the Sunnis expect all the laws imposing de-Ba‘thification to be changed in a way that Sunni ex-Ba‘th members who have no criminal record will be free to join politics and government service with no restrictions, something that the Shi‘i-dominated government in Baghdad has already done for Shi‘i ex-Ba‘th.

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34 Al-‘Arab al-Jadid (The New Arab) and France Press, September 14, 2014, https://www.alaraby.co.uk/politics/2014/9/14/%D8%A7%D9%84%D8%B9%D8%B1%D8%A7%D9%82-%D8%A8%AA%D8%B4%D9%83%D9%8A%D9%84-%D8%A7%D9%84%D8%AD%D8%B1%D8%B3-%D8%A7%D9%84%D8%B7%D9%86%D9%8A-
On September 8, 2014, following the loss of Mosul and the threat to Baghdad, the Iraqi Parliament approved of Haydar al-Abadi as the new PM to replace Nuri al-Maliki. Soon afterward Abadi asked the UN Assistance Mission for Iraq (UNAMI) \(^{36}\) to assist him in studying the positions of all sides and working out a plan that could serve as confidence-building\(^ {37}\). After an extensive dialogue with the Sunni factions, including with senior commanders of two Salafi-Jihadi insurgent groups (the Islamic Army and the Mujahidin Army), UNAMI came to Abadi with a proposal to adopt a three-fold legislative act. One law suggested was an amendment of the Justice and Accountability (the De-Ba’thification) Law which would lower the plank for those falling under the restriction of existing rules. The second was a National Guard Law, designed to create a basis for including Sunni forces within the Security apparatus and therefore for legitimizing their presence on the ground across the Sunni provinces. Finally: UNAMI suggested an Amnesty Law, related to the National Guard Law, that will pave the way for granting immunity to Sunni insurgents not related to ISIS or AQI. The latter law could also be stretched somewhat to allow the recruitment to the National Guard of ex-insurgents. If adopted, those proposed laws could have changed the course of events in Iraq in 2015-2016 because they held a promise of meaningful Sunni participation in fighting IS and following it better chances for national reconciliation. The three laws became part of the government of Iraq (GOI) program for national

\(^{36}\) UNAMI is a political mission established by the 2003 UN Security Council Resolution 1500 at the request of the Iraqi Governing Council. It has been on the ground ever since, with its role greatly expanded in 2007 with the passage of UNSC Resolution 1770. UNAMI’s mandate includes advancing inclusive, political dialogue and national reconciliation, assisting in the electoral process and in the planning for a national census, facilitating regional dialogue between Iraq and its neighbours, and promoting the protection of human rights and judicial and legal reform. See for example [http://www.uniraq.org/index.php?option=com_k2&view=item&layout=item&id=943&Itemid=637&lang=en](http://www.uniraq.org/index.php?option=com_k2&view=item&layout=item&id=943&Itemid=637&lang=en), accessed August 20, 2016.

\(^{37}\) The following information is based on interviews and e-mail exchanges 2015-2016 with the Bulgarian diplomat Miroslav Zafirov who spent 2014 and 2015 in Iraq. He discussed those issues with most parties, including senior members of the Sunni insurgency who admitted ties with IS.
reconciliation and they were supported not only by the UN Baghdad office and the US but also by Grand Ayatollah Ali al-Sistani. The Iranians objected to it because it could jeopardize their influence in Baghdad. Yet, they were reluctant to challenge Sistani directly. For their part, the Sunni insurgents and other Sunnis of the hinterland with whom UNAMI spoke were deeply mistrustful of the GOI and did not even trust the Sunni politicians in Baghdad, but they trusted UNAMI. They did not reject the legislative confidence building as presented to them. This UNAMI, apparently correctly, understood as consent. The prospects for a meaningful improvement looked good.

But it was not to be. Between October 2014 and the spring of 2015 Abadi failed in his attempts to pass the three laws through parliament. Iran acted against him through its Iraqi supporters. With the exception of his own Da’wa Party Abadi met with strong opposition from almost all the other Shi‘i parties. The Badr Brigade, under the command of Hadi al-‘Amiri, ‘Asaib Ahl al-Haqq, Iraqi Hezbollah, ISCI, led by ‘Ammar Hakim, all objected, each for its own reasons and as part of their relations with Iran. Even Kutlat al-Ahrar (the Liberal Bloc), Muqtada al-Sadr’s political party (28 members of parliament) that is relatively independent of Iran and was supportive of Abadi’s anti-corruption campaign, was against the laws. To top it all, even the Sunni Iraqi Islamic Party (IIP, previously: The Muslim Brothers) opposed it. The latter were wary of competition from the pardoned and rehabilitated Sunnis. Abadi lost height when as part of his anti-corruption campaign he was unable to impose his government reform, designed to replace politicians with professionals. The falling world oil prices in the second half of 2014 (that continued at least until the Fall of 2016), precisely when he came into office, further complicated Abadi’s position as he was unable to buy support as did his predecessor. In his difficult hour he decided to escape forward: he launched an operation to liberate Ramadi from IS control in the hope that this would
send the militias away from Baghdad and if successful would save his sagging prestige. Between July 2015 and late February 2016 the Iraqi military with the support of the Shi’i militias (called “The Popular Mobilization Forces”, PMF, *al-hashad al-sha‘bi*) but also the US Airforce very slowly and laboriously and at a high cost liberated Ramadi. Then came Falluja. There is no evidence that either costly victory helped Abadi’s prestige and authority. By then the UNAMI team that initiated the legislative confidence building measures left Baghdad. For whatever reason, Ján Kubiš of Slovakia, who was appointed by the Secretary-General Ban Ki-moon as his Special Representative for Iraq and head of UNAMI in February 2015 and his team never tried to revive the plan. Maybe the reason was that he believed that Abadi was unable to re-visit the UNAMI’s plan.

By the fall of 2016 Abadi is walking on eggs: his leadership is challenged by many and he has lost much in public opinion because he failed in his anti-corruption initiative. Mass anti-corruption protests at Baghdad’s Liberation Square led often by Muqtada’s movement, while ostensibly meant to support, in fact humiliated him. Thus, for example, on February 26, 2016, Sadr led a million-man demonstration. "Abadi must carry out grassroots reform," Sadr said in front of the protesters. "Raise your voice and shout so the corrupt get scared of you." On the March 18 Sadr’s followers began a sit-in outside the Green Zone, housing government offices and the parliament. He called the Green Zone "a bastion of support for corruption". On March 27 he himself walked into the Green Zone to begin a sit-in, urging followers to stay outside and remain peaceful. The most humiliating scene for Abadi was when the Iraqi Army
general in charge of security at the Green Zone kissed Sadr’s hand as he allowed him to enter.  

Frustratingly Abadi became a prisoner of the same Popular Mobilization Force (PMF, \textit{al-hashad al-sha’bi}) militias which he reluctantly helped to a position of great power. The June 30, 2016 occupation of the Green Zone by Muqtada’s supporters, the partial sacking of the seat of parliament and the fact that he needed Interior Minister Muhammad Ghabban, a member of the radical pro-Iranian militia Badr Brigade, to bring back order into town, did not help him (Ghabban resigned soon after this security fiasco but he was replaced with another Badr member).

Mosul will be liberated probably sometime in very late 2016 or early 2017, but to avoid civilian casualties the Iraqi military, the Kurds and the US Airforce are moving slowly and carefully. At the same time IS is

\begin{footnotesize}
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  \item[38] https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Muqtada_al-Sadr, accessed September 1, 2016.
  \item[39] Officially speaking the PMF were formed by the Iraqi government on 15 June 2014 after Ayatollah ‘Ali al-Sistani’s \textit{fatwa} on "Sufficiency Jihad" on 13 June. According to the de-facto head of the PMF, Badr Brigade commander Hadi al-Amiri the force was in fact formed several months earlier. It encompasses some forty different Shi’i militia groups, some already existing ones, like the Badr Brigade the Peace Companies (\textit{saraya al-salam}), formerly part of the Mahdi Army, \textit{Kata’ib Hizb Allah}, \textit{‘Asa’ib Ahl al-Haq}, and many new ones, like \textit{Kata’ib Sayyid al-Shuhada} (The Lord of Martyrs) and \textit{Kata’ib al-Imam Ali}. All were grouped within the umbrella organization formally under the control of the Ministry of Interior Popular Mobilization Units directorate. The PMF is believed to be under Iranian control. Officially the chairman of the Popular Mobilization Committee in the Iraqi government is Falih al-Fayyadh, who is also Abadi’s National Security Adviser but in reality its political boss is al-Amiri, who coordinates plans with \textit{Qais al-Khaz’ali}, commander of ‘Asa’ib Ahl al-Haq, and it is led on the battlefields by Kata’ib Hezbollah chief Jamal Ja’far Muhammad, also known as \textit{Abu Mahdi al-Muhandis}. According to Iraqi sources, as well as to \textit{Al-Sharq Al-Awsat}, the different militias rely on their own chain of command, and rarely work together or follow regular Iraqi Army’s orders. The PMF is See for example, "Popular Mobilization Forces" in Wikipedia, https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Popular_Mobilization_Forces. Also “Mosul Will be Liberated. But What Comes Then?” Middle East Briefing August 22, 2016, http://mebriefing.com/?p=2473, accessed August 22, 2016.
  \end{itemize}
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successfully carrying out massive terrorist attacks in Baghdad. All this represents a heavy burden on Abadi’s shoulders. The Shi’i factions and parties are unwilling to allow the Sunnis any advantages, certainly not as long as IS still controls Mosul. Growing internal rifts within each of the Shi’i and Sunni camps are making a national consensus even more difficult to achieve than before. Without massive international support Abadi will not risk another Shi’i-Sunni trust-building initiative. In the mean-time the Americans are reluctant to arm directly the small Sunni militias that are already fighting alongside the Iraqi military because Baghdad demands that every single round will come through the central government. All this is making it very difficult to add new tribes and tribal splinters to the Sunni tribal fighting force that is already working with Baghdad. As long as there is no sufficient such force, ISIS can convincingly tell the one million citizens of Mosul that a defeat to the government forces will mean a massacre of Sunni civilians at the hands of the Iraqi military and even more so the unruly Shi’i armed militias and the Iranian Quds Force. The paradox is that now is the best time to launch such an initiative. First, because many Sunnis need assurances before they are joining the battle against IS. Secondly: because the Sunni community is more exhausted than their Shi’i counterparts. Fatigue usually moderates political positions.

The Sunni Tribes:

At the moment most Sunni tribes – or most members of the Sunni tribes - are not supporting any side in the civil war: they are waiting in the wings to see what Baghdad can offer them if at all. Their experience from the

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days of the Awakening has taught them that joining the fray on Baghdad's side guarantees nothing. They fear Iran, they don't trust Baghdad, and they don't trust Washington, DC. A very typical explanation for the neutrality of most tribes was given by Sheikh ‘Abd Allah al-'Issawi to the BBC journalist. In June 2015 the shaykh said that most of Anbar's Sunni tribes were remaining on the sidelines of the fight against IS - some because they support the extremists, but others because they remember the past. "The first group believe in the Daesh doctrines," he said. "The second group hate Daesh, but they saw what happened to the tribes who fought al-Qaeda between 2006 and 2008. Afterwards the government turned against them and arrested them. Most have been killed or jailed." This is largely exaggerated, but many Sunni shaykhs were indeed arrested or chased out of Iraq. Abd al-Aziz al-Ta’i, a criminal law professor at Baghdad’s Al Rasheed University College, also saw “the social injustice that isolated many Sunni tribes in Syria and Iraq” as a prime reason that “left them susceptible to Daesh (ISIS)”. Shaykh Saleh al-Jughaifi from Haditha whose tribe, the Jughaifa, had joined the government in fighting ISIS, explained that the post-war civil US administration and subsequent Shia-dominated Iraqi governments “isolated Sunni tribes, designated us enemies and stripped us of all benefits, like social status and posts in the government, army and police… As a result, many tribesmen joined Daesh to get revenge from the state”. Thus, for example, members of the Albu Ajeel (‘Ajil) tribe in Iraq’s Salah al-Din (Tikrit) province threw their lot immediately behind Islamic State (ISIS) who invaded and captured their north-central area in June 2014. On the other hand, two months later, his al-Jughaifa tribe

in Anbar province formed an armed force that has since been resisting ISIS\textsuperscript{42}.

This report was incorrect when it came to the Sahwa years (2007-2009) but quite accurate when it comes to the Iraqi government in later years\textsuperscript{43}. Both American administrations looked the other way. And still, there is no alternative to American guarantees. A few tribal units have already become part of the ISIS forces while others, in some cases even belonging to the same tribe, have been supporting Baghdad and its American and Iranians allies. An excellent analysis of the considerations of the tribes and the internal divisions within some of them is exposing the complexity of tribal allegiances\textsuperscript{44}. Thus, for example, Albu ‘Ajil (‘Ujayl) supported IS in 2014 but after their area near Tikrit was liberated they reached a ceasefire with the Shi’i Badr Brigade and apparently remained neutral. By 2015-2016 albu Jurayf and albu ‘Issa have been split between the government and ISIS, while albu Fahd, albu ‘Alwan and the Jubbur have been mostly supporting the government. The Jubbur of Salah al-Din and Ninneweh (Mosul) even collaborated with the Shi’i Hashad al-Sha’bi (Popular Mobilization, PM). Albu Nimr especially of Hit have been all-out in support of the government already in 2005 and into

\textsuperscript{42} Jamal J. Halaby, “Sunni tribes in Iraq and Syria split over ISIS” \textit{The Arab Weekly}, ibid.

\textsuperscript{43} See the analysis of Mohsen Sazegara, one of the founders of Iran’s Revolutionary Guards who is now a U.S.-based dissident. He reported that PM Maliki "squandered the inheritance of the Sahwa, the U.S.-funded militia drawn from among the country’s Sunni Muslim tribes". Interview with Samia Nakhoul, “Islamic State carves jihadist hub in heart of Middle East”, \textit{Reuters}, Aug 12, 2014, \texttt{http://www.reuters.com/article/us-iraq-security-mideast-insight-idUSKBN0GC1FB20140813} accessed Sept. 6, 2016.

\textsuperscript{44} Robert Tollast, “The Civil Wars of Iraq’s Sunni Tribes: Fault Lines Within 8 Tribes and Sub-Tribes, 2003-20016”, \textit{Afkar Iraqiyya (Iraqi Thoughts)}, March 28, 2016, \texttt{http://1001iraqithoughts.com/2016/03/28/the-civil-wars-of-iraqs-sunni-tribes-fault-lines-within-8-sunni-tribes-and-sub-tribes-2003-2016/}
2016. Like most of those tribes or tribal units that are supporting
the government albu Nimr complained bitterly that, in their difficult hour,
when they were defending the city of Hit against ISIS the government
offered them no support and Hit was lost with dire consequences to the
tribe. The ultimate considerations of the tribes though were more
profound. Following the 2009 near-complete defeat of AQI the US no
longer protected the interests of the tribes and Maliki’s government
began to target them. At the same time AQI, later ISIS, continued to
assassinate Sahwa (Awakening) tribal shaykhs and the tribes were
captured between Baghdad and AQI. By 2014 a few tribes, like Albu Nimr
and the small albu Risha who had been already fully committed to
working with the government had already crossed the Rubicon. Other
tribes and tribal units chose sides according to local calculations. ISIS
offered money, weapons and revenge against Shi’i Baghdad, but they
also demonstrated that they were capable of mass-murder. As happened
with Albu Risha tribe in 2006, however, excessive ISIS violence
sometimes achieved the opposite results when a tribe chose the side of
the government, even the Iranian-controlled militias as response to
murder, kidnappings and threats.45

45 See for example the case of the mayor of Huwayja, Sabhan Khalif ‘Ali al-
Jubburi who, by the spring of 2015, came under threat from ISIS. He then joined
forces with pro government Popular Mobilization Units, noting: “One day Iran
was our enemy, but now Iran is helping us fight our enemy.” Robert Tollast, “The
Civil Wars of Iraq’s Sunni Tribes: Fault Lines Within 8 Tribes and Sub-Tribes,
2003-2016”, Afkar Iraqiyya (Iraqi Thoughts), Mar 28, 2016,
http://1001iraqithoughts.com/2016/03/28/the-civil-wars-of-iraqs-sunni-tribes-
fault-lines-within-8-sunni-tribes-and-sub-tribes-2003-2016/ accessed Sept. 5,
2016.
The very large Shammar Jarba tribal federation straddling the northern part of the Iraqi-Syrian border, who have substantial presence in Mosul, is mostly still sitting on the fence, but parts of it are already committed: in Syria, 3000 of their fighters are already working with the Syrian Kurdish forces (YPG) against Isis north of Raqqa. In the Mosul area, despite a brewing territorial conflict with the Peshmerga of Barazani’s KDP, following a 2014 ISIS attempt on his life and the destruction of his home in al-Rabi’ah on the Syrian border, Shaykh Khalid al-Shammari has been recruiting fighters against the extremists. However, like the albu Nimr in Hit he, too, complains on lack of support from Baghdad. The same was reported in May, 2015, by Shaykh Wisam Hardan, who has lost many of his ‘Issawi tribesmen because of his ties to Baghdad. He explained that his Sahwa remnants continued to fight in Anbar, but did not receive arms, money or supplies for 15 months. “The government”, he complained, “destroyed the Sahwa.” 46 It seems that the lesson was learned in some cases: in November 2014, a few weeks after Hit was lost, with American air support, albu Nimr received weapons and collaborated with the Iraqi army and even with the Shi’i Popular Mobilization, in the derive to liberate the city.47

A survey of the available information shows that fighting alongside ISIS in the center-north were, in 2015, ‘Aqaydat (‘Uqaydat) and ‘Anza, and parts of the tribes of al-Afadila, Albu-‘Asaf, al-Tayy, al-Mushahada, al-’Ubayd, albu Nasir (Saddam’s tribe), a northern branch of al-Jaghaifa, Albu Sha’ban. Some tribes of al-Anbar in the west-north-west too joined


ISIS, like al-Jumaila, albu Assaf, albu Bali, albu Ali al-Jasim Kartan, al-Sab'awiyan, al-Lhaib (Luhayb), al-Haddiyyin. Even elements from Albu Mahal, on the Syrian border, a tribe most of which is fighting against ISIS, joined its ranks. Where there were serious old rivalries between tribes, usually one joined the government and the other joined ISIS, like the case in the Khalidiya and Jazirat Ramadi areas, where albu Bali is supporting ISIS and albu Fahd is supporting the government.

Fighting against ISIS in 2015-16 is, as mentioned above, a part of the Shammar Jarba in the north. In Anbar Albu 'Issa in Fallujah, albu Risha of Ramadi, Albu Fahad in East Ramadi, a section of al-Jughayfa in Haditha, Albu 'Alwan in Ramadi, albu Fahd, albu Dhiyab, al-'Ubayd (of Anbar, not the larger Qabila), al-'Isa, albu 'Ali and part of Albu Mahal in Al-Qaim. Albu Nimr in Hit paid very dearly for their support of Baghdad: between July and October 2014 more than 500 of their people (mostly men, but also a few women and children) were executed by ISIS. The largest Arab tribes in the Mosul area of Ninneveh most of which remained neutral by the Summer of 2016 are reportedly the Tayy, Shammar and Jubbur (Jabour). These tribes will be essential in the fight against ISIS. Other tribes known to be neutral are al-'Assaf, al-Jabir, al-Mar'i, parts of al-Jumaila and part of albu 'Issa, and some tribes of the al-Qaim area on the Syrian border. Sheikh Ziyad al-Suleiman, a leader of the Albu Assaf, explained his position: “The Hashad (PM) and ISIS are two sides of the same coin. They both loot and burn Sunni homes, kill our young men and our leaders”.

So far anywhere between 5-10,000 Sunni tribal fighters have joined the Iraqi military and 17,000 Sunni policemen

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joined the force in the Sunni areas.\textsuperscript{50} They fought in Falluja and will participate in the liberation of Mosul, but this is not enough.

An important step made by Prime Minister Haydar al-Abbadi was the early 2015 appointment of the Sunni Major General Najim al-Jubburi (Jabouri) as Commander of the Mosul (or Ninneweh) Operations Command.\textsuperscript{51} Jubburi is an experienced fighter and an excellent field commander who served as a Brigadier-General under Saddam in the

\begin{footnotesize}
\textsuperscript{50} Information on most tribes in electronic mail exchanges, mainly August 26, 2016, with Dr. Sterling Jensen, an American scholar who spent a few years in Iraq between 2006 and 2011 and who is keeping in close touch with Iraqi tribal shaykhs. For more information on individual tribes see James Kitfield, “The battle for Mosul has already begun, but what matters is the day after” Yahoo News, August 8, 2016, \url{https://www.yahoo.com/news/battle-mosul-already-begun-matters-00000323.html}, accessed August 29, 2016. The Wikipedia (“Popular Mobilization Forces”, ibid.) figure of 40,000 Sunni tribal fighters is highly exaggerated. For tribal shaykhs, mainly from the Jumayla, pledging allegiance to ISIS in Falluja see Al Jazeera Staff, “Sunni tribes in Iraq's Anbar province pledge support to ISIL”, al-Jazeera, June 4, 2015, \url{http://america.aljazeera.com/articles/2015/6/4/sunni-tribes-in-anbar-iraq-pledge-support-to-isil.html}. On the establishment of Majlis al-'asha'ir al-Muntafidha (The Council of Rising Tribes) by the primary shaykh of the 'Ubayd Wasfi al-'Asi see “Al-Iraq: tashkil majlis 'asha'ir muntafidha”, Al-'Alam, August 29, 2014, \url{http://www.alalam.ir/news/1627586}; Shaykh Anwar al-'Asi, the Emir of all the 'Ubayd, refused to swear allegiance to ISIS and they burned his home (west of Kirkuk) and kidnapped many from his family and tribe, “Iraq: Daesh kidnapped 20 people from a Sunni village” (in Arabic), Al-Arabiya, Sept. 11, 2014, \url{http://www.alarabiya.net/ar/arab-and-world/iraq/2014/09/11/%D8%A7%D9%84%D8%B9%D8%B1%D8%A7%D9%82-%D8%AF%D8%A7%D8%B9%D8%B4-%D9%8A%D8%AA%D8%B7%D9%81-20-%D8%B4%D8%AE%D8%B5%D9%87-%D9%85%D9%86-%D9%82%D8%B1%D9%8A%D9%84-%D8%B3%D9%86%D9%8A%D8%A9.html}; accessed Sept. 5, 2016. See also

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Iraqi Air Defense. Following the Ba'th regime demise he became Mayor of Tel Afar in the north of Iraq, working with then Brigade Commander Colonel Sean MacFarland (1 Armored Division) who was in Tel Afar from January to June 2006, before going to Ramadi. Now a Lt. General, he became (September 2015-September 2016) commander of the international coalition forces against ISIS in Iraq and Syria. Gen. Najim Jubburi was eventually whisked out of Iraq to the US with his family as a result of credible threats against him and his family coming from both Sunni and Shi'i diehards. In addition to his military expertise his presence is designed to convince the Sunni citizens of Mosul that, when liberated by the Iraqi armed forces, they will be safe. Potentially he can recruit a large part of his al-Jubbur tribe, so-far mostly uninvolved. He worked hand-in-glove with General MacFarland, who knows the Iraqi tribal system well as he was the same officer who, in September 2006, initiated the military cooperation with albu Risha in Ramadi, which launched the Sahwa52.

So far, however, even though PM Abadi and a few other Shi'i politicians are in favor of it, Baghdad as a collective political entity is reluctant to accept any of the Sunni demands or the three laws suggested by UNAMI. The main opposition is coming from the pro-Iranian militias and parties. Apparently, Iran is not interested in any real Iraqi rapprochement because it will immediately diminish the Iranian influence inside Iraq. The tragedy is that even Muqtada al-Sadr's militia Saraya al-Salam and political party Kutlat Al-Ahrar (or Liberal Bloc) are against the UNAMI-recommended trust-building laws.

What Can Be Done?

Military Support, Refugees, Territorial and Ethno-Sectarian Must-Dos:

In the first place, even before the liberation of Mosul, the Iraqi government and the American commanders and diplomats must internalize two lessons: the fall of Hit, 90 miles north-west of Baghdad in October 2014, and the lessons of the liberation of Falluja. Hit fell despite the fact that its defenders, albu Nimr, fought well and kept ISIS at bay for weeks. However, they received no help from Baghdad or the US in logistics, weapons, ammunition and supplies, let alone air-to-ground support. Many pro-government tribes suffer of the same impediment. This changed in some cases but not enough. Jordan, too can help. According to some reports the Shi‘i PMF with the help of the federal police massacred there some 1,000 Sunni civilians. In Mosul such atrocities may mushroom to catastrophic proportions. Ergo, the Shi‘i militias must be kept out of the fighting and holding alike.

Secondly, even before the battle of Mosul, according to the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR), by the end of 2015 Iraq's unending conflicts had driven 4.4 million (or 3.4 million according to other sources) people from their homes, and a further half a million into exile representing at least 10% of the total population. Those who need help


most urgently are the new refugees (2014-) from the Yezidi community (mostly in Kurdistan), and hundreds of thousands Sunni Arab refugees from Diyala, Tikrit, Falluja and Ramadi. Some estimate that up to one million fled the war areas in the hinterland of Mosul alone, and at least one million more are expected to be displaced following the liberation of Mosul. All the liberated cities were destroyed during the fighting and in some cases following the liberation.⁵⁵

In addition to the obvious humanitarian aspect there is also a weighty political consideration. The vast majority of the displaced Iraqi persons who haven’t yet found a permanent home and livelihood are Sunnis Arabs. If they will not be re-settled soon after ISIS is pushed out of Iraq the Sunni community will boil again. Mosul is the heart of Sunni Iraq. This means that, following its liberation, Mosul and its hinterland (at least Ninneveh Province) must be placed under a strong Sunni figure and all its security (military and police), and reconstruction must be under his authority. Sunni-on-Sunni tribal feuds will be a major problem. This Iraqi general will be also responsible for the transition back to civilian governance and a return to the rule of law over a one-year period. With the help of the US he will also have to push back on Kurdish and the Iranian-

backed militias’ ambitions in the Mosul area. He must be provided with the financial resources to re-build the city and revive its economy. On a smaller scale the same must happen also in Tikrit (Salah al-Din), Falluja and Ramadi (Al-Anbar). One person who is suitable for the job is General Najam al-Jubburi, himself born and raised in Mosul. If done properly and quickly this will be the best trust-building approach. It will have a good chance of buying the refugees’ gratitude, then trust and they may see in it a new beginning. The resources will have to come mostly from the international community because Iraq’s treasury is depleted due to corruption and low oil prices. Under no circumstances should Baghdad have access to those funds: its corruption is beyond imagination and hardly anything will reach Mosul. The humanitarian and reconstruction support must be handled by the UN and the governors of Ninneveh, Anbar and Salah al-Din independently. If one person can be made the Czar of Reconstruction in all three provinces this will help efficiency. At the same time, new UNAMI officials will have to arrive in Baghdad and begin the arduous work of mediation between the communities.

What Can be Done on the Diplomatic Level?

The Mediators: Unless there is an unexpected major strategic shift in the Iraq-Syria complex, the present political deadlocks in Iraq described above are very likely to persist for a long time. The only chance of breaking the ice and resolving at least some of the present conflicts lies in the choice of mediators and in the backing that they will receive from the superpowers: the US, Russia, Britain

and the EU, together with the UN. Even if the mediators will be the most suitable for the job, and even if they receive meaningful support from the international community, due to the almost non-existence of effective governance, success may elude them, but they will have a chance. Any mediator will have to be reasonably-well acquainted with Iraqi society and politics. He or she will have to know how to be tough, and to be able to tell between the parties’ negotiating positions and their core interests. Someone who can speak Arabic will always have a better chance. Finally, any negotiator will have to be persistent, never to give up, willing to accept multiple crises and ends-of-process situations and doggedly continue. Frustrations and deep disappointments will be an unavoidable part of the process. If mediation fails again a new civil war will break up. It will look differently from the previous ones (2003-2009, 2012-2016) but it will be just as devastating.

How then can the international community support a Sunni-Shi’i dialogue and, eventually, a rapprochement? Here, the only body that can have any chance at all of bridging the gaps is the UN, with American pressure behind the scenes. Through its mediation it should try first of all to get parliament to approve of the three trust-building laws suggested by UNAMI in 2014. Certain aspects of the laws may be easier to agree upon today than in 2014. For example, the 5-10,000 strong Sunni Popular Mobilization Force fighting already alongside the Iraqi military can be integrated into a Sunni National Guard in the same way that some Shi’i Popular Mobilization militias can be joined together and molded into a disciplined National Guard in southern provinces. UNAMI will have little choice but also to get involved in Sunni-Sunni and Shi’i-Shi’i
negotiations so that a consensus can be developed within each community. This, too, is a tall order.

The next stage may be to create a joint negotiating body, or a consultative body (majlis shura) involving the most influential Sunni and Shi‘i politicians, militia commanders, moderate clerics and tribal shaykhs, with the open support of Grand Ayatollah Ali al-Sistani who will send a senior representative. Among the Sunni leaders Ayad al-Allawi still holds the respect of many, and in the Sunni tribal hinterland Shaykh Abd Allah Yawer al-Shammari is very influential among the Shammar Jarba, while Shaykhs Na‘im and Bilal al-Ka‘ud (Ga‘ud) is very respected among Albu Nimr, being one of the largest tribes of the Dulaym super-federation. Shaykh Anwar al-‘Asi al-‘Ubaydi, the Emir of the ‘Ubayd, is very influential in his tribe and like the others mentioned here loyal to the government. Shaykh Wasfi al-‘Asi, too, wields great influence in the ‘Ubayd. Shaykh Wisam Hardan al-‘Issawi has a strong position in the albu ‘Issa. Shaykh Salih al-Jughayfi in Haditha and Shykh Rafi‘ al-Fahdawi of albu Fahd (Anbar) too are very respected. Shaykh Ali Hatem al-Sulayman, the former Emir (supreme shaykh) of the Dulaim, and his brother, Abd al-Razzaq Hatem al-Suleiman, the present Emir, are mostly symbolic figures, but as seals of legitimacy they can help. Today the two are keeping open channels both with the government, UNAMI and the insurgents.

Finally: even though this Consultative Majlis will discuss Sunni-Shi‘i issues, in addition to the UN as neutral advisers, the participation of two or three experienced Kurdish politicians, like Barham Salih, former PM of the KRG will be of value. If it can be assembled, when convened by the UN this un-elected body will be independent and will try to work out a vision for Iraq which it will then bring to parliament for discussion and serve as a lobby for advancing the ideas it put forward. This will be a time-consuming and highly
frustrating process, and therefore it should be embarked upon as
soon as possible, maybe now. While Sistani will probably support
such a majlis, the Iranians will oppose it. The only way to persuade
them to drop at least their open opposition is a fatwa from Sistani.
The Iranians are usually reluctant to oppose him openly.

If all fails and a common vision for Sunnis and Shi’is is emerging but it
cannot pass parliament, there is the possibility of a referendum as the
last resort. If no common vision receives sufficient support on both sides,
there are two possible scenarios. According to the optimistic one, held
by many Shi’i politicians and apparently by Iran as well, once Mosul is
liberated and ISIS troops are being pushed out of Iraq into the Syrian
desert, the Sunnis will simply have no option but to recognize Shi’i
supremacy and to try to fit into the Shi’i hegemonic system. In other
words, they will recognize their complete defeat and learn to live with it.
The other possibility is, and I consider it as more likely, that once the
Americans and Europeans leave and once the Iranians, too, satisfied
with their political-strategic hold over Baghdad, will withdraw most of their
troops in Iraq, Baghdad will be left alone to face vicious guerilla warfare
from the Iraqi and Syrian deserts. This will no longer be designed to
conquer lands and establish again a caliphate, at least not as an
immediate goal. Rather, the strategy will be to harass the Shi’i population
and the holy cities and turn people’s lives into hell. This was how AQI
operated between 2003 and 2009 and this is how it resumed its activities
even before it conquered Mosul. In other words: ISIS will transform
again from a lethal butterfly into a deadly worm. They will receive support
from the Sunnis of Syria, from Saudi Arabia and the emirates, as all of
them are beholding with great concern the tightening Iranian stranglehold
over Iraq. There are many additional scenarios but in my view the

57 This position is held also by some well-informed scholars. See for example, Ronen Zeidel,
optimal one is keeping the Iraqi state intact while de-centralizing power to a significant extent. The Damocles sword Shi'i-hegemonic Baghdad will always have hanging over the autonomous zones will not be a military one. Rather, it will be Iraq's oil revenues. Sharing them equitably with all the provinces is the price Baghdad will have to pay for keeping Iraq together. So far, at least, this is a vision in common to all the disparate Shi'i factions.

END