Research Paper

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Iraq After the Fall of ISIS: The Struggle for the State

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Contents

Summary

- The defeat of ISIS's 'caliphate' project in Iraq, together with the national and provincial elections due in 2018, presents a renewed opportunity to halt the cycle of failure and repair that has undermined efforts to assert national cohesion and win citizens' confidence in government institutions since 2003. The last opportunity to do so emerged in 2008–10, only for temporary success to disintegrate by 2014, when ISIS rapidly seized control of a third of Iraq's territory.

- Most significant to this new round of state reinforcement is likely to be the breakdown of the monolithic ethno-sectarian blocs that have characterized previous government-formation cycles. With Iraq's Shia, Kurdish and Sunni leaders now less able to rally or unify their constituents based principally on identity politics, intra-community rivalries will be seen to define the next stage of state reinforcement.

- The current mood in Iraq is generally one of cautious optimism. Although Iraqis are now more supportive of state institutions, they are also concerned that the root causes that led to the rise of ISIS have not been adequately addressed. As such, many are placing a new emphasis not only on defeating ISIS, but also on countering corruption through effective state-building and better governance. This common cause is evident in the breadth and endurance of the reformist, cross-sectoral protest movement.

- Iraq's Kurdish leaders are now largely focused on securing influence and legitimacy within the Kurdistan Region, rather than in forging a stronger Iraqi state, while the Sunnis – in the absence of a long-established or well-developed political party to take forward their interests – still have little leverage in Baghdad and look for more local solutions.

- The country's Shia power-brokers will thus continue to dominate after 2018, but the three main political actors have appreciably different visions of statehood. Former premier Nouri al-Maliki – closely associated with the Popular Mobilization Forces – presents himself as the 'strongman' who is needed to deliver a strong state; his long-time rival, the populist cleric Muqtada al-Sadr, is using the protest movement to push for strong institutions; while incumbent prime minister Haider al-Abadi, frequently embroiled in political manoeuvring between and against these two, has invested significant effort and reputational capital in strengthening the state security sector. All will claim credit for the liberation of Mosul from ISIS.

- It is unlikely that one camp will win outright control in 2018. The struggle for dominance of the key ministries, and the future of the constitutionally mandated independent commissions, is thus likely to prove a key indicator of the prevailing power balance and direction of state reinforcement.

- The intra-Shia rivalry also has implications for the dynamics of the US–Iran relationship in Iraq. It is now unlikely that Tehran and Washington will see eye to eye as regards what is in Iraq's best interests. It can be expected that Iran will continue to support Maliki and his allies, as in previous election cycles, whereas the US will favour Abadi and others who want to mitigate Iranian influence in Iraqi affairs.

1. Introduction

The aim of the US-led invasion of Iraq in 2003 was to bring about regime change – i.e. to remove the administration of Saddam Hussein – but not to change the state *per se*. As the then National Security Advisor, Condoleezza Rice, put it: 'You would be able to bring new leadership but … we were going to keep the body in place.'[1] Instead, however, the 'body' swiftly collapsed, and the US leadership found itself mired in the far more complex mission of state-building. And although it was the US intervention that brought about the destruction of the state, it is Iraq's leaders who, over almost a decade-and-a-half, have subsequently been unable to rebuild a viable successor state when given the opportunity to do so.

In the vacuum after Saddam Hussein's removal from power, the US and its Iraqi allies decided to replace the 1920 British-built centralized and unitary state with a decentralized federal system. The new state – which in large part reflected a compromise between Iraq's Shia and Kurdish leadership, with very little accommodation for the Sunnis (many of whom initially rejected the process) – has since been unable to take hold, instead going through repeated cycles of failure and repair.

The most recent failure came in 2014, as ISIS took over a third of the country's territory, including the second largest city, Mosul. That relatively few ISIS fighters were able to defeat the US-built and -trained army in a matter of days is regarded by most Iraqis as a humiliation for the Iraqi state. In reality, however, ISIS was the latest in a string of non-state military actors – among them its precursors al-Qaeda in Iraq (AQI) and subsequently Islamic State of Iraq (ISI) – that have challenged the government's ability to secure Iraq's territory since the overthrow of Saddam Hussein.

The prospect of the eventual defeat of ISIS's 'caliphate' project, together with the provincial and federal elections due in 2018, presents a renewed chance to reinforce the Iraqi state. The last time such an opportunity for state-building emerged was in 2008, when ISI forces were defeated and forced underground (later to evolve into ISIS). With that military victory came a political solution that included the so-called Sunni Awakening and the Operation Knights Charge (Sawlat al-Fursan) campaign to oust all militias. Following the 2009 provincial and 2010 federal elections, the competition among various actors for control of Iraq's state institutions had the effect of undermining rather than reinforcing those institutions – one of the critical factors that led to the state's incapacity to resist the ascendant ISIS in 2014.

With the end of the ISIS state-building project in Iraq, this paper analyses the differences between the current situation and that of 2008–10 with regard to the reinforcement of state institutions – comprising the executive, legislative and judiciary branches of government, along with the security apparatus, the constitutionally mandated independent electoral, integrity and human rights commissions, and the central bank.

1 Gordan, M. (2004), 'The Strategy to Secure Iraq Did Not Foresee a 2nd War,' New York Times, 19 October 2004, http://www.nytimes.com/learning/students/pop/articles/19war.html (accessed 15 May 2017).

The disintegration of the unitary Iraqi state after 2003 has given rise to a perpetual struggle for power and the redefinition of the state, with rivalrous factions – in the form of non-state or social groupings – competing for control or influence in a complex power-balancing exercise.[2] Now, to add those factors that are known to have influenced previous cycles of state-reinforcement since 2003, there is a set of new variables in play. These include the absence of US occupying troops; the strengthened position of Iran in relation to other regional and international actors; the traumatic legacy of ISIS on the Iraqi psyche; and the influence of 'non-state' leaders such as former prime minister Nouri al-Maliki and Shia cleric Muqtada al-Sadr.[3]

Most significant to the process of government formation following the 2018 elections is likely to be the breakdown of the monolithic ethno-sectarian blocs that have dominated previous election cycles. As Iraq's Shia, Kurdish and Sunni leaders now find it difficult to rally or unify their constituents based principally on identity politics, intra-sect and intra-ethnic contestation will be seen to define the next stage of state reinforcement.

In particular, although political splits are not new to the majority Shia community, the current rivalry between former prime minister Nouri al-Maliki, the populist cleric Muqtada al-Sadr, and incumbent prime minister Haider al-Abadi is unprecedented in terms of its expected impact on government formation in 2018. There are two key arenas in which this intra-Shia contestation is currently most evident: the ongoing anti-government protests; and the emergence of the Popular Mobilization Forces (al-hashd al-shaabi, or PMF), an umbrella organization of some 60 predominantly Shia militias that fought alongside state forces against ISIS. In this context, the three main political actors have appreciably different visions of how state reinforcement should be achieved: Maliki presents himself as the 'strongman' who is needed to deliver a strong state; Sadr is using the cross-sectarian, reformist alliances of the mass protest movement to push for strong, technocrat-led institutions; while Abadi, although frequently embroiled in political manoeuvring between and against Maliki and Sadr, has latterly been winning power back to the state by focusing on the state security sector.

Rebuilding the Iraqi state after ISIS will not mean starting entirely from scratch, as after Saddam Hussein, because much of the institutional base is already in place. Following the 2018 elections, however, those actors who emerge in the most favourable position will have the scope – to the disadvantage of their political rivals – to launch a new process of state reinforcement, with the aim of strengthening Iraq's institutions and redefining the Iraqi nation in line with their own vision.

[2] Migdal, J. (2001), State in Society: Studying How States and Societies Transform and Constitute One Another, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, p. 23.

[3] Maliki and Sadr are considered non-state actors here because the power they exercise comes from outside state institutions. This is despite both having a role in the state. Maliki remained vice-president for much of the Abadi premiership, and Sadr's al-Ahrar party remained active in government. This exemplifies the blurred line between state and non-state in Iraq.

2. Intercommunity Contestation and the Building of a Weak State

Although it was the US-led intervention in 2003 that led to the collapse of the Iraqi state, it was Iraq's new political class that failed in the critical task of building a new state in the years immediately following the removal of Saddam Hussein. Simply put, the failure of state-building is a failure of that class.[4]

The key state-building years were 2003–06, at which time relatively monolithic blocs negotiated the new Iraq. The great 'dividing the pie' (*taqsim al-ka'ka*) process allocated state positions and resources along community lines. Under a new quota system (*muhassasa*), the leadership of each community looked to the country's ministries and state agencies to secure resources and power, with the inevitable result that the process of state-building was overshadowed by intercommunity rivalry.

The state that emerged was the product of a Shia–Kurdish compromise, with minimal accommodation for the Sunnis. Iraq's Shia and Kurds each had political parties that were able to mobilize effectively in the new state, whereas the Sunnis lacked strong political parties or institutions that could play a role in the negotiations – or otherwise largely rejected the state-building process. One consequence of the Sunnis' lack of faith in the reshaping of the state was a disinclination to participate in elections, as was seen at the polls in 2005. In the predominantly Sunni province of Anbar, for instance, voter turnout in the January parliamentary elections was just 1 per cent;[5] a similar pattern was evident in other Sunni jurisdictions.

In the new state, politics was based on identity, rather than region or ideology. And during the period of state-building in 2003–06, the Shia and Kurdish communities were each able to project a single voice on behalf of their respective camps. The key task for the Shia leadership was to use their weight of numbers to ensure command of the state through seizing control of the government and ensuring that the Shia identity was represented and empowered – at times above Iraqi identity.[6] As commented by Iraq's former ambassador to the US, Rend Rahim, in 2013:

> [T]he Shia demographic majority will forever remain a political majority … and the Sunnis will always be the political minority. The principle of equal citizenship and equal rights for all, irrespective of religion, race or gender, so often stated in the constitution, is terribly undermined by this interpretation of democracy.[7]

[4] Makiya, K. (2016), *The Rope: A Novel*, New York, NY: Pantheon Books.
[5] Wong, E. (2005), 'Turnout in the Iraqi Election Is Reported at 70 Percent', *New York Times*, 22 December 2005, http://www.nytimes.com/2005/12/22/world/middleeast/turnout-in-the-iraqi-election-is-reported-at-70-percent.html (accessed 15 May 2017).
[6] Haddad, F. (2016), 'Shia-Centric State Building and Sunni Rejection in Post-2003 Iraq', Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, 7 January, http://carnegieendowment.org/2016/01/07/shia-centric-state-building-and-sunni-rejection-in-post-2003-iraq-pub-62408 (accessed 15 May 2017).
[7] Rahim, R. (2013), 'Iraq is still held back by sectarian violence and politics', *Guardian*, 19 February 2013, https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2013/feb/19/sectarianism-divides-iraq-again (accessed 15 May 2017).

To institutionalize the new political reality of 'demography is democracy', and recognizing the risk presented by the possibility of intra-communal splits, Iraq's Shia leadership established the United Iraqi Alliance (al-itilaf al-Iraqi al-muwahad, or UIA) to stand as a single bloc in the 2005 elections. That Grand Ayatollah Ali al-Sistani, the country's most senior Shia cleric, associated himself with the UIA was interpreted by his supporters as evidence of his endorsement, and many felt compelled to answer Sistani's call to stick together.[8]

All the same, unity among Shia leaders soon collapsed under the weight of internal political rivalries, the eventual result being a descent into civil war as forces loyal to prime minister Nouri al-Maliki fought against Muqtada al-Sadr's Mahdi Army (Jaysh al-Mahdi). In the 2010 legislative elections Shia groups stood against one another, with Maliki's State of Law Coalition (Dawlat al-Qanoon), Sadr's al-Ahrar Bloc and others breaking away from the National Iraqi Alliance (NIA – the successor to the UIA). The success of al-Iraqiya, a secular list that also represented the senior Sunni leadership and the leaders of the Sunni Awakening, for the first time brought the Shia majoritarian logic into question.

The Shia political parties did, for a number of reasons, come back together to build a government coalition in 2010. Principally, the collective will to forge power and reap the benefits of majority rule necessitated intra-communal cohesion in the face of rival communities. Linked to this, Iraq's post-2003 political leadership, from within the Shia community, relied on a socially constructed history of 'victimhood' to unify against the 'other'.[9] At other times it was Ayatollah Sistani who had the ability to bring the Shia together, as was seen in 2005, while on some occasions it was Iran's influence that brought the groups back together. In 2010, with the support of Iran and Iranian-aligned Shia clerics such as Kadhim al-Haeri, Maliki succeeded in retaining the necessary unity to form his second government. During the election campaign, Haeri issued a loyalist *fatwa* obliging Sadr and his supporters to back Maliki, who for his part argued that siding with al-Iraqiya put Shia political gains at risk. The outcome was that Sadr and other influential Shia leaders all endorsed Maliki, thus reasserting Shia political unity.[10]

The Kurds too prioritized unity. The Kurdistan Democratic Party (KDP) was able to gain considerable influence by engineering an existential fight for autonomy against the Arabs. A strategic agreement with the Patriotic Union of Kurdistan (PUK), against which the KDP had fought a civil war in the 1990s, further consolidated the drive for unity among Iraq's Kurds.[11] The two parties ran together within the Kurdistan Alliance (al-tahaluf al-Kurdistani) in the 2005 and 2010 elections. Thus, with the community's major political parties and actors on one list, the Kurds presented a unified vision for the future of the Iraqi state. Even when the Change Party (Gorran) emerged as an opposition movement in the Kurdistan Region, its leader, Nawshirwan Mustafa, emphasized at the time that he was solely interested in Kurdistan's politics, and that the party

[8] Although Sistani later commented on how his role had been manipulated by the elite. Fahim, E. (2005), 'تباين في موقف مرجعية السيستاني من دعم قائمة «الائتلاف الوطني» الموحد' [The contrast in the stance of Sistani from the support for a consolidated National Alliance List], The Office of Sistani, 15 January 2005, http://www.sistani.org/arabic/in-news/903/ (accessed 15 May 2017).
[9] Jabar, F. (2003), *The Shi'ite Movement in Iraq*, London: Saqi.
[10] Hatem, O. (2012), 'Muqtada al-Sadr Ignores Fatwa Against Secularist Candidates', Al-Monitor, 4 June 2012 , http://www.al-monitor.com/pulse/politics/2012/06/haeri-issues-fatwa-forbidding-vo.html (accessed 15 May 2017).
[11] Fakhri Karim, who was the chief mediator of that agreement, claimed that the underlining vision was for both parties to remain strong in unity. Author interview with Fakhri Karim, Erbil, September 2015.

would leave 'external' policy – including state-building *vis-à-vis* Iraq's central government – up to the region's leadership in Erbil.[12]

At the 2014 legislative elections, Maliki's State of Law Coalition emerged as the largest party, with 92 seats, while its closest rival, the Sadrists, won only 34 seats.[13] Subsequently, the process of forming a government was disrupted as a result of the rapid loss of a third of the country's territory, notably including Mosul, to ISIS. The dramatic failure of the state security forces, together with Sistani's demand for Maliki's removal, forced the latter to step down and paved the way for his State of Law colleague Haider al-Abadi to take his place as prime minister.[14] Abadi was considered to be a weak and therefore compromise candidate as compared with the 'strongman' Maliki.

A state built to fail

The victors in Iraq after 2003 – the Shia and Kurds – associated the centralized state under Saddam Hussein with dictatorship and repression, and traumatic memory of the ousted regime guided Iraq's new leadership in preferring a weak central government, couched in the term 'federalism',[15] as a mechanism to guard against the return of the old state. In other words, distrust of a strong state led to intentionally building weakness into its successor.

For the Shia, state reinforcement during this period came primarily under Nouri al-Maliki, whose eight-year tenure as prime minister (2006–14), backed by both the US and Iran, has been the longest of any Iraqi leader since 2003. His Dawa Party was ideologically aligned with the late Mohammad Baqir al-Sadr, who called for a strong state based on the concept of *wilayat al-umma* (governance of the people) rather than on the Khomeinist *wilayat al-faqih* (guardianship of the clerics). During his first term, under the watch of the US, Maliki held close to this ideological line. His strategy to pull Iraq out of civil war was to target non-state groups, whether Sunni – such as AQI or ISI – or Shia – such as Operation Knights Charge – against the Mahdi Army. His State of Law Coalition was so named to symbolize this drive to reinforce the legitimacy of the state.

Maliki's narrow defeat in the 2010 parliamentary elections changed his perception of the state. He and his allies faced a stark reality: the Shia demographic majority did not necessarily translate into winning elections or an automatic path to government. For Maliki, the inclusive state under the *muhassasa* quota system became as much a threat as a benefit for the Shia majority. Although he was eventually able to form a government in that year, he became wary of any political opposition – Shia, Sunni or Kurd – that might use state institutions against him.

Particularly after US forces left Iraq at the end of 2011, Maliki relied increasingly on Iran for support, moving away from Dawa's state-centric ideological underpinnings and towards the

[12] Mansour, R. (2015), 'How the Kurds Helped Draw the United States Back to Iraq', Carnegie Middle East Center, 29 June 2015, http://carnegie-mec.org/2015/06/29/how-kurds-helped-draw-united-states-back-to-iraq-pub-60522 (accessed 15 May 2017).
[13] The Sadrist movement was competing on its own for the first time, having previously contested the elections under the NIA list.
[14] Author interview with Iraqi intelligence officer, Baghdad, March 2016.
[15] Danilovich, A. (2014), *Iraqi Federalism and the Kurds: Learning to Live Together*, Abingdon: Routledge, pp. 88–89.

Khomeinist line. He took power away from the institutions that fell under the authority of the council of ministers; and established an Office of the Commander-in-Chief as the 'home' of the Iraqi Special Operations Force and other elite intelligence and security forces. Through this manoeuvre, his priority was to create a 'shadow' state security apparatus in place of the official state military. The strategy became, at this point, to contain power within controllable circles rather than in weak, inclusive state institutions. Thus, the shifting of power away from state institutions and towards personal fiefdoms has become a defining characteristic of post-2003 Iraq, to the detriment of effective state-building.

The Kurds also contributed to building a state destined to fail, based on a simple equation: a weak Iraq would mean a strong – and possibly independent – Kurdistan. The Kurdish leadership refused to call the government in Baghdad a 'central' administration, considering that their preferred term, 'federal', had weaker connotations.[16] For the Kurds, the process of drafting a new constitution for Iraq represented an opportunity to enshrine their ambitions to secure autonomy, land and resources. Notably, the eventual wording of Article 112 of the constitution begins: 'The federal government, with the producing governorates and regional governments, shall undertake the management of oil and gas extracted from present fields …'[17] The wording is vague, and the Kurds sought to use the term 'present' to justify claims to future oil and gas in their largely untapped region, which would effectively deny revenues to the government in Baghdad. The Kurdish leadership also refused to allow the new state to have an air force, citing Saddam Hussein's use of his air force to attack their nationalist movement. In this, Kurdish leaders drew on the traumatic collective memory relating to repression under the ousted regime, and regularly linked the new leadership in Baghdad with past violations.[18]

In short, the two main groups that built (in 2003–06) or reinforced (in 2008–10) the Iraqi state did not trust the very entity they were tasked with forging. Their project was doomed to fail.

[16] In a meeting, the author was asked by representatives of the Kurdistan Regional Government not to use the term 'central' but rather 'federal' government (*hukuma al-Itihadiyah*).
[17] Cabinet of Iraq (2005), 'Destour jumhuriyya al-Iraq' [Constitution of the Republic of Iraq], http://www.cabinet.iq/PageViewer.aspx?id=2 (accessed 15 May 2017).
[18] For instance, former Iraqi foreign minister Hoshyar Zebari (a Kurdish leader) drew on the traumatic memory of the Saddam Hussein regime when arguing for a proposed referendum on independence in 2017. See for example https://twitter.com/HoshyarZebari/status/875617866120216576.

3. State-building in Iraq After ISIS: The Myth of Monolithic Blocs

The recovery of Iraq's territory following the defeat of ISIS will be the precursor to a new round of critical state reinforcement in Iraq. Thus, interest groups that are able to prove their effectiveness in helping to defeat ISIS will have significant leverage in the 2018 elections and subsequently exert influence not just in the process of forming a new government, but also in the process of state reinforcement that will follow.

This will not be the first time Iraq's leadership has faced the task of rebuilding the state, with elections in prospect, having emerged from a brutal conflict marked by sectarian killings and insurgencies. With this in mind, it is important to consider what will be different this time around.

The most striking difference is the presence today of intra-community rivalries, and their potential impact on forming a government. Political differences within the Shia and Kurdish blocs are now more open and substantial than at any other point since 2003. Crucially, these differences will complicate the forming of coalitions based on identity lines.

Political contestation among Iraq's Shia is most significant for the future settlement and the next attempt to reinforce the state. The Shia remain the power-holders in Baghdad, but this time there are fewer Kurdish leaders who are working in the capital to preserve influence in Arab Iraq. As one adviser for the Kurdistan Region Security Council put it: 'It's too late to salvage the post-2003 project … the country will be better off realigned on the parties' own terms.'[19] From the perspective of the Kurdistan Region's leadership, Iraq is now a lost cause, meaning that increasingly the focus will be internal rather than on Baghdad. Tellingly, during the early state-building years after 2003, Kurdish leaders held a number of senior positions in the central government: PUK leader Jalal Talabani was president, PUK senior official Barham Salih was deputy prime minister, KDP senior leader Hoshyar Zebari was foreign minister, and KDP official Rowsch Nuri Shaways was deputy prime minister. By 2017, however, the only senior Kurdish official in Baghdad was President Fuad Maasoum, who has been unable to match the authority of his predecessor Talabani.

Both the KDP and the PUK have come to regard the central government as a non-critical actor in terms of promoting Kurdish interests, and have shifted their attention more to enforcing their authority inside the Kurdistan Region. This shift brings with it a power struggle between Erbil (KDP) and Sulaimania (Gorran and the PUK). These parties are more interested in securing influence and legitimacy within the Kurdistan Region than in rebuilding the Iraqi state. As such, there is also a focus on promoting Kurdish independence and a referendum as well as on acquiring sovereignty over neighbouring areas in northern Iraq, such as Kirkuk or northern Ninewah.

[19] Ahmad, A. (2017), "We Were Never Brothers': Iraq's Divisions May Be Irreconcilable', *Wall Street Journal*, 26 March 2017, https://www.wsj.com/articles/we-were-never-brothers-iraqs-divisions-may-be-irreconcilable-1490559099 (accessed 15 May 2017).

Similarly, the leaders of Iraq's predominantly Sunni provinces will look for more local solutions. In the absence of a long-established or well-developed political party to take forward their interests, the Sunnis will be in no position to try to call the shots in Baghdad and influence the process of state reinforcement.

The lack of Kurdish and Sunni Arab leadership in Baghdad will mean that Shia actors will play the largest role in reinforcing the state. However, the factors that formerly brought the Shia parties together in earlier periods of state-building are also now weaker, challenging the notion of the Shia community having a 'forever majority'. It is unlikely that the communal distribution of resources, the use of identity politics and a narrative of victimhood, the interference of Sistani or meddling by Iran can – together or separately – be expected to forge another Shia coalition in a post-ISIS Iraq.

The greatest intra-Shia rivalry has long been that between Maliki and Muqtada al-Sadr.[20] Their split can be traced back to an early Dawa ideological contestation within the Sadrist movement, and there were signs of a rupture in the so-called Shia camp soon after the forced unification during the process of building a coalition following the 2010 elections. The Maliki–Sadr rivalry, which saw them fight each other in 2008, re-emerged fully as Sadr returned to Iraq from exile in 2011 and began working to undermine Maliki. Many members of his close circle hint that Sadr regrets what he regards as his capitulation in supporting Maliki in 2010, under the auspices of the NIA.[21]

While the political differences among Iraq's Shia can be understood to stem in part from the personal animosity particularly between Sadr and Maliki, members of parliament from both camps have claimed that the problems are not based on personality.[22] Personalities and ideologies often play a role, but the true competition is for power, resources and influence.

In 2012 Sadr joined with al-Iraqiya's Ayad Allawi and the KDP's Massoud Barzani in an attempt to force a parliamentary vote of no confidence in Maliki. As in 2010, Iran and its loyal Shia clerics worked to block this move and keep the Shia camp in order, with Haeri issuing another *fatwa* and criticizing working with secular parties. This time, however, Sadrist leaders asserted that Sadr would not adhere to any *fatwa* issued by Haeri, and would not back down from his decision to withdraw confidence from Maliki.[23] Iran turned to the PUK, its ally within the Kurdistan Region, and convinced Jalal Talabani to break ranks with the rest of the Kurdistan list and stop the move to oust Maliki. These developments signalled a new political context of cross-ethnic and cross-sectarian coalition-building, and Sadr's break from Haeri and his mentors in Iran: neither Iran nor Maliki could control Sadr, and thereby Shia unity.

This intra-Shia rivalry now plays out openly in Iraqi politics, not just between Maliki and Sadr, but also involving other high-profile figures such as Prime Minister Abadi and Ammar al-Hakim, the leader of the Islamic Supreme Council of Iraq (ISCI). In particular, Maliki – who has on several

[20] Mansour, R. (2016), 'The Political Battles in Baghdad after the Battle for Mosul', War on the Rocks, 3 October, https://warontherocks.com/2016/10/the-political-battles-in-baghdad-after-the-battle-for-mosul/ (accessed 15 May 2017).
[21] Author interviews with a leading Sadrist figure, Baghdad, November 2016.
[22] Saadoun, M. (2016), 'Iraqi National Alliance seeks Maliki-Sadr reconciliation', Al-Monitor, 11 November 2016, http://www.al-monitor.com/pulse/originals/2016/11/shiite-national-alliance-iraq-muqtada-sadr-nouri-maliki.html (accessed 18 May 2017).
[23] Hatem, O. (2012), 'Muqtada al-Sadr Ignores Fatwa Against Secularist Candidates', 4 June 2012, Al-Monitor, http://www.al-monitor.com/pulse/politics/2012/06/haeri-issues-fatwa-forbidding-vo.html (accessed 15 May 2017).

occasions said that he is willing to return to power if Iraq needs him[24] – has consistently attempted to discredit Abadi and to portray him as weak, too close to the US, and even too secular. ISCI was the largest party in the aftermath of the 2003 invasion, but while its influence as a political force has since dwindled it continues to have in its ranks senior figures who are powerful in their own right.

The intra-Shia rivalry also has an element of the long-standing dichotomy between Najaf and Qom. Whereas in general terms the Qom school in Iran adheres to the concept of *wilayat al-faqih* and supports the Tehran regime, the Najaf ideological school in Iraq opposes the participation of clerics in governance. More critically, Ayatollah Sistani's efforts to minimize Iranian influence in Iraqi politics extend to attempting to counteract powerful Shia leaders – notably among them Maliki and the Badr Organization's Hadi al-Ameri – who are close allies of Iran's Supreme Leader Ali al-Khamenei.[25]

There are two key arenas in which the intra-Shia contestation is currently most evident, and which are likely to differentiate the next phase of state reinforcement from previous ones: anti-government protests; and the emergence of the PMF.

The protest movement

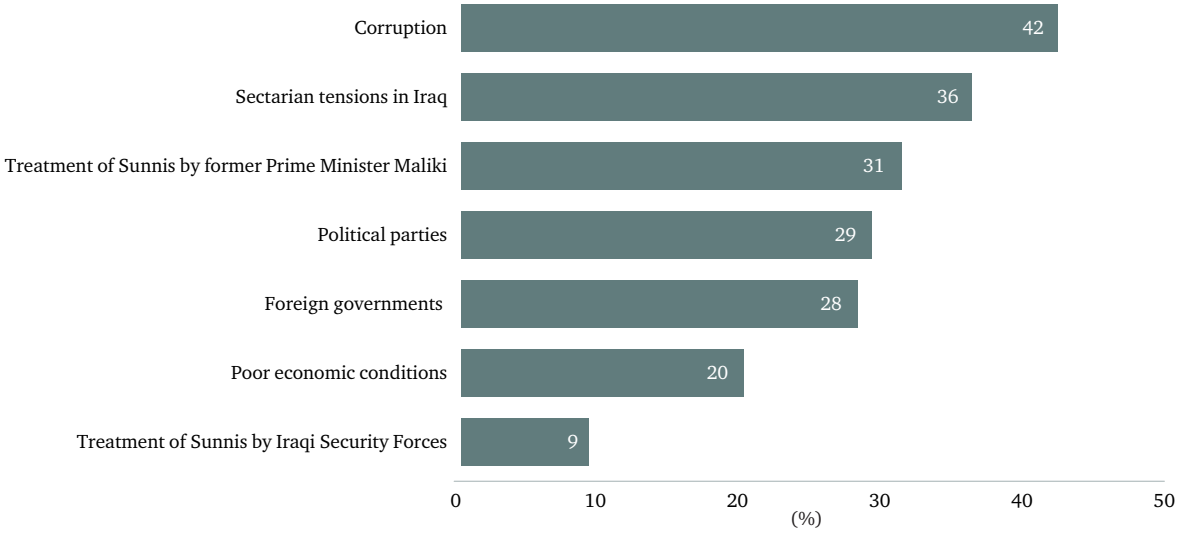
Unlike in 2008–10, Iraq has recently seen a wave of mass anti-government protests. From this protest movement, which emerged in the summer of 2015, have come two particularly remarkable slogans: 'corruption equals ISIS'; and 'corrupt leaders are the same as terrorists'.[26] Within this movement, it is evident that the Shia population has begun to protest against the Shia leadership,[27] and that the Shia parties cannot rely on their traditional rallying cries to guarantee loyalty. And most critically, it is possible to discern a questioning of strictly identity-based politics in Iraq. The protest movement is broad-based, including communists, secularists, women's rights activists, monarchists and Sadr-linked Islamists. Although these groups do not share a single, unified platform, and there are concerns among some that Sadr has 'hijacked' the protests, all are opposed to corruption and are demanding more effective state-building and better governance.[28]

It is important to note that this internal Shia contestation became evident even in the context of the existential threat presented by ISIS, an explicitly violent anti-Shia force, as the group took control of as much as a third of Iraq's territory.[29] Particularly after ISIS militants killed more than 1,500 Shia air force cadets at Camp Speicher, near the city of Tikrit, in June 2014, the Shia leadership emphasized that ISIS was a clear external threat to Iraq's Shia community, and this message has

[24] BBC News (2016), 'المالكي لبي بي سي: لا مانع من العودة مجددا لرئاسة الحكومة' [Maliki to the BBC: I do not mind returning to the leadership of the government], 3 July, http://www.bbc.com/arabic/multimedia/2016/07/160703_iraq_al_maliki_iv (accessed 16 May 2017).
[25] Nawaret (2015), 'ممثل السيستاني: "قبول المساعدات في محاربة الإرهاب لا يعني غض الطرف عن استقلالنا"' [Sistani's Representative: Accepting help in the fight against terrorists does not mean neglecting our independence], 14 March 2015, http://bit.ly/2rmExU4 (accessed 15 May 2017).
[26] Seen on a poster from the protest movement, April 2016.
[27] In the Kurdistan Region, particularly in Sulaimania, Kurds are also protesting against their leaders.
[28] Chatham House roundtable, Beirut, 22–23 May 2017.
[29] Although smaller Shia protests erupted in Baghdad in early 2011 and again in late 2013, a larger and longer-lasting movement began in 2015.

since been maintained. In July 2016, moreover, over 300 people were killed in an ISIS bomb attack in the Shia-majority Karada district of Baghdad.[30] As previously, the Shia leadership used a narrative of an external threat and Shia victimhood in an effort to bring the community together, but this time the strategy failed to take hold and protests continued. Notably, in a 2017 National Democratic Institute (NDI) survey conducted across Iraq, respondents expressed the view that corruption had been a greater driver of the emergence of ISIS than had sectarian tension.[31]

Figure 1: What led to the rise of ISIS?



Source: National Democratic Institute (2017).

That the protest movement has endured suggests that, after more than a decade of government by a Shia coalition, under which Islamist parties and leaders have been able to reap the material benefits of power, protesters no longer view the Shia leadership as victims but rather as very wealthy beneficiaries of the conflict that ousted Saddam Hussein. For the average citizen in Iraq, the sharing of resources among the elite has been a cause of inequality, as the spoils of war have not been passed down. The protesters are now unwilling to allow their leaders to hide behind identity politics – or related arguments based on the need for security or stability – in order to ensure their own position. Issue-based politics is becoming as relevant as identity-based politics to a large number of Shia citizens, and the political class has found it increasingly difficult to persuade their constituents to tolerate temporary socio-economic or political difficulties either for the sake of community, or to shore up the same leaders in power.

Unlike during the initial state-building phase, Ayatollah Sistani has latterly refused to act as a rallying point for Shia unity. Moreover, several in his camp believed that the push to unite the Shia in 2005 was a key factor resulting in the identity politics that came to plague the country. This time,

[30] Rasheed, A. (2016), 'Death toll in Baghdad bombing rises to 324: ministry', Reuters, 31 July 2016, http://www.reuters.com/article/us-mideast-crisis-iraq-toll-idUSKCN10B0VK (accessed 19 June 2017).
[31] National Democratic Institute (2017), 'Improved Security Provides Opening for Cooperation in Iraq: March to April 2017 Survey Findings', 7 June 2017, https://www.ndi.org/publications/improved-security-provides-opening-cooperation-iraq-march-april-2017-survey-findings (accessed 19 June 2017).

not only does Sistani refuse to act as a unifier, but he increasingly challenges the Shia elite by sending clear signals to the detriment of the leadership in Baghdad, and in a way that suggests he is on the same side as the protesters. Whereas in 2011 Sistani actively undermined and quashed emerging protests,[32] by 2014 Sistani's office had begun supporting the protest movement.[33] In July of that year, for instance, a statement issued by his office urging 'Iraqi leaders' not to hang on to their positions[34] was widely interpreted as referring to Maliki's post-election efforts to form a government, and to be advising that certain Shia leaders should not be allowed to retain power. Soon afterwards, Sistani sent a message to Iran stating that Maliki should not remain as prime minister, and he was eventually able to build a coalition of partners willing to force Maliki to step down.[35]

Thus, and in parallel with the protest movement, Sistani and his followers increasingly became a critical voice against Iraq's Shia leaders and the institutions that they controlled. In 2015, for instance, the Najaf Hawza (seminary) sought to loosen Maliki's grip on the judiciary by calling for reforms to the court system.[36] Through such actions, Sistani was intervening directly in Iraqi politics to ensure that Maliki and other leaders from the post-2003 period did not now use state institutions to maintain their power.

In short, although his office has traditionally preferred to follow the 'quietist' school (al-hawza al-samita), which calls for political non-interference by clerics, Sistani has latterly been seen to intervene in politics in an apparent effort to reinforce the state and to advocate for cross-sectarianism and a move away from identity politics.

The evolution of the protest movement also shows a change in how Iraqis perceive Iran. Many protesters have come to view Tehran's (or Qom's) actions in propping up Iraq's leaders, as happened with Maliki after 2010–11, as problematic: to them, the 'other', or 'colonizer', is no longer just the US, but also Iran. Indeed, on many occasions Shia protesters have chanted 'Iran, Out, Out!'[37] Although Iran remains the strongest external actor in Iraq, for the protesters at least its stock is no longer what it was.

With the variables of coalition-building weakened, the protest movement has brought into relief the splits that exist within the Shia camp. There, many regard the movement as a rebellion that

[32] A sentiment shared by representatives of the protest movement who participated at a Chatham House roundtable in Beirut, 22–23 May 2017.
[33] Author interview with Grand Ayatollah Sistani, Baghdad, November 2016.
[34] The statement was published in Arabic media and on the Sistani organization website. The Office of Grand Ayatollah Ali al-Sistani (2014), 'السيستاني يرسل إشارات للمالكي بعدم التشبث بمنصبه' [Al-Sistani sends a signal to Maliki to not cling on to the post], 25 July 2014, http://www.sistani.org/arabic/in-news/24933/%20/ (accessed 15 May 2017).
[35] Al-Hayat (2014), 'خامنئي يؤيد الدعوة إلى التغيير وكتلة المالكي تطرح الخزاعي بديلاً' [Khamenei supports the call for change and Maliki's Bloc puts al-Khuzaie as an alternative], 5 August 2014, http://bit.ly/2qsa8Ey (accessed 15 May 2017).
[36] Mehdi, O. (2015), 'السيستاني يدعو لثورة شاملة ضد القضاء الفاسد' [Sistani calls for a comprehensive revolution against a corrupt judiciary], Elaph, 14 August 2015, http://elaph.com/Web/News/2015/8/1031272.html (accessed 15 May 2017).
[37] Youtube (2016), 'ايران برة برة من ساحة الاحتفالات في بغداد 2016' [Iran Out Out from the Grand Festivities Square in Baghdad], 30 April 2016, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=e75OcTg9hqI (accessed 15 May 2017).

jeopardizes Shia rule. As one senior official of ISCI put it: 'protests threaten our political process'. He, like other leaders in Dawa and ISCI, would prefer to keep the house in order.[38]

Meanwhile, some Shia leaders in Dawa and ISCI complain about Sadr's apparent position above the rule of law and his hijacking of the protest movement.[39] Some, moreover, question how the Sadrist movement, which has been part of the government, is also playing street politics. In February 2017 Prime Minister Abadi's convoy was reported to have been attacked with stones and water bottles by pro-Sadr protesters,[40] three of whom were injured when security forces fired tear gas and live bullets. Although Sadr subsequently apologized to Abadi for the incident, that the attack took place demonstrates that intra-Shia rivalry can occasionally take a violent form.[41]

Shia clerics of the Qom school in Iran have issued *fatwa* against the protest movement. They are seeking to control it, and particularly Sadr's involvement. One of the leading clerics in this context is Sadr's former mentor, Kadhim al-Haeri.[42] As previously described, in 2010 Haeri and other Iranian-aligned clerics managed to influence Sadr and his followers to act in the interests of Shia unity. Now, however, the Sadrists have shown themselves to be considerably less willing to accede to the calls coming from Qom, with senior Sadrists claiming that Haeri and other Qom-based clerics are viewing the situation in Iraq unfairly, or lack full awareness of Iraqi affairs.[43]

Although the protests may also act as a destabilizing force and challenge the rule of law, the ultimate goal of many of the groups within the movement is to strengthen state institutions in the interests of preventing corruption and countering personality-based politics. The protest movement suggests that many Iraqis are no longer bound by the identity politics that underpinned the legitimacy of the post-2003 elite. Thus – and as distinct from 2010 – the movement, supported by senior leaders such as Sadr or Sistani, offers a potential new platform to influence the formation of a government and through this the process of state reinforcement. Many Iraqis are placing a new emphasis not only on defeating and preventing ISIS, but also on good governance, and see security and corruption as interlinked. Their leadership will in future face increased calls to be accountable as regards ensuring national security, as well as for service provision and eliminating corrupt practices.

[38] Van Veen, E., Grinstead, N. and Kamouni-Janssen, F. (2017), *A House Divided: Political relations and coalition-building between Iraq's Shi'a*, The Hague: Clingendael – Netherlands Institute of International Relations, https://www.clingendael.nl/sites/default/files/a_house_divided.pdf (accessed 15 May 2017).
[39] Author interviews with ISCI and Dawa Party leaders, Baghdad, November 2016.
[40] Al-Ghad Press (2017), 'طلبة جامعة واسط يهاجمون موكب العبادي والأخير يخرج من الباب الخلفي' [Students from the University of Wasit attack Abadi's convoy and he finally comes out from the back door], 28 February 2017, http://bit.ly/2rceliJ (accessed 15 May 2017).
[41] Al-Ghad Press (2017), 'بالوثيقة: الصدر يدين احتجاجات طلبة واسط ويعتذر للعبادي ويقرر استثناء الكوت من التظاهرات الى اشعار اخر' [Document: Sadr condemns the demonstrations by students in Wasit and apologizes to Abadi], 28 February 2017, http://bit.ly/2qocmqm (accessed 15 May 2017).
[42] Ankawa.com (2011), 'المرجع الحائري يحرم المشاركة في تظاهرات الجمعة والأصفي يعدها إضعافاً للنظام' [Al-Haeri forbids participation in Friday demonstrations that weaken the regime]', 24 February 2017, http://www.ankawa.com/forum/index.php?topic=487089.0 (accessed 15 May 2017).
[43] NRT (2017), 'صالح العراقي لكمال الحيدري: أنت في "قم" وتتدخل بشؤون النجف' [Saleh al-Iraqi to Kamal al-Haidari: You are in Qom and interfere in the affairs of Najaf], 21 February 2017, http://www.nrttv.com/ar/Detail.aspx?Jimare=42020 (accessed 15 May 2017).

The Popular Mobilization Forces

Another development within the Shia camp that will influence the formation of a government and eventual state reinforcement is the emergence of the PMF. This umbrella organization is made up of some 60 militias, with over 60,000 fighters in total. The PMF rose in the context of the collapse of the Iraqi state as ISIS advanced in 2014, and came to be regarded by the Iraq's senior leadership as a rallying point to reinforce the fragile state. In reality, closer scrutiny of the PMF supports the case that the 'demography equals democracy' calculation is no longer as relevant as it was in the early years of state-building under the Shia leadership.

The PMF is commonly mischaracterized as a monolithic militia.[44] However, three sometimes competing camps can be discerned, based on their respective allegiances to Ayatollahs Khamenei and Sistani, and Muqtada al-Sadr.[45] While some Shia leaders, among them Maliki, refer to the PMF as the Holy Mobilization Units (al-hashd al-muqaddas), Sadrists have used the term Imprudent Militias (al-militiat al-waqiha) to describe certain pro-Khamenei groups within the PMF that they regard as rivals.[46]

Within the PMF, there is contestation over the collective Shia drive for resources and power.[47] The pro-Khamenei camp controls the PMF Commission (hay'at al-hashd al-shaabi) and includes in its leadership Maliki, the Badr Organization's Hadi al-Ameri, Asaib ahl al-Haq's Qais Khazali, and Abu Mahdi al-Muhandis, who serves as the de facto PMF chief administrator and maintains good relations with the Iranian Revolutionary Guard Corps. As such, this group commands the resourcing of the PMF's units: the commission receives cash payments from the office of the prime minister, for distribution to the paramilitaries. According to multiple PMF sources, the final word on who gets paid rests with Muhandis.[48] The strongest individual group is the Badr Organization, which split from Hakim's ISCI in 2012 to form its own military and police units. Moreover, having contested the elections in 2014, Badr now has 22 members of parliament in Baghdad. It remains closely aligned with Maliki and Khamenei.

Pro-Sadr and pro-Sistani groups alike feel that they are not treated equally under this arrangement, and that the pro-Khamenei camp has used the commission to increase its own power. In particular, a common grievance is that many of the fighters loyal to Sadr's Peace Brigades (Sarayat al-Salam) or to Sistani's groups do not receive their fair share in salaries.[49] Therefore, according to the pro-Sistani and Sadrist leaders within the PMF, thousands of would-be volunteers have been denied salaries, weapons, equipment and provisions.

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[44] See for instance claims that 'the Iraqi Shia *militia* [emphasis added] announced it plans to cross the border into Syria', in Al-Jazeera (2016), 'Shia militias open new front in battle for Mosul', 29 October 2016, http://www.aljazeera.com/news/2016/10/shia-militias-open-front-battle-mosul-161029083620389.html (accessed 15 May 2017).

[45] Mansour, R. and Jabar, F. (2017), 'The Popular Mobilization Forces and Iraq's Future', Carnegie Middle East Center, 28 April 2017, http://carnegie-mec.org/2017/04/28/popular-mobilization-forces-and-iraq-s-future-pub-68810 (accessed 15 May 2017).

[46] CNN (2015), 'الصدر يهاجم "المليشيات الوقحة" المقاتلة إلى جانب حكومة بغداد: يذبحون ويعتدون ويشوهون سمعة الشيعة' [Sadr attacks the Imprudent Militias that are alongside the government of Baghdad], 4 March 2015, http://arabic.cnn.com/middleeast/2015/03/04/iraq-sadr-militias (accessed 15 May 2017).

[47] Mansour, R. and Jabar, F. (2017), 'The Popular Mobilization Forces and Iraq's Future'.

[48] Author interviews with various PMF figures, Baghdad, March–November 2016.

[49] Mansour, R. and Jabar, F. (2017), 'The Popular Mobilization Forces and Iraq's Future'.

Although pro-Sistani groups form part of the PMF, Sistani himself does not act as a unifying force within the organization. Notably, he refuses to refer to the PMF by name, preferring instead to use the term 'volunteers'. In a *fatwa* issued in 2014, Sistani urged citizens to volunteer to join the 'security forces' – by which he meant the army and federal police: through this, he signalled that he did not want fighters to join the militias that had been operating alongside Maliki's government. The contradiction, however, was Sistani's inability and apparent unwillingness, as expressed by his representatives, to effectively enforce the carefully worded call for the volunteers to enlist in the state security apparatus rather than non-state paramilitary or militia groups. Since then, he has remained quiet about volunteers joining paramilitaries rather than the state security forces, but at times he expresses his disdain for Maliki and other pro-Khamenei figures who have used Sistani's *fatwa* to recruit volunteers.[50] His representatives have also expressed concern about the growing power (both military and political) of certain pro-Khamenei factions within the PMF.[51]

These divisions within the PMF point to the strength as well as limits of Iranian influence in Iraq, and, critically, to Iran's apparent inability to bring Iraq's Shia blocs together against a common threat. Within the PMF, the pro-Sadr and pro-Sistani groups remain critical of their pro-Khamenei counterparts and their Iranian backers. These rifts will be harder to resolve as part of the process to build a coalition in support of a future government.

[50] Author interview with Sistani representative, Baghdad, November 2016.
[51] Mansour, R. and Jabar, F. (2017), 'The Popular Mobilization Forces and Iraq's Future'.

4. Divergent Visions of State Reinforcement After ISIS

Rival interest groups have for some time been manoeuvring to position themselves favourably in anticipation of a new phase of state reinforcement in a post-ISIS Iraq. This will begin with competition for control of the state's institutions and resources as part of the process of forming of a new government following the provincial and national legislative elections due in 2018.

The intra-Shia rivalry revolves around the competing visions of the Maliki and the Sadr camps regarding the new political order, with Abadi the most prominent of the Shia political actors seemingly manoeuvring between them. This plays out as a power struggle for control of the branches of government, the security apparatus and the independent commissions. The balance that is struck between the three political actors will define state reinforcement.

As prime minister, Abadi is caught in the political crossfire between Maliki and Sadr, sometimes as collateral damage, sometimes as the target. Within the Dawa ranks, Maliki's party allies have repeatedly accused Abadi of being weak and disorganized as premier;[52] Sadr too complains that Abadi is a weak leader.[53] However, the case can be made that Abadi has latterly shown some success in restoring confidence in his office and in promoting his own vision of state reinforcement through his leadership of the state security apparatus and the fight against ISIS.

Sistani, meanwhile, refuses to involve himself directly in Iraq's politics, but is a prominent actor nonetheless. Hakim attempted to pursue ISCI's so-called 'historical settlement' initiative to reconcile and unite all factions, but remains unable to acquire enough power to be regarded as a serious contender in the current context. Although ISCI may, in time, serve as a channel to push his representatives towards power, at present Hakim continues to fall in between the Maliki–Sadr–Abadi camps.

Maliki and Sadr have both attempted to influence and shape Abadi's government to their respective advantage. In 2016, for instance, the two rivals, through different means, forced changes in Abadi's cabinet, including to the critical 'sovereign' ministries of defence, oil and finance. Sadr used the protest movement as a vehicle to exert changes, while Maliki used parliamentary impeachment processes to remove certain figures from the government.[54]

In the spring of 2016, Sadr's supporters took to the streets to demand the appointment of a new, 'technocratic' cabinet. In March, Sadr himself marched into Baghdad's Green Zone, where he was warmly hailed by the security forces. Later in the month, his supporters stormed the Green Zone and forced their way into the parliament building, again apparently unrestrained by state forces.

[52] BBC News (2016), 'المالكي لبي بي سي: لا مانع من العودة مجددا لرئاسة الحكومة' [Maliki to the BBC: I do not mind returning to the leadership of the government], 3 July 2016.
[53] Author interview with Sadrist representatives, Baghdad, November 2016.
[54] The sovereign ministries – interior, defence, finance, oil and foreign affairs – are considered the most important posts because they are responsible for the state's security and the economy.

Sadr's intervention in the struggle for control of the sovereign ministries exposed Abadi's weakness, as the prime minister failed on three occasions in April to secure parliamentary approval for his proposed new cabinet. Abadi was eventually able to get just five technocratic appointments approved; one of these was a new oil minister, but the other appointments were to non-sovereign positions.

According to one senior ISCI member, interviewed as part of the research for this paper, Abadi's greatest error was in responding to the protests (and thereby legitimizing them) rather than using official institutions such as the parliament or the judiciary as a means to bring about change.[55] That Sadr was able to compel the prime minister to act as he did underscores the former's status operating above the rule of law, and highlights the perceived weakness of Abadi and the state more broadly at that time.[56]

Maliki, for his part, has worked to undermine the Abadi cabinet via the legislature. There, his key ally, Haitham al-Jabouri, has led a campaign to remove certain rivals from the government on grounds of corruption. However, the removal of the defence and finance ministers has been seen to further weaken state authority. First, in August 2016, parliament voted to impeach the defence minister, Khalid al-Obeidi, a Sunni leader from Mosul. According to one of his advisers, this meant that the ministry was left unable to sign any procurement contracts.[57] Then, in the following month, finance minister Hoshyar Zebari, of the KDP, was also impeached. Zebari was the government figure most closely associated with a $5.34 billion standby loan, approved by the IMF in July of that year, in support of the government's economic reform programme. Zebari (who, as previously mentioned, had also served as foreign minister) had notably made allegations of corruption against Maliki in the past.[58] Members of the international business community expressed concerns about the future of the IMF arrangement now that Zebari, who had negotiated the deal, was no longer in office.[59] Evidence was presented in support of the motion to impeach Zebari that he had inappropriately used government funds to rent property and appoint bodyguards, and had personally benefited from real-estate transactions.[60] As such, Zebari was one of the figures singled out in connection with the corruption widely held to be rampant in Iraqi politics. Indeed, one Maliki ally and former State of Law parliamentarian noted in 2014: 'We have all benefited from corruption.'[61] Notwithstanding, the agenda for Maliki and his allies has apparently been to use the focus on corruption to target political opponents, and not the allies who may also have engaged corrupt practices.

Beyond the pressure brought to bear by Sadr and Maliki on the composition of Abadi's cabinet, the weakness of the government was exposed in the resignation of the (sovereign) interior minister,

[55] Author interview with ISCI official, Baghdad, November 2016.
[56] It should be added that Abadi would also benefit from these protests, notably by using the calls for change to target rival ministers in his cabinet.
[57] Author interview with defence ministry official, Baghdad, November 2016.
[58] Solomon, E. (2016), 'Iraq finance minister fights on two fronts', 11 September 2016, *Financial Times*, https://www.ft.com/content/e9b7c5ba-750d-11e6-bf48-b372cdb1043a (accessed 19 June 2017).
[59] Author telephone interview with international finance adviser, March 2017.
[60] Mansour, R. (2016), 'Game of Thrones in Baghdad', Diwan, 30 September 2016, http://carnegie-mec.org/diwan/64716 (accessed 18 May 2017).
[61] Youtube (2014), 'Hanan al-Fatlawi acknowledges the obtaining of contracts, tenders, and commissions', 9 April 2014, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=AYkkBJtljCw (accessed 15 May 2017).

Mohammad Ghabban, in July 2016. On his resignation, Ghabban asserted that the scale of interference by various interest groups had made it impossible to work effectively.[62] According to a senior source within the ministry, inter-party and internal rivalries all served as blocks to the professionalization of its functions. There were, for instance, an unprecedented 25 military officials who over the years had been assigned the rank of lieutenant-general during Ghabban's time in office; in the view of ministry officials, that political parties were able to force such promotions reflected the weakness of the institution at this time.[63]

'Strongman' versus strong institutions

The current intra-Shia contestation has revealed divergent perceptions of the state and thus of the eventual process of reinforcement. Understanding how each actor perceives the role of the state in society is important in anticipating the potential direction of state reinforcement following the 2018 elections, and the new balance of power that will be struck. For instance, both Sadr and Maliki believe that the present state is weak and favour a strong central government. Beyond personal animosity, as discussed above, the fundamental divergence is where power should lie: in strong individual leaders; in strong institutions; or somewhere in the middle.

The Maliki group and the 'strongman' solution: state reinforcement via the PMF

For the Maliki-aligned group, which includes key figures from the pro-Khamenei PMF – such as Badr's Ameri and Qais Khazali, who heads the Asaib Ahl al-Haq paramilitary – the current challenges to state authority reflect the absence of a strongman. This group is 'restorationist', and considers Maliki's administration, not Abadi's, to be the better model for the future executive that Iraq requires. Even though under Abadi Iraq's state forces have retaken most of the territory that had been lost to ISIS under Maliki, Abadi is still perceived as weak. To many Shia leaders, this has to do with leadership style. Whereas Maliki spoke in a definitive tone about solutions, Abadi has a more conciliatory style in raising questions and identifying problems, which has allowed his detractors to portray him as a less confident leader.[64]

The Maliki-aligned group stands against the *muhassasa* system of ethno-sectarian quotas. Its leaders do not trust that a diverse and likely shaky coalition of actors can result in a strong state. Instead, they look to a strong leader who can govern effectively without having to deal with inclusive institutions that may be weakened by consociational commitments.

Linked to its opposition to *muhassasa*, Maliki's supporters have called for the reform of the executive branch, to include the establishment of a presidential system. According to Khazali, for example:

> Today in Iraq we have big problems and everybody knows … one of the main reasons for these problems is the sectarian quota system in Iraq. To resolve this we have suggested that a presidential system be introduced because at the moment, the Prime Minister cannot choose the members of his government.

[62] Youtube (2016), 'شاهد استقالة وزير الداخلية محمد سالم الغبان على الهواء' [Watch the resignation of interior minister Mohammad Salim al-Ghabban on the air], 5 July 2016, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=l8tDV5vsOic (accessed 15 May 2017).
[63] Author interview with interior ministry official, Baghdad, November 2016.
[64] See Van Veen, E., Grinstead, N. and Kamouni-Janssen, F. (2017), *A House Divided*.

> He must bend to the will of the different blocs represented in Parliament who impose candidates upon him … such sensitive issues must be left to the Iraqi people to decide.[65]

Elements of the Maliki camp's vision of statehood can be discerned from his second term as prime minister (2010–14), when he made a bid to centralize power under him rather than under the state institutions.[66] This included creating separate institutions answering directly to him, such as the Office of the Commander-in-Chief, an extra-constitutional body with a contested legal framework and little accountability or transparency yet in control of the Iraqi Special Operations Force (Golden Divisions). Maliki also effectively controlled the ministries of defence and the interior, and removed or sidelined the heads of the independent central bank, integrity commission and electoral commission. By 2014 central authority was lodged firmly in Maliki's hands, with very few institutional checks and balances in place.

The Maliki-aligned group seeks a return to this centralized arrangement, and believes that there is popular support for its vision. In the words of one official, 'The street wants a strongman.'[67] The group points to the legislative election results in 2014, when Maliki's bloc won 92 seats while the Sadrists came a distant second with 34 seats. The former prime minister and his allies trust that, in the 2018 elections, the personal popularity of Maliki, Ameri and others in the group will serve as evidence of voters' desire for a strongman and the establishment of what is already dubbed a 'political majority government'.[68]

This camp believes that it is wrong to blame the significant losses of territory to ISIS on Maliki. For them, there were many external factors, compounded by the lack of will on the part of the people of Mosul to fight, that led to the humiliation of June 2014. Maliki's supporters hold to the belief that the ISIS takeover was a result not of a failure of government, but rather of a conspiratorial movement involving senior Sunni leaders such as the former governor of Ninewah (Mosul), Athil al-Nujaifi, and senior Kurdish figures within the KDP and its allies.[69] Thus, to the pro-Maliki camp, the need to return to a strongman model is not negated by the record against ISIS, but is in fact strengthened by it.

To reinforce the state institutions, the Maliki group relies on the PMF, or what they term the Holy Mobilization Units, to play both a security and a political role, and has pressured the Abadi government – which has begun recognizing non-state armed groups, rather than integrating them within the state armed forces – into legitimizing the PMF. In November 2016, in a vote boycotted by Sunni deputies, parliament approved a new law according the PMF legal status as a government entity, under the auspices of the prime minister's office, operating alongside the state military. The

[65] Al-Zaidi, M. (2015), 'Interview with Militia Leader, Qais al-Khazali: 'We Don't Deny Militias Have Committed Violations'', Niqash, 19 August, http://www.niqash.org/en/articles/politics/5080/ (accessed 15 May 2017).
[66] Jabar, F., Mansour, R. and Khaddaj, A. (2012), *Maliki and the Rest: A Crisis within a Crisis*, Beirut: Iraq Institute for Strategic Studies, http://iraqstudies.com/books/featured3.pdf (accessed 15 May 2017).
[67] Author interview with senior interior ministry official, Baghdad, November 2016.
[68] Author interview with Maliki adviser, Baghdad, November 2016.
[69] Ibid.

Sunnis, for their part, opposed the legitimization of paramilitaries outside the existing armed forces and police structures, and complained that they had not been consulted about the process.[70]

To the pro-Maliki group, the existence of the PMF is part of an Iraq-specific form of state-building and reinforcement. Its goal is for the PMF to be a legitimate force recognized by the people, by the government and by external actors, and, ultimately, for a strongman who can control the PMF as a special force – along the lines of Maliki's establishment of the Office of the Commander in Chief, which Abadi has abolished. Maliki and his supporters believe that responsibility for security should not fall under institutions that are constrained by consociational obligations and the *muhassasa* quota system. As one senior official in the Maliki camp put it: 'We will need the PMF not only after the liberation of Mosul, but as long as ISIS is still a threat.'[71]

From within a legitimized PMF, many military-turned-political leaders – such as Ameri and Khazali, who already have representatives in parliament – will look to use their military record in defeating ISIS to project themselves as the political strongmen that Iraq now needs. In an attempt to capitalize on the PMF's popularity, in 2016 Maliki attempted to create an electoral bloc under the same name – a notable departure from his previous State of Law Coalition – but failed to do so as the law on political parties explicitly debars lists tied to armed factions. However, despite this reverse, in 2017 the PMF leadership made known their intention to use the PMF name in relation to Maliki in the forthcoming election campaign. This apparent disregard for established legislation further highlighted the uncertain role of the state in enforcing laws.[72]

To the pro-Maliki group, a strong relationship with Iran, via its allies in the PMF, can thus support the emergence and maintenance of a strong leader in Baghdad. The Maliki camp views Iran as an integral actor in support of Iraq's security sector and stability, and believes it to have helped save Iraq from falling entirely to ISIS after 2014.

The Sadr group and the 'strong state': state reinforcement via the protest movement

Muqtada al-Sadr and his allies also want to reinforce the state in a post-ISIS context. Sadr has already forged a number of pragmatic relationships to this end, having shown himself willing to work with influential anti-Maliki Sunni leaders – such as Osama al-Nujaifi (of the Mutahidoun Bloc) or Khamis Khanjar (of the Pan Arab Project), both of whom support Sadr's reform programme – as well as secular Shia and Sunni leaders. During April 2017, for example, Khanjar referred to Sadr's 'important reformist leadership' on several occasions.[73]

Although many Iraqis, across diverse communities, continue to view Sadr with mistrust, regarding his transformation from 'firebrand cleric' to Iraqi nationalist as a political ploy, Sadr and those aligned to his current discourse will undoubtedly be major actors in the next process of state reinforcement.[74] Recent NDI survey data from the Sunni-dominated provinces and Kirkuk indicate

[70] Reuters (2016), 'Iraqi parliament passes contested law on Shi'ite paramilitaries', 26 November 2016, http://www.reuters.com/article/us-mideast-crisis-iraq-military-idUSKBN13L0IE (accessed 15 May 2017).
[71] Author interview with PMF leader in Baghdad, November 2016.
[72] Aljournal News (2017), 'قياداته تحسم أمرها: "الحشد السياسي" عنواننا في الانتخابات' [Its leaders decide: the PMF politics will be our title in the elections], 25 March 2017, http://bit.ly/2qxsUJa (accessed 15 May 2017).
[73] Author's meeting with Khamis Khanjar, London, April 2017.
[74] Mansour, R. and Clark, M. (2014), 'Rethinking Sadr: From Firebrand to Iraqi Statesman?', Carnegie Middle East Center, 20 November, http://carnegie-mec.org/diwan/57279?lang=en (accessed 15 May 2017).

that Sadr's approval ratings increased from 16 per cent in January 2016 to 68 per cent in April 2017.[75]

The Sadr-aligned group calls for a reform process leading to strong institutions, rather than a strongman, in order to prevent the return of figures such as Maliki and his allies, and to prevent the concentration of power in the hands of individuals who are not fully accountable to the state.

Like the pro-Maliki camp, Sadr and his allies want to move away from the *muhassasa* system, although for different reasons, believing that the resulting division of resources has made Shia, Sunni and Kurdish leaders wealthy with little or no benefit to the wider population. Rather than sectarianism, the Sadrists blame corruption arising from weak state institutions that are unable to compete with the sub-national groups among which the national wealth is allocated. To counter this, the Sadr-aligned group wants Iraq to be governed by a representative group of technocrats, selected according to their ability and legitimacy to speak and act on behalf of the population rather than in accordance with their sub-national identity or party political affiliation.

This group is opposed to the PMF's pro-Khamenei groups, and has called for all paramilitaries to be disbanded: Sadr has stated that he is willing to disband his Peace Brigades immediately on condition that other leaders do the same.[76] One Sadrist leader commented, in an interview conducted at the end of 2016, that his bigger fear was no longer ISIS, but rather the politicization of the fight against ISIS by the pro-Maliki group in a bid for votes and a return to power.[77]

The Sadrists are, moreover, vehemently opposed to any influence by external powers, whether US or Iranian. Having broken away from Haeri and Iran, Sadr has since 2011 been critical of the country's interventions. And latterly, for Sadr and the protesters, Iran has become more of a problem because of its clear support for the Maliki-aligned group.[78]

Particularly since the end of 2015, Sadr and his allies have regarded the protest movement as a potential channel for its political agenda to reinforce Iraq's state institutions. Many protesters were initially reluctant to see Sadr linked to the movement, and, as already noted, some consider that he has hijacked the protests in his own interest, but over time a significant number have come to regard him as an ally in the campaign for reform – and to resist Maliki's efforts to return to power.[79] The protest movement has also given rise to some other unlikely alliances, such as the relationship that has developed between Sadr and the Iraqi Communist Party.

Sadr and the protest movement more widely believe that the post-2003 state has failed to provide security and deliver services to the people of Iraq. The movement does not regard the state as legitimate, and its main priority is to force the reform of the executive as well as the judiciary, the legislature and the independent commissions that Maliki came to dominate during his second term

[75] National Democratic Institute (2017), 'Improved Security Provides Opening for Cooperation in Iraq'.
[76] Author's meeting with Sadrist representative, Beirut, August 2016.
[77] Author interview with Sadrist leader, Baghdad, November 2016.
[78] Author interview with a protester, Baghdad, April 2017.
[79] Ankawa.com (2016), 'جنوب العراق يستقبل المالكي بالاحتجاجات' [Southern Iraq receives Maliki with protests], 11 December 2016, http://www.ankawa.com/forum/index.php/topic,827805.0.html?PHPSESSID=asf1j8ghmjputgq4pu811pjpg2 (accessed 15 May 2017).

as prime minister. For instance, the Sadrist al-Ahrar bloc has called for the removal of executive members of the electoral commission because they include members from big political parties, such as Maliki's bloc.[80] The common aim is to ensure that the state is more representative of ordinary citizens, rather than a 'bank for the elite'.[81]

The irony is that many in this group, particularly the Sadrists, have been part of the very problem that they now criticize, with members of parliament associated with Sadr having been implicated in corrupt practices. Sadr's opponents therefore accuse him and his allies of hypocrisy. Some view Sadr as the 'chameleon' of Iraqi politics and thus interpret his engagement with the protest movement as a ploy to gain political power rather than as evidence of a genuine belief in the movement's aims. Even so, and although his tactics remain unpredictable, Sadr has shown some consistency in his broad views on reform of the state and a commitment to countering corruption. Unlike the Maliki-aligned group, Sadr has asked 'his' ministers to submit their resignation and remain in the country if allegations of malpractice are made against them. For instance, when Abadi launched an investigation into the Sadrist deputy prime minister Baha al-Araji in 2015, Sadr personally released a statement ordering him to resign and not leave the country while the judicial process was in progress.[82]

The middle way: Abadi and state reinforcement via the security sector

Since taking office in 2014, Prime Minister Abadi and his government have been in a perpetual struggle both against and between Maliki and Sadr for control of the state and its institutions – particularly the legislative and judicial branches of government along with the constitutionally mandated independent commissions.

Initially, as already set out in this paper, Abadi often emerged from these battles for authority on the losing side; he was forced to make cabinet changes either under pressure from Sadr-allied protesters, or because of impeachment proceedings driven by Maliki's allies in the legislature, and he struggled to secure parliamentary approval for his nominees for several of the government's sovereign ministries. Even now, Abadi has difficulty in mitigating Maliki's influence particularly over the electoral and integrity commissions, while the Sadr-aligned groups continue to chip away at the prime minister's authority by calling for technocratic and non-party-affiliated government appointees.

Latterly, Abadi has made efforts to reassert the power of his own office. As already discussed, he has sought to benefit from anti-corruption sentiment within the protest movement as means of targeting potential rivals – particularly figures closely associated with his predecessor.

Abadi has, meanwhile, had some success in winning power back to the state through a focus on rebuilding the security sector – the collapse of which in the face of ISIS in 2014 was the most visible evidence of the failure of state authority. In the first battles against ISIS under Abadi's premiership, at Jurf al-Sakhar and Tikrit in late 2014, the PMF paramilitaries were on the front line largely

[80] Al-Rubae, M. (2016), 'اصلاح مفوضية الانتخابات مطلب ملح' [Reform of the Electoral Commission is an Urgent Requirement], *Attaakhi*, 25 July 2016, http://www.altaakhipress.com/viewart.php?art=82247 (accessed 15 May 2017).
[81] Interview with protesters, Baghdad, April 2017.
[82] Reuters (2015), 'Iraqi deputy PM resigns, faces corruption investigation', 10 August 2015, http://uk.reuters.com/article/uk-mideast-crisis-iraq-reform-idUKKCN0QF25Z20150810 (accessed 15 May 2017).

because the state forces had collapsed following their defeat in Mosul. He also struggled to exert influence over the interior ministry, which is dominated by the Badr Organization and as such remains closer to Maliki and his allies.

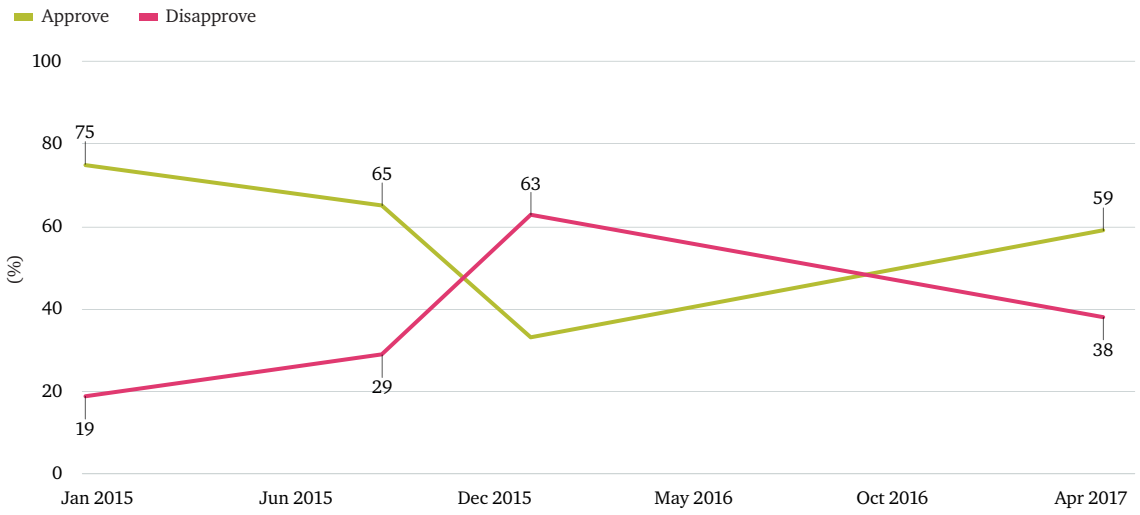
Yet by the time of the battle to retake Mosul in October 2016, the state security apparatus under the prime minister's office had rebounded, with the Counter-Terrorism Services and the federal police notably showing increased cohesiveness and effectiveness. Although some of the fighters inside the Iraqi security apparatus, particularly in the ministry of interior, are members of the Badr army, for Abadi, having these forces under the control of his office rather than under the PMF is a priority to restoring his influence as commander-in-chief.

Abadi also has the goal of establishing greater authority over the many autonomous paramilitaries of the PMF as a means of reasserting state control over Iraq's national security. Before becoming prime minister, he had expressed his fundamental opposition to reliance on non-state militias, in line with the Dawa party teachings of Mohammad Baqir al-Sadr and *wilayat al-umma*, as discussed earlier in the paper.[83] The means of achieving this were illustrated in his Order 91 of February 2016, defining the PMF as a state security institution, and later codified by parliament in November the same year. Nominally at least, therefore, the PMF – and its financial resources – have been brought under state command. Nonetheless, many of the more powerful paramilitaries, particularly those aligned to Maliki, continue to operate outside the state's influence.

As regards the assertion of state authority through external relations, Abadi has focused on reducing Iraq's security dependence on Iran – and the associated weight of Iranian pressure on his government – by means of a US counterbalance. In March 2015, notably, the US began to conduct airstrikes against ISIS positions in Tikrit, in response to a request from Abadi for direct military assistance.[84] This renewed US engagement in Iraq changed security conditions: in the words of one middle-ranking military commander, 'Iran controls the ground, the United States the skies.'[85] Latterly, Abadi's forging of closer ties with the US, in the mutual interest of mitigating Iranian influence in Iraqi politics, has implications in terms of the wider escalation of tensions between the US under the Trump administration and Iran. Most immediately, at the 2018 elections in Iraq, it is likely that Iran and the US will for the first time back different candidates.

[83] Author interview with Haider al-Abadi, Cambridge, October 2013. At this point, Abadi was a member of parliament for the Dawa Party.
[84] Nordland, R. and Bakermarch, P. (2015), 'Opening New Iraq Front, U.S. Strikes ISIS in Tikrit', *New York Times*, 25 March 2015, https://www.nytimes.com/2015/03/26/world/middleeast/iraq-islamic-state-tikrit-united-states-airstrikes.html?_r=1 (accessed 15 May 2017).
[85] Mansour, R. and Jabar, F. (2017), 'The Popular Mobilization Forces and Iraq's Future.'

Figure 2: Abadi approval ratings, January 2015–April 2017



Source: National Democratic Institute (2017).

Reflecting in large part his efforts in the battle against ISIS, Abadi's personal popularity has evidently increased across the country. By April 2017 his approval rating had reached 59 per cent nationally, compared with just 33 per cent in January 2016.[86] This upward trajectory reflects both the success of operations to combat ISIS and regain control over most of Iraq's territory, and also, it would appear, his conciliatory style but nonetheless increasingly assertive occupation of the middle ground between the rivalrous Maliki and Sadr camps.

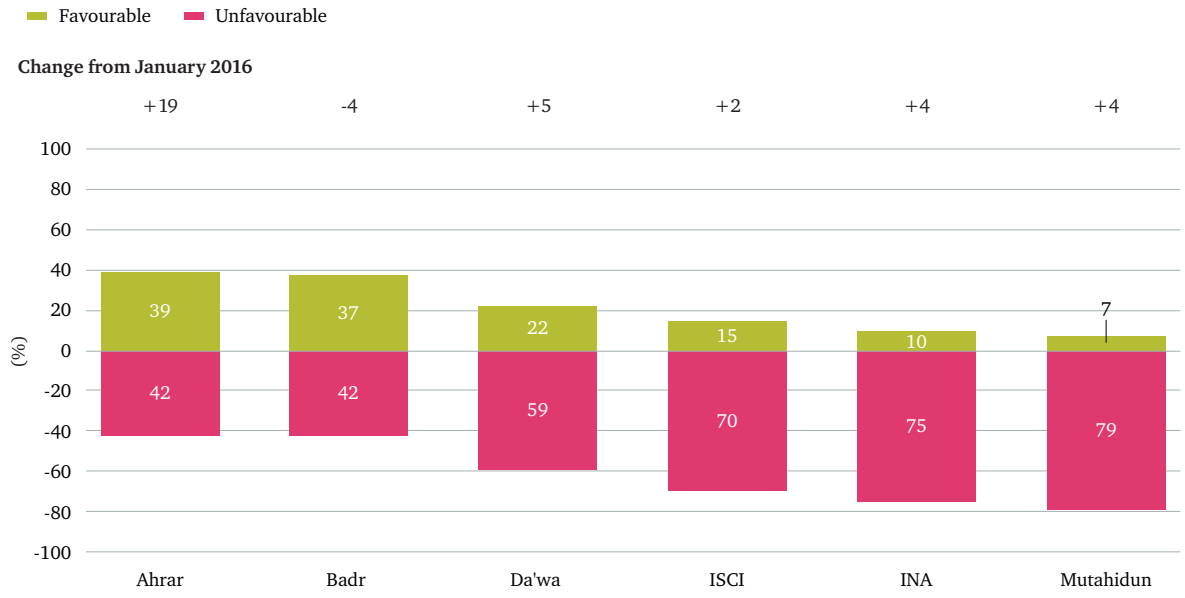
Increasingly since 2016, therefore, Abadi has attempted to bring the centre of authority back under the state through a focus on national security. All the same, the state remains weak in many respects, and the security sector, the state institutions and external actors all continue to serve as impediments to consolidation.

[86] National Democratic Institute (2017), 'Improved Security Provides Opening for Cooperation in Iraq'.

5. Conclusion: Next Steps for the Iraqi State

The last time there was an opportunity to reinforce the Iraqi state for the benefit of its citizens, after the defeat of the Islamic State of Iraq (ISI) in 2008, a short-lived period of peace and greater popular participation in politics was followed by a swift return to civil war and a degradation of state authority. Now, with a post-ISIS future in prospect, and in the context of national and provincial elections due in 2018, there will be scope once again to define the state in a post-'caliphate' Iraq. Current public opinion polls suggest that most Iraqis believe the country is moving in the right direction, but the form that a newly reinforced state may take remains as unclear as it did in 2008. More troublingly, all the senior Iraqi figures interviewed as part of the research for this paper concluded that the root causes that led to the eventual rise of ISIS – and thus state collapse – have not been adequately addressed. Thus, while there is a sense of optimism regarding the military defeat of ISIS, this has yet to translate into long-term confidence that the state after 2018 will remain strong.

Figure 3: Political party ratings, April 2017



Source: National Democratic Institute (2017).

Iraq's main political figures have already begun vying to promote their respective visions for the framework of the state. What is already clear is that the existing institutions will remain in place, and thus that the opportunity will be not for comprehensive state-building, but rather for the reinforcement of the executive, judiciary, legislature, security sector and independent commissions – which together make up the state and its checks and balances. The distribution of power, moreover, will remain diffuse. There will not be a single victor, and thus what is at stake is the balance that can effectively be struck between the different groups, and the connection between rhetoric and action once the new authorities are in power. The day-to-day reality of Iraqi politics is

unpredictable, and there is always the chance of new alliances forming – and of strategic calculations changing.

Nonetheless, it is clear that intra-community contestation over control of the state will determine what form an eventual reinforcement will take. Some would regard the solution as being to install a 'strongman' at the centre of government, while others see reinforcement coming through reform of the political system and the institutions of state. Close examination of these rival visions reveals likely flashpoints and critical junctures of governance at the level of central government as well as at the regional/provincial level in post-ISIS Iraq.

While all will look to claim credit for victory over ISIS, the leader who is best able to leverage their security credentials will have critical momentum going into the 2018 elections and in the subsequent formation of the government. Strong performance from the state security services may prove a boon to incumbent prime minister Abadi, who has invested significant effort and reputational capital in strengthening them.

Related to this, the future of the PMF will have a critical bearing on the future direction of the state. The national security forces' victory in Mosul may lead to calls for the PMF to be disbanded (a consistent demand of the Sadrist group), or at least to its continuing relevance being questioned. Should this be the case, Sadr's standing will increase. For the Maliki-aligned group, on the other hand, the involvement of the PMF and allied tribes in the ongoing fight to eliminate ISIS elsewhere – such as in Tel Afar and Hawijah – is essential to the Maliki group's continued influence and pursuit of its vision of state reinforcement.

The nature and extent of Iran's influence will also affect how power relationships play out between Iraq's rival camps. In particular, a continued – or stronger– Iranian role as regards Iraq may add to Maliki's chances of regaining the upper hand. Since 2010 he has relied on Iran for political support and to disrupt his opponents. However, an increase in anti-imperialist sentiment focused not just on the US but also on Iran, as has been seen within the protest movement, will complicate Iraq–Iran relations.

Moreover, the intra-Shia rivalry has implications for the dynamics of the US–Iran relationship in Iraq. Unlike in 2006 or 2010, when the US and Iran both supported Maliki, it is now unlikely that Tehran and Washington will see eye to eye as regards what political arrangement is in Iraq's best interests. It can be expected that Iran will continue to support Maliki and senior PMF figures, whereas the latter will focus on Abadi and other Shia actors who have been critical of Iranian influence in Iraqi affairs.

The future of the independent electoral and integrity commissions in particular is likely to be a key indicator of which of the rival camps has greater leverage. Currently, the Sadrists are pushing to reform the electoral commission and its governing laws in an effort to get away from identity-based politics. If successful, this is likely to be to the advantage of Sadr's vision of the state. Moreover, if the integrity commission is empowered to act more in accordance with its independent mandate, this may be to the detriment of political figures who have thus far been able to evade its full scrutiny.

Wherever state authority comes to reside after the elections in 2018, what will ultimately be critical for Iraq after the defeat of ISIS will be whether its citizens have confidence that the state is acting in the interests of society. Since the overthrow of Saddam Hussein in 2003, successive governments have been unable to persuade the Iraqi people that their best interests are being served by those in power. The failure to forge trust in state authority has, for many, undermined a common commitment to a specifically Iraqi national identity, which in turn calls into question Iraq's prospects as a unified state. This legitimacy gap was for many years both excused and tolerated as part of a narrative of sectarian victimhood and the inevitably imperfect process of dividing of the national 'pie'. Notwithstanding their ethno-sectarian identities, in the coming years Iraqis will demand more from their government. And in the absence of a representative and accountable government and state institutions, attempts to forge a strong Iraqi nation are doomed to fail.

About the Author

Renad Mansour is an academy fellow at Chatham House and a guest lecturer at the London School of Economics and Political Science, where he teaches on the international relations of the Middle East. He has held positions as lecturer and supervisor at the faculty of politics at the University of Cambridge; and was also previously an El-Erian fellow at the Carnegie Middle East Center. He holds a PhD from Pembroke College, University of Cambridge.

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Cover image: Supporters of Shia cleric Muqtada al-Sadr hold flags and shout slogans during an anti-corruption demonstration in Baghdad, Iraq, on 16 September 2016.

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