Majorities and minorities in post-ISIS Iraq

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ABSTRACT

The question of majorities and minorities has dominated the Iraqi political scene since the American-led invasion of 2003. As an occupying power, the US enshrined sectarianism in post-Saddam Iraq through divisive policies and structures that continue to pervade the political institution from top to bottom. As a result, what was considered a remedy for Iraq’s political ills opened the gates for more sectarian division, the dispersion of religious minorities and power struggles between the main majority groups: Shia Arabs, Sunni Arabs and Kurds. How this deadlock will be resolved is the key question that Iraq is facing as it prepares for an imminent defeat of the so-called Islamic State (Da’sh or ISIS). This paper traces the development of the concepts of majorities and minorities in Iraq’s recent history, analyzing the factors that led to the sectarian paralysis of today and exploring possibilities for a post-ISIS political solution that preserves the multi-ethnic, multi-religious character of the Iraqi nation-state.

KEYWORDS

Minorities in Iraq; majorities in Iraq; post-Saddam Iraq

Introduction

In the wake of the Iraqi government’s retaking of Fallujah in June 2016, the possibility of an imminent defeat of the so-called Islamic State (Da’sh or ISIS) is looming ever closer on the horizon. The existential threat posed by ISIS has occupied the Iraqi state for almost two years, and has allowed it to delay many important political decisions. In several ways, the rise of ISIS was symptomatic of a flawed political system that reinforced sectarian divisions while blocking many of Iraq’s constituent groups from genuine participation in government. Now, as Iraq begins to plan for the post-ISIS phase, building a political order that can rectify the problems of the past will be a key challenge.

Since the 2003 US-led invasion, Iraq’s political system has been based on ethnic and sectarian quotas designed to reverse the legacy of the Saddam Hussein period by guaranteeing the participation of all Iraq’s majority groups – Shia Arabs, Sunni Arabs and Kurds – in government. However, rather than producing genuine inclusion, the post-2003 system led to the centralization of power in the hands of Shia politicians, producing resentment from Sunnis and Kurds. At the same time, the new political order was not able to give a real voice to any of Iraq’s minorities – which include Turkmen, Chaldo-Assyrian and Armenian Christians, Yezidis, Shabak, Bahais, Sabean-Mandaeans, Kaka’i, and others – nor could it protect them from violence and discrimination.
As a result of more than two years of armed conflict against ISIS, the balance of power between Iraq’s three majority groups has been altered in important ways. Moreover, the brutal targeting of minorities throughout the conflict has raised critical questions about whether they will continue to have a place in the Iraq of the future. More than ever, the Iraqi nation-state model seems at risk of collapse, and there is little agreement on the direction in which the country should head. Solutions being proposed by prominent figures range from tripartite partition, to heavy decentralization, to a return to a collective national identify based on secular civic values. It remains to be seen which of these solutions is the most likely to be realized, and whether or not any of them will be able to preserve the multi-ethnic, multi-religious character of the Iraqi nation-state.

The paper critically explores the concepts of majorities and minorities in Iraq from a historical perspective in order to analyse the factors that led to today’s situation and inform the discussion of possible solutions for the post-ISIS period. It is primarily based on the authors’ close engagement with Iraq’s political development since 2003, in addition to interviews conducted with intellectuals and political figures from both majority and minority groups between 2014 and 2016.

The next section provides a theoretical background to the concepts of majority and minority by discussing how they relate to the emergence of the nation-state model in the Arab world. The third section traces the formation of majorities and minorities in Iraq beginning with the creation of the Iraqi state in the aftermath of the First World War and continuing into the Ba‘ath period. The fourth section discusses the new political order introduced following the 2003 US-led invasion of Iraq, analysing its consequences for both majorities and minorities. The fifth section looks at how the rise of ISIS and ensuing armed conflict have changed the distribution of power between majorities and minorities and paved the way for demands for political change. The sixth section overviews the current situation, outlining some of the main challenges that will need to be addressed in any post-ISIS settlement. The final section discusses some of the main proposals for a post-ISIS political solution as put forward by prominent Iraqi intellectuals and political figures, assessing their relative merits and flaws.

**Majorities, minorities and the nation-state in the Arab world**

Contrary to the European experience, where economic development led to the formation of nation-states, the emergence of the nation-state model in the Arab world was closely tied to the colonization process. In the words of Ibrahim (1998, 239), ‘The caesarean birth of many of the Arab states at the hands of colonial midwives brought to existence a number of seriously deformed Arab states.’ In general, the colonial powers imposed Western-style governance structures on Arab societies, despite the fact that those societies had not undergone the same transformations as had European societies. The Arab countries were not alone in adopting the Western state model under the influence of colonialism, but it was the Arab world that was exposed to the deep impact of Western intervention, long before direct colonization. This is not to deny that some of the region’s countries, including Egypt, Yemen and Morocco, exhibited state-like features prior to colonization. Western intervention in Egypt actually aborted the pioneering attempt of Muhammad Ali to build a modern state in the 19th century (Dāhir 1991).
As the colonial period came to an end, nationalist liberation movements placed their hopes in the state as a melting pot that would be able to unify all ethnic groups and lead society towards modernization. However, after the departure of the colonial powers, the new ruling elites quickly began to behave like their colonial predecessors, using the state structure they inherited as a tool for violence and oppression. As the Syrian intellectual Ghalyūn (1991) argues, the postcolonial nation-state became the state of the enlightened elite minority, either represented by the ruling party, the tribe or both.

One of the challenges the newly independent Arab states faced was how to deal with the deeply embedded religious tradition (turath) in their societies. Whereas the development of nation-states in Western Europe was accompanied by secularization, with nationalism often taking the place of religion, the nationalists of the Arab Nahdha and the ruling elites who succeeded them adopted a hesitant stance towards religion. As Jaffrelot (2009) argues, most ethnic nationalist movements are based on shared cultural values, such as religion. Arab nationalism, as a movement that arose in response to Western expansionism, was no exception, but the elites and intelligentsia of the movement were often divided between the qualities they acquired from the West and their loyalty to their religious tradition. The solution the elites adopted for this contradiction was generally to follow ‘a reformist strategy’ (Jaffrelot 2009).

It should be noted that the emergence of the concept of ‘minorities’ in the Arab world was also closely tied to the colonial experience. As White (2007) has argued, the idea of a minority as a numerically inferior group only became meaningful after the imposition of the nation-state framework in the region by the European powers, and did not have any real precedent in the Ottoman period. Moreover, the pretext of protecting minorities was one of the key ways that the European powers safeguarded a foothold in the region and furthered their economic and financial interests. Perhaps in part because of this colonial legacy, the term ‘minority’ is heavily contested in the Arab world and often provokes hostility from the groups on which it is conferred. Most prefer to be called ‘components’, a term which more clearly acknowledges those groups’ status as constituent elements of the social fabric rather than emphasizing their difference from the majority.

The emergence of majorities and minorities in modern Iraq

Iraq prior to the US-led invasion was a clear example of the colonial formation of the Arab state. The British colonial authorities created the Iraqi state in the aftermath of the First World War by stitching together three provinces of the former Ottoman Empire following its defeat and disintegration (Hourani 1947). Thus, the newly drawn borders imposed an artificial structure on a territory inhabited by Sunni Arabs, Shia Arabs and Kurds. Those groups became known as Iraq’s three constituent majorities, while a myriad of smaller ethnic and religious groups, including Turkmen, Chaldo-Assyrian and Armenian Christians, Yezidis, Shabak, Bahais, Sabean-Mandaens, and Kaka’i, became minorities within the newly formed state.

Contrary to the common belief that the Shia–Sunni divide present in today’s Iraq was a result of American invasion alone, it was obvious even in the semi-liberal monarchical era that Sunnis and Shia disagreed about the future of the new state. While many Sunnis were committed to the idea of pan-Arab nationalism and a single Arab state, Shia favoured the
development of an Iraqi nationalism that could include all Iraqi citizens regardless of their ethnicity or sect (Hourani 1947). The experience of the monarchical period shows that the Sunni–Shia divide was not a matter of doctrine nor was it caused by power sharing, for both groups were classified together as the Arab component in Iraq at the time and together represented the absolute majority of the population.

However, tensions between Sunnis and Shia brewed under the surface, especially as Shia became the victims of repressive governments. Although the Ba’athist regimes in Iraq and Syria unleashed harsh repression on all their opponents, regardless of sect or ethnicity, those who were on the receiving end of violence developed a victimhood discourse that allowed them to conceptualize the reasons for their plight and strengthened their feelings of oppression. The 1979 Iranian Revolution that brought Khomeini to power, and the subsequent eight-year war with Iraq, provided the conditions for Iraqi Shia to build dissident political groups supported and funded by Tehran. Some of the Shia groups were armed and able to fight a guerrilla war against the regime, while Sunni Arabs who opposed the regime did not have this advantage (Al-Qarawee 2014).

These political and armed groups would later come to represent the Shia politically and promote the idea of ‘majority rule’, since the separation of the Arab national bloc of the past into Shia and Sunni components left the Shia as the largest single community. This opened the way for Sunnis and Kurds to compete for second place, but the Kurds did not show interest in furthering the unity of the old Iraq. Since the 1990s, they enjoyed de facto autonomy in northern Iraq and focused their efforts instead on furthering a new Kurdish entity, complete with its own government and parliament. This left Sunni Arabs in the role of victim in the new Iraq after decades of being the educated elite.

**Majorities and minorities after 2003**

The 2003 American-led invasion had disastrous consequences for Iraq’s social and political development. One of the most highly criticized aspects of the American occupation was the decision by Paul Bremer, head of the Coalition Provisional Authority, to completely dissolve the Iraqi army. In so doing, he destroyed a fundamental institution of the Iraqi nation-state that for more than 90 years had served as a melting pot, bringing together Sunni, Shia, Yezidis, Kurds and Christians. Disillusioned ex-soldiers served as eager recruits for the proliferation of militia groups that began popping up all over the country, and Iraq quickly descended into sectarian chaos.

The political system introduced after 2003, with its emphasis on sectarian parliamentary quotas, served to institutionalize religious and ethnic divisions. As a result of the Coalition Provisional Authority’s de-Ba’athification policies, former members of the Ba’ath Party were prohibited from running for office and working in the public sector, a decision that disproportionately affected Sunnis. Although the new constitution enshrined a series of rights and freedoms for ethnic and religious minorities, including the right to mother-tongue education and self-government in their areas, most of them remained empty promises. The referendum to decide the status of the disputed territories, as required by article 140 of the constitution, was continually delayed. Minority representatives in parliament had little influence on decision-making, which was controlled by powerful majority political blocs.
The sectarian violence rocking the streets of Baghdad continued to increase in intensity. After Al-Qaeda in Iraq bombed the al-Askari mosque in Samarra – an important Shia symbol – in 2006, the country entered its worst phase of bloodshed. Shia death squads roamed the streets of Baghdad carrying out widespread kidnappings, torture and execution-style killings of Sunnis as punishment for the largely Sunni-led insurgency against the central government. Without their own militias to protect them from the rising tide of religious extremism, Baghdad’s minorities were also targeted for attacks. Christians formed a disproportionately large percentage of refugees leaving Iraq during this time period (Assyrian Universal Alliance Americas Chapter 2014). While the community had once numbered an estimated 1.4 million, in the years after the invasion their numbers were gradually reduced to fewer than 350,000 (Lalani 2010). Sabean-Mandaeans, who had long served as Iraq’s most skilled goldsmiths, found that their traditional profession increasingly exposed them to kidnappings, armed robberies and killings. They, too, began leaving the country en masse.

Many of those minorities who stayed in Iraq chose to leave Baghdad for the relative security of the Ninewah Plains. However, living in the disputed areas had its own drawbacks. The central government neglected the governorate in terms of social services, job creation and basic infrastructure. The Sinjar region, home to the majority of Iraq’s Yezidis, was known for its impoverishment, soaring unemployment and high suicide rates among young men and women. The Kurdish authorities assumed de facto responsibility for the security of these areas, and minorities complained of periodic incursions and pressure to support Kurdish political aims.

After Nouri al-Maliki took office as prime minister in 2006, Sunnis and Kurds became increasingly resentful of his monopolization of power. Through a new Justice and Accountability law, al-Maliki used affiliation with the former Ba’ath Party as a pretext to exclude Sunnis from public office and allocate high-ranking positions to Shia, while deploying a heavy security presence into Sunni areas (International Crisis Group 2013). Sunnis launched widespread protests and sit-ins, provoking a heavy-handed response from the government. Iraq’s Kurds, on the other hand, gradually left Baghdad for the relative stability of Iraqi Kurdistan. The Kurdish region flourished during this period, attracting local and foreign capital due to its ability to provide a secure and stable environment for investment. Many Kurds moved away from agriculture into the lucrative world of business, transforming Kurdistan into a Dubai-style service-based economy. However, on the political side of things, the promises of Kurdish liberation remained unfulfilled. The governance structure in Kurdistan continued to resemble that of its Arab neighbours, with the parliament’s role increasingly marginalized as a result of conflict between the Democratic Party, the National Union and the Movement for Change. The president’s family controlled all sensitive political posts, including the prime ministership and head of the intelligence services, and rumours of corruption abounded.

Meanwhile, in the rest of Iraq, violent attacks continued. In the single deadliest bombing in post-2003 Iraq, at least 400 Yezidis were killed in a string of coordinated car bombings targeting the villages of Kataniya and Jazira in 2007. In October 2010, an attack on the Our Lady of Salvation Church in Baghdad left dozens dead and prompted a new exodus of Christian families from the city. In Kirkuk, one of the disputed regions whose status remained unsettled, a constant barrage of bloody attacks led Turkmen
leaders to complain of attempts to forcibly alter the demographic balance of the city in favour of majority groups.

All the while, the central government tried in vain to build a cohesive army that could regain its former strength, spending billions on armaments and training. Like many other aspects of the post-invasion landscape, however, this process was deeply marred by corruption. In 2014, reports emerged revealing the presence of more than 50,000 ‘ghost’ soldiers on the army payroll – merely names on paper to facilitate the siphoning of salaries and other material benefits to political officials. After the last American troops left Iraq in 2011, the central government struggled to contain perpetual cycles of violence.

The rise of ISIS: a new chapter in Iraq’s sectarianism

It was in this context that the Iraqi army collapsed in the face of the so-called Islamic State (Da’sh or ISIS) as it advanced on Mosul in 2014, leaving behind millions of dollars in arms and ammunitions as its soldiers and commanders fled for their lives. The rise of ISIS was fuelled in a large part by Sunni disenfranchisement, the result of years of marginalization and discriminatory policies by the central government. ISIS obtained a significant base of support in the Sunni-majority Anbar governorate, allowing it to take control of Ramadi and Fallujah, the governorate’s two largest cities, in January 2014. Soon after its advance into Mosul in June, ISIS massacred over 1000 mostly Shia cadets at Camp Speicher in Tikrit, sending a terrifying symbol of their intention to exact revenge for the years of humiliation suffered by Iraq’s Sunnis at the hands of the Shia-dominated government.

In response to these calamitous events, and in the absence of a capable national military force able to push back the advance of ISIS, the Grand Ayatollah Ali al-Sistani issued a fatwa calling on all able-bodied Shia males to step up to the task of defending their country and register as volunteer fighters. What followed was the formation of the Popular Mobilization Forces (PMF), a loose conglomeration of mainly Shia militias, which went on to play a leading role in the military confrontation against ISIS. Some of the militias that fall under the PMF umbrella predate the rise of ISIS, and they each have their own loyalties and agendas, some of which do not necessarily involve a commitment to the survival of the Haider al-Abadi government. However, the PMF became an indispensable partner in the campaign against ISIS as their military capabilities quickly surpassed the weak and corrupted Iraqi security forces (Mansour 2015).

In the weeks following their takeover of Mosul, ISIS quickly completed the process, which had been in progress for many years, of emptying the city of its ethnic and religious minorities. Christians, Shabak and Yezidis saw themselves dismissed from their jobs and their properties expropriated. After ISIS issued a decree forcing Christians to choose between submission to the group’s authority, including paying the jizya, and death, most of the remaining Christians left the city.

Over the course of July and August 2014, ISIS expanded dramatically into Ninewah and Salahuddin governorates, in the process uprooting entire minority communities from their historical homelands. Over the course of 24 hours on 6 August, Qaraqosh, Iraq’s largest Assyrian Christian town with a history dating back thousands of years, was completely emptied of its inhabitants. As ISIS entered Shia Turkman villages, it carried out kidnappings and executions of civilians while bombing mosques and other religious sites. Some of the group’s worst treatment, however, was saved for the Yezidi minority. As
ISIS advanced into Sinjar, Yezidis who were not able to escape were systematically rounded up, the men executed or kidnapped and the women forced into sexual slavery.

**The current situation**

As of mid-2016, ISIS has been pushed back from large parts of Ninewah, Diyala, Salahuddin, Kirkuk and Anbar governorates; the cities of Tikrit, Ramadi and Fallujah have been recaptured, and the government has set its eyes on Mosul as the next major chapter in the battle against ISIS. The tasks of defence and liberation have been carried out in a large part by military formations divided along ethnic and religious lines, including the Popular Mobilization (Shia), the Peshmerga (Kurdish), the Tribal Mobilization (Sunni), the National Mobilization (Sunni), the Babylon Brigades (Christians) and other minority militias. Moreover, the process of liberation has often created more problems than it has solved. After pushing back ISIS, the Kurdish Peshmerga has placed many disputed areas firmly under its control, allowing it to impose a reality on the ground that will likely be difficult to reverse later. The Peshmerga, Iraqi security forces, Popular Mobilization units and other militias have all been accused of retaliatory violations against the civilian population in liberated areas due to their perceived support for ISIS, including destruction and looting of property.

The result of this has been a climate of sectarianism that is more charged than ever. A visitor to Baghdad cannot help but be taken aback by the propagandistic placards that adorn every corner of the city, in an attempt to rouse popular emotions in support of the Popular Mobilization forces. Rumours that the Shia have come to make up 65% of the city’s population do not seem to be exaggerated, as years of bombings and threats have contributed to a veritable ghettoization of the city.

Meanwhile, an estimated 3 million people remain internally displaced across the country, while the United Nations estimates that a total of 10 million people are in need of humanitarian assistance (Institute for International Law and Human Rights (IIILHR), Minority Rights Group International (MRG), No Peace Without Justice (NPWJ), and the Unrepresented Nations and Peoples Organization (UNPO) 2016). Anbar governorate has produced the largest wave of displacement, yet internally displaced persons (IDPs) attempting to cross into Baghdad often find themselves stranded on Bzebiz Bridge, which has become a symbol for the government’s arbitrary and sometimes discriminatory policies towards Sunni IDPs. Citing security fears, the government often closes the bridge, or insists that IDPs produce proof of residential addresses or sponsors in Baghdad before allowing them to cross. However, many Sunnis feel that ‘demographics’ are the real reason behind these restrictions. Sunni IDPs do not have an easy time trying to enter the Kurdistan region, either, which has already hosted close to 1 million IDPs and carefully patrols its borders.

The return of IDPs to liberated areas is complicated by factors including the destruction of infrastructure, local tensions and the still volatile security situation. Local governance structures have all but collapsed in the areas taken back from ISIS, leaving a power vacuum that has been filled by whichever armed factions are dominant in a particular area. Friction has erupted between returning IDPs and the population who stayed behind, fuelled by property disputes and accusations of sympathy for ISIS. In the absence of any coordinated national plan to coordinate the processes of reconstruction
and reintegration, resettlement of IDPs to their areas of origin remains limited (Higel 2016).

The events of 2014 and their aftermath have had a profound psychological impact on minorities. Many feel a sense of betrayal by the central government and the Kurdish authorities, both of which stood by as their villages were invaded and desecrated by ISIS forces. Theories abound over the deliberate surrender of their lands as part of a calculated political move. For religious minorities in particular, the events of 2014 were the final straw in a long line of developments that convinced them that there is no longer a place for them in Iraq. Christians and Yezidis are steadily leaving the country, seeking refugee status in Europe or America, and most of those who leave do not return. As for those who still remain, most are living an uncertain existence in the Kurdish region, where their status as IDPs prevents them from owning property, and where they are subject to the whims of the Kurdish authorities who have at times closed their camps and restricted their movements. Shabak and Turkmen IDPs, on the other hand, have mostly fled to the central and southern governorates of Iraq where they have found shelter among their co-religionists. However, few of them consider permanent settlement in those areas to be a long-term solution (IILHR et al. 2016).

Towards a post-ISIS solution

It is clear from the preceding analysis that the post-2003 political order in Iraq was unable to meet the aspirations of either its majority or its minority groups, and is partially responsible for the sectarian deadlock the country has reached today. Therefore, the key question facing Iraq today is whether a political solution can be reached once ISIS is defeated that rectifies the problems of the past and provides real opportunities for participation to all groups, or whether the Iraqi nation-state model is doomed to disintegrate.

Views diverge widely among Iraqi intellectuals and political figures on what a post-ISIS political configuration should look like. Years of conflict and sectarianism have produced a great deal of pessimism and resignation among many, and this has sometimes manifested itself in the advocacy of rather extreme political solutions. One Iraqi academic interviewed in Baghdad, for example, did not hesitate to put forward his prescription for a ‘military coup, led by Iraqi officers, who would take charge for a period of three years to get rid of any remnants of the sectarian period and prepare the country for democracy’. Along similar lines, a commentator writing in an Iraqi daily newspaper in May 2016 had the following to say about his country’s political future:

Iraq is a wild, rebellious, and constantly violated country … a people that cannot be governed through elections, nor through pluralism, nor through a presidential or parliamentary system … the solution is in a dictator who doesn’t favour one person over another, but grants everyone their rights. (Hadi Jelo Mar’ai, Al-Dustour Al-Iraqiya Newspaper, 28 May 2016)

Practically speaking, it is likely that the current configuration of power on the ground among Iraq’s constituent groups will determine the shape that a post-ISIS political solution will take. Power in today’s Iraq is defined not only by relative military strength and control of natural resources, but also by the degree of international support a group enjoys. Iraq’s Sunnis may be the most disadvantaged under this formula. They
are the only group without an obvious foreign patron to defend their interests, the way that
the Shia have Iran, the Turkmens have Turkey, and the Kurds and minorities have the
West. Moreover, the war against ISIS has been fought largely in their areas, creating an
enormous drain on their resources, while intensive aerial bombardment has destroyed
much of their critical infrastructure. Reconstruction of Sunni areas will be an expensive
order, and one that the Iraqi government may not be willing or able to pay.

If the Sunni are out of the equation, the final settlement about the future of Iraq will be
negotiated between two parties – the Shia and the Kurds – and this will undoubtedly shake
internal alliances. The Iraqi government, which will emerge from the war victorious but
financially depleted, will likely look to Kurdistan to settle many issues which it has long
put off, especially the status of Kirkuk and the rest of the disputed territories. In reality,
the Peshmerga has already put most of these areas under its de facto control. In light of
this fact, the Kurds have recently renewed their call, through Masrour Barzani, for Iraq
to be partitioned after the defeat of ISIS into three independent entities with three separate
capitals for the Shia, Sunni and Kurds respectively (Al-Hayat 17 June 2016, 2). However,
the problem with Barzani’s proposal is that it is a Kurdish proposal, which might be
rejected by Sunni and Shia alike.

Other prominent political figures have different ideas. Some Sunnis have found a
spokesman in Atheel al-Nujaifi, the former governor of Ninewah governorate who now
heads the National Mobilization, a 1300-member-strong military formation composed
of Sunnis from Ninewah. The group that has undergone training under Turkish direction
at Kazer camp in Dohuk and is preparing to play a major role in the liberation of Mosul.
Al-Nujaifi predicts that after the defeat of ISIS, Iraq will go back to being ‘a state with
strong peripheries, instead of the previous model of a strong central government and
weak peripheries’. In his view, a decentralized model will produce better governance,
because individual governorates know their own needs better than the central government,
and are better able to accommodate diversity. As for the map of future coalitions, al-
Nujaifi sees the possibility of cooperation between the Kurdish and Sunni Arab political
classes based on self-interest and collective development rather than sectarian or doctrinal
orientations, which paralyze the Shia political class.2

Rather than resorting to partition or coalition-building, some see the cure for the sec-
tarianism plaguing Iraq today as lying in a return to a common national identity based on
shared values. This is the view espoused by Salim Al-Jabouri, the current speaker of the
Iraqi parliament and the Sunni MP for Diyala Governorate. According to Al-Jabouri,
the success of the post-ISIS stage will depend on whether Iraqi society can be rehabilitated
based on the rule of law, the values of citizenship and the disarmament of all armed groups
outside of the official state framework. If this is not accomplished, Al-Jabouri considers
that the state itself will be at risk of collapse.3 Similarly, Iraq’s president, Fouad
Massum – a Kurdish politician belonging to the Kurdistan National Union, with a docto-
rate in Islamic philosophy from Al-Azhar University in Egypt – rejects the idea of the par-
tition of Iraq. In his view, the post-2003 political system was not a failure, and the proof is
that elections are held on time, demonstrations are tolerated and criticism of political
figures is a regular feature in the media. Consequently, Massum believes that the idea
of citizenship will take the place of ethnic and sectarian loyalties after the defeat of ISIS.4

Where does this leave Iraq’s minorities? More than any other group, the future viability
of minorities in Iraq hinges on the post-ISIS political compromise reached, and whether it
will be able to reverse the patterns of violence and marginalization that minorities have faced since 2003. Some Christian leaders have rejected outright the possibility that a suitable political solution could ever be reached, seeing emigration as the only long-term answer for their communities.\textsuperscript{5} Others see permanent settlement in Kurdistan as the only way that minorities could continue living in Iraq. In this light, it is notable that Kurdish President Masoud Barzani has already pledged to make Sinjar a Yezidi-majority governorate within the Kurdish region.

However, these views are by no means universally shared by all. Many minorities have strong historical attachments to their lands dating back centuries or even millennia. Moreover, for small religious groups such as Yezidis and Sabean-Mandaean, leaving Iraq could pose a serious challenge to the maintenance of group identity and religious traditions. As a result, some minority leaders view emigration as the least favourable solution, choosing to emphasize instead the need for positive changes that would allow minorities to live a peaceful and dignified life in Iraq.\textsuperscript{6}

One proposal that has gained traction among some is the idea of creating an autonomous, internationally protected safe zone for minorities in the Ninewah Plains. This idea has been strongly endorsed by diaspora Iraqi Christian lobby groups, in addition to some leaders inside Iraq. However, many details of this proposal are blurry. For example, it is not clear who would be responsible for the security of such a region, as neither the United States nor the United Nations have shown willingness to take on such a burden. Moreover, it is doubtful whether a safe zone would address the root causes of discrimination against minorities. Instead, it might further reinforce division, and give the impression that the international community is providing selective assistance to some groups over others (Omar 2016). Christian MP Yonadam Kanna has strongly rejected the ‘safe zone’ proposal, calling it racist in nature and likely to lead to further isolation (Saadoun 2015).

Another version of the autonomous zone proposal focuses not on complete autonomy and international protection, but rather on implementing a degree of self-government in minority areas in line with article 125 of the constitution. One shape this might take is by creating new provinces with devolved powers in Sinjar, Tel Afar, and the Ninewah Plains. Prominent Turkmen leaders, as well as some Yezidis, have called for this type of an arrangement. However, how the security of these areas will be guaranteed is still an open-ended question. Minority militias may not be strong enough to defend themselves on their own, yet they are unlikely to trust either the central or Kurdish government to protect them, after the experience of 2014. Furthermore, it remains to be seen whether Kurdistan will be willing to relinquish its territorial ambitions for those regions, which are already under its \textit{de facto} control.

\section*{Conclusions}

More than at any other time since its creation after the First World War, the Iraqi nation-state today is facing an existential crisis. Consecutive regimes have been unsuccessful in producing a governing consensus acceptable to Iraq’s constituent majorities, fuelling tension and resentment that eventually erupted into full-blown war. The war against ISIS that has absorbed the Iraqi state for the past two years has unleashed unimaginable destruction, hardened sectarian divisions and resulted in the dispersion of minorities. All
these factors have raised the question of whether the Iraqi nation-state, as a model capable of holding together enormous ethnic and religious diversity, can survive in future.

However, the possibility of an imminent defeat of ISIS also represents an opportunity. The end of a conflict can often pave the way for critical reassessment of past governing structures and renegotiation of the social contract. Many Iraqi politicians are acutely aware of the need to move past sectarianism and establish a system that provides real opportunities for participation to majority and minority groups alike. Whether or not this ideal can ever be realized, given the deep-seated divisions and distrust that characterize today’s Iraq, remains to be seen. What is clear, however, is that the upcoming period will be a critical juncture for Iraq’s future development.

Notes

1. This was discussed in an interview with Pr. Kazem al-Maqdadi in Baghdad, 24 May 2016.
2. This was discussed in an interview with Atheel Al-Nujaifi in Erbil, 5 June 2016.
3. This was discussed in an interview with Dr Salim Al-Jabouri, BBC, 6 June 2016.
4. This was discussed in an interview with Fouad Massum, BBC, 13 June 2016, http://www.bbc.com/arabic/multimedia/2016/06/160613_iraq_fouad_massum_full_iv/.
5. This was discussed in an interview Father Emad YaldaMatti, Syriac Catholic Patriarchate in Basra, 13 August 2014.
6. This was discussed in an interview with Reshma Sattar Jabbar Helo, leader of the Sabean-Mandaean community in Iraq, in Baghdad, 20 August 2014.

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