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Iraq, Iran and the U.S.: Looking Beyond ISIL

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Executive Summary

From 2003 through 2014, Iraq walked a fine line between the demands of the United States to democratize, liberalize, share power and accept its version of checks and balances and accountable governance, and demands from its neighbor, the Islamic Republic of Iran, to create a government more in keeping with its version of a Shia-dominated Islamic state. For the first time in decades, Iran once again had access to and influence in Iraq. Iraq was open to Iranian political, economic and strategic influence and Tehran pushed the advantage it had acquired through years of hosting and sponsoring Iraqi exiles, mostly Shia Arabs, using them first to fight its war with Iraq and then to penetrate and direct political, economic, and security policy making after the collapse of Saddam Husayn's government. Not all Iraqis were comfortable with Iranians' influence in their affairs, but there was little that could be said or done to oppose them. Iraq's Sunni neighbors accused the United States of ceding Iraq to Iran by supporting open elections, which guaranteed a Shia majority, and failing to rein in sectarian policies aimed at marginalizing Iraq's Sunni minority. As U.S. influence dwindled in Iraq after the withdrawal of military forces in December 2011, Iran continued to support various political factions and militias and encourage anti-American activities in hopes of forcing the Americans to withdraw totally from the region. They nearly succeeded.

The Syrian rising against President Bashar al-Assad and the emergence of Islamist extremist factions in Iraq aided by unhappy Sunni Arab tribes and politicians after 2011 changed all this. Prime Minister Nuri al-Maliki was forced to resign under criticism of his efforts to assure sectarian and personal control of the government and the failure of Iraqi security forces to prevent ISIL extremists from occupying Mosul and one-third of the country. The pressure came from Shia, Kurdish and Sunni factions, Iraq's senior Shia cleric Ayatollah Ali Sistani, Iran and the United States.

The resulting civil war is having a profound effect on Iraq's domestic politics, its relations with its neighbors, and regional security. Equally important, it could change the delicate balance currently in play between Iran and the U.S in the P5+1 nuclear negotiations due to end in November and relations between the United States and the Gulf Arab states. This paper examines the impact events in Iraq are having on Baghdad and on strategic and diplomatic relations between

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Washington, Baghdad and Tehran, and offers recommendations for U.S. policy in light of new risks and opportunities. The United States should:

- *Look for ways to cooperate with regional players to ensure Iraq remains a united, independent state.* The United States cannot single-handedly solve Iraq's crises; it needs the cooperation and leverage held by Iraq's neighbors, including Iran, the Gulf Arab states, and Turkey. Until this current crisis in Iraq, Iran has rejected linkage of the nuclear P5+1 talks to other issues and we have followed the same strategy. Iran may now think Iraq has become a larger issue or a distraction it can use to its advantage with Washington, but this would be a mistake. The nuclear issue needs resolution on its own terms or it will continue to overshadow U.S. relations and Iranian ambitions in the region and create unease in Israel and with our Gulf Arab friends regarding our intentions.
- *Resist the pressure to link Iraq policy to Syria policy.* The issues are not the same; support for the Abadi government in Baghdad against its extremist terrorist opponents does not require similar support for Bashar al-Assad, who has ruthlessly battled opponents seeking political reform and an end to regime terrorism and injustice.
- *Define U.S. regional security interests and policy more broadly than just by counter-terrorist cooperation or by the success of nuclear negotiations with Iran.* These are important issues and progress on one can lead to greater cooperation on other issues. Again, cooperation with Iran in Iraq and on a nuclear agreement could convince the Arab Gulf states that the United States is on Iran's side on all issues pertaining to stability and security in the Gulf. The U.S. needs to actively counter that view with close coordination with the Arab Gulf states.
- *Strongly encourage the Abadi government to pursue national reconciliation between Iraq's disparate sectarian and ethnic communities.* Adherence by all factions—Arab and Kurd, Sunni and Shia—to the principles of federalism outlined in the 2005 constitution and subsequent devolution of responsibility to the provinces over local budgetary, resource and security issues could strengthen the role of the national government over allocation of national resources and a fair distribution of revenues, border security, and transnational threats. Failure to do so risks civil war between Arabs (Sunni and Shia) and Kurds at a later date if the issues of disputed territories and control of hydrocarbon resources are not resolved soon.
- *Do not rush to abandon Iraq again if and when the current crisis is over.* Instead, analyze what failed under Maliki's government and what the United States can do to encourage good governance and an effective, integrated defense force that is independent of civilian political influence and sectarian and ethnic animosities. This latter may seem an impossible task, given the recent fighting, but is necessary if Iraq is to survive as a country and avoid future challenges to its political and territorial integrity and stability.

End Executive Summary

Background

Since the collapse of Saddam Husayn's regime in April 2003, we have watched with anticipation and anxiety as Iraqis lurched from one terminal political crisis to another. Leaders of Sunni Arab, Shia Arab, Kurdish, and Turkmen parties with an almost deliberate regularity threatened to walk away

from their posts in government, parliament, and negotiations with each other if a solution favoring their side of an issue were not adopted. Kurdish and Sunni Arabs, in particular, walked out of endless negotiations with the government over the preparation of a constitution, allocation of budgets, distribution of oil revenues, definition of borders and the right to disputed territories, allocation of ministries, and Baghdad's refusal to amnesty regime rivals and former Baathists. The threat was clear: without us, the government and the state will fail. National reconciliation was never an option; it was all about revenge, retaliation, and power. A round of furious secret negotiations followed by a Solomon-like intervention from Vice President Jalal Talabani or an outside power, the United States and/or Iran, was the norm. An uneasy truce would then descend on Baghdad until the next crisis, but basic decisions over power-sharing, a hydrocarbon law, or resolving disputed territorial issues were delayed until a time when one party would have established new facts on the ground.

That time never came. After his controversial victory in the 2010 parliamentary election, Prime Minister Nuri al-Maliki promised to appoint a national security council under his chief rival, Ayad Allawi, and name new defense and interior ministers at a meeting in Irbil, all in the spirit of national unity. He then proceeded to ignore his promises of power sharing, kept these key ministries under his control, and implemented changes that, in effect, brought much of the government under his direct control, stripped the parliament of all power, eliminated independent regulatory commissions intended to oversee government operations and practices, purged Sunni Arabs and rivals from their official civilian and military posts, and created a "counterterrorism" unit within the military that reported directly to him rather than the Ministry of Defense.

Then the unthinkable happened. Sunni extremist factions fighting President Bashar al-Assad in Syria crossed the border into Iraq and beginning in December 2013 through June 2014 launched a military campaign that gave them control of roughly one-third of Iraq, eliminated the border with Syria and in June saw the creation of an Islamic caliphate in territory now controlled by the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIL or ISIL). It marks the first time an Islamic terrorist faction has acquired territory and declared an independent state with the goal of global jihad. For Iraq, Iran and their neighbors, it marks an existential crisis of the worst sort. It creates a threat to their security and futures as independent states under any kind of governance. ISIL's goal is to take Damascus and Baghdad, eliminating along the way all Muslims – Sunni and Shia—who do not conform to their standards and values as a fundamentalist Islamic state and society.¹ For Sunnis, this means acceptance of all standards and practices of the self-appointed Caliph Ibrahim, formerly known as Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi; for recalcitrant Sunnis and Shia Muslims, who are deemed apostates, it means punishment by death (crucifixion, beheading, or burial alive); for women it means rape, enslavement and forced "marriage" to an ISIL fighter or honor killing by her family if freed. ISIL has threatened Kuwait as a way to attack U.S. interests in the region and urges its foreign fighters, especially those carrying European and American passports, to return home and prepare to attack.²

¹ After Baghdad, many Arabs believe it will move into the Arabian Peninsula to conquer Mecca and Medina and destroy the shrines in the two holy cities. Many Arabs also believe that Saudi Arabia will not be able to fight ISIL because the organization and its loyalists follow precepts and practices preached by Wahhabi clerics and is supported by Saudi nationals, media and popular opinion.

² For threat to U.S., see "Greg Miller, "Islamic State Working to Establish cells outside the Middle East, U.S. says," Washington Post, 14 August 2014, http://www.washingtonpost.com/world/national-security/islamic-state-working-to-establish-cells-outside-iraq-and-syria-us-says/2014/08/14/639c32b0-23f5-11e4-8593-da634b334390_story.html?utm_source=Saithru&utm_medium=email&utm_term=%2ASituation%20Report&utm_campaign=SITREP%20AUG%2015%202014

Iran and Iraq: Hostile Past, Ambiguous Presence

Iran and Iraq have shared territorial ambitions, fought wars against each other and honored common religious values and leaders since the Arab-Islamic conquests of the seventh century. Both were occupied by foreign powers, experiences that shaped their modern self-view towards the Turks, British, Russians and Americans, and describe their ambiguous relations today. Both are ruled by Shia sectarian political factions intent on preserving their version of an Islamist and revolutionary nationalist legacy interspersed with democratic practices. Iran's 80 million population is approximately 90 percent Shia, 5 percent Sunni and 5 percent other (Zoroastrian, Christian and Jewish).³ Iraq's population of 32.6 million is approximately 75 percent Arab and 20 percent Kurd ethnically; by sect it is 60-65 percent Shia Arab and 37 percent Sunni (Arab and Kurd), with a smattering (3 percent) Turkmen, Assyrian-Chaldean Christian, and Yazidi.⁴

Although public attention focuses on sectarian differences, it is nationalism and the ethnic issue—Persian, Arab, and Kurd—that shapes loyalty and identity in both countries. ISIL's recent and rapid successes raise the question of whether sectarianism has become the driving force inside Iraq and the region. The takeover of Mosul and other cities in the Sunni-dominated northeast this spring clearly was accomplished with the support of Iraqi Sunni Arab disaffected political leaders and dissidents, local tribal leaders, renegade Baathists and ex-military officers, the same mix responsible for the 2006-2007 insurgency in which ISIL's predecessor was an al-Qaeda affiliate.⁵ When Mosul fell and the Iraqi army collapsed, Iraq's Kurdistan Regional Government (KRG) took advantage of the chaos to deploy its peshmerga militia to occupy the territories under dispute with Baghdad and claimed by Iraqi Arabs, Turkmen and other minorities. KRG President Masud Barzani talked about organizing a referendum on independence. ISIL then turned on the Kurds, saying it intended to push them back to the mountains and out of territory that belonged to Iraq's Arab Sunnis. As of this writing, ISIL and the Kurdish peshmerga with U.S. military assistance are fighting ISIL in the north and have retaken several Kurdish villages and the country's largest hydroelectric dam on the Tigris River near Mosul.

Iran's Views of Iraq.

In the past 100 years, Iran and Iraq have been at war or in an uneasy state of truce. Rarely have the two countries enjoyed the kind of ambiguous and somewhat superficial harmony that has existed since the fall of Saddam. They share a 900-mile virtually open border and a history of using whatever allies were available, including unhappy minority populations, dissident factions, Israel and the United States against each other. In a dramatic move in 1975, Saddam Husayn and the Shah signed the Algiers Accord which gave Iran what it wanted—control of the Shatt al-Arab, territory along the border, and an end to Iraqi encouragement of Iran's Kurds, in exchange for what Saddam needed, an end to the Shah's, Israeli and American aid to the rebellious Kurds of Iraq.

³ <https://www.cia.gov/library/publications/the-world-factbook/geos/ir.html>

⁴ <https://www.cia.gov/library/publications/the-world-factbook/geos/iz.html>

⁵ In early 2014 Al-Qaeda leader Ayman al-Zawahiri disavowed ties with ISIL, which was formed from an al-Qaeda affiliate led by Jordan terrorist Abu Musab al-Zarqawi, killed in Iraq in 2006. Zawahiri accused Zarqawi and his successor Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi of being too violent in their murderous pursuit of Iraq's Shia, with the aim of instigating sectarian civil war there. See Liz Sly, "Al-Qaeda disavows any ties with radical Islamist ISIL group in Syria, Iraq," *The Washington Post*, February 3, 2014, http://www.washingtonpost.com/world/middle_east/al-qaeda-disavows-any-ties-with-radical-islamist-ISIL-group-in-syria-iraq/2014/02/03/2c9afc3a-8cef-11e3-98ab-fe5228217bd1_story.html

The peace lasted five years. In September 1980 Iraq, now a much stronger state, took advantage of the chaos in Iran after the revolution and invaded. Both sides misread the other. Saddam feared Iran's clerics would seek to export their revolutionary ideology to Iraq's Shias, but he believed the Arab Sunnis of Iran, most of whom lived in the oil-rich Khuzistan (Arabistan) province, would join him in overthrowing the Islamic regime. Ayatollah Khomeini assumed Iraq's Shia would abandon Baghdad and support the new Iran. Both were wrong; the suspect populations in both countries remained loyal and the eight-year war began.

Iran's strategy towards Iraq has been consistent. Territorial squabbles were the norm but outright invasion unthinkable. Whoever ruled in Iran preferred a more subtle approach to containing the ambitions of Iraq's leaders – exploit the ethnic and sectarian tensions within the other, probe for signs of weakness, and take advantage of internal political, economic and strategic vulnerabilities to control or contain the other. This policy has worked especially well for the Islamic Republic since 2003. Tehran's goal is the creation of an Iran-friendly government strong enough to keep the country united and too weak to pose a military, political, or economic threat. It has supported virtually every Shia leader and aspiring politician, and has influence over many Kurdish and Sunni Arab politicians as well.

Since 2003, millions of pilgrims, probably thousands of traders, and many military and security specialists have gone to Iraq for both innocent and nefarious purposes, including support to the major Shia parties and their militias.⁶ Lacking any real border controls, Iranian pilgrims and traders have been able to enter Iraq without check; their objectives range from religious tourism to commerce, investment, and smuggling probably of narcotics, weapons and possibly human trafficking as well. Iraq is the center of Shia Islam; it contains four important religious shrine cities which are global centers of learning and law. Iranian intelligence officers and IRGC personnel have allegedly helped with training, logistics support, and targeting of operations.

A significant shift, however, occurred with the Syrian civil war. Assad has been a staunch and indeed the only Arab ally of Iran since the early days of the revolution. Tehran supports him to a great extent because it fears the alternative should he fall – Damascus under the control of Sunni extremists, be they *salafis* such as ISIL, or the allegedly more moderate Muslim Brotherhood. Tehran views both as anti-Iran and anti-Shia. The possibility that Assad might fail and Syria dissolve into civil war put an even greater emphasis on Iraq as Iran's strategic line of defense against threats from the west and from the Islamist extremists moving into Iraq and threatening Shia whom the Islamic Republic has vowed to defend.

Iraq's Views of Iran.

Iraq's Shia have been influenced by the success of the Islamic revolution in Iran and Iranian clerics' vision of Shia traditions and symbols resonates in both countries' religious communities. Many Iraqi Shia who wanted to end Saddam's repressive regime sought to replicate Iran's revolution in Iraq. Yet not all Iraq's Shias seek to establish Ayatollah Khomeini's doctrine of rule of the supreme cleric. Most Shia in Iraq as well as many in Iran and the Gulf region follow Ayatollah Sistani's doctrine of quietism, meaning opposition to the participation of clerics in government; this does not preclude the establishment of Iraq as an Islamic state under religious (sharia) law, which even Sistani advocates.

⁶ The Supreme Council, or SCIRI, was meant to be an umbrella organization for Iraqis in exile in Iran. It became the Islamic Supreme Council in Iraq, or ISCI, after its return to Iraq). Its Badr Brigade militia of approximately 20,000 was headed by Abd al-Aziz al-Hakim and was used to fight Iraqi forces during the Iraq-Iran war.

Iraq's Sunni Arabs, like Saddam, feared the Islamic revolution. He saw Shia religious extremists as his greatest threat. Iraq's Sunni Arabs continue this distrust and call the Shia of Iraq and Iran *safavis*, referring to the sixteenth-century conversion of Iran to Shia Islam under the Safavid Shah Isma`il. They blame Iran for encouraging the marginalization of the Sunni minority in the new state and for trying to isolate them from the Sunni Arab world.

Iraq, Iran and the U.S.

Tehran and Washington share a common interest in Iraq. Neither wants to see it partitioned. Iran is determined that the Shia majority head the government, whereas the U.S. prefers a leader who will bring all major ethnic and sectarian groups together in a unified Iraq. For Iran, however, it is vital that, whatever party, faction, or individual rules in Baghdad recognizes its interests, is a Shia-dominated government able to protect its interests. In opposing Maliki, Tehran has shown flexibility—better to change leaders than risk its need for stability and strategic depth in Iraq.

Ties between Iraq and Iran are not as strong or consistent as many assume. The two have unresolved border claims and Iran has not dropped its demand for reparations for the 1980s war. It meddles in Iraqi politics and in Kurdish-Baghdad relations, a dangerous game if it wants to avoid Iranian Kurds from having the same aspirations as Iraq's. Iran meddles in oil-field claims and would like greater influence in affairs of the *hawza*, the religious "college" governing the Shia community in Najaf where it is busy building schools and buying land. Its aggressive business dealings undercut Iraqi merchants and traders, its currency easily accepted, especially in the south. Many Iraqi Shia were uncomfortable with the leverage Iranian military and political officials wielded in Iraq. Iranian "advisors" permeated the many security, intelligence, police, and government agencies and according to many Iraqis still exert considerable influence.

Regardless of the outcome of the war with ISIL, Iraq will remain weak for years, unable to defend its borders or keep its more powerful neighbors from meddling in its politics or creating breakdowns in security. It cannot ignore its large and powerful neighbor, but ***Iran's influence will probably fade in the long term, especially should the Sunni resurgence lead to a divided Iraq or should a new Iraqi leadership develop into a more unified federal government that downplays the sectarian divide.*** Iran, however, was the first to answer the call for help from Iraqis when ISIL's military forces routed both the Iraqi military and the Kurdish peshmerga, a point not lost on Iraqis regardless of their view of Iran. And senior Iranian officials – especially Ali Shamkhani, an ethnic Arab and secretary-general of Iran's Supreme National Security Council who is responsible for Iran's policy in Iraq, and General Qassem Suleymani, the senior IRGC military commander in Iraq and Syria – are extremely influential in Iraq's political and security issues.⁷

Options for Iraq: One State, Two States, Three States, None

Iraq is in the midst of the civil war that has long been predicted but only seen now. The war and the humanitarian disaster that accompanies it has affected politics, the economy, society and virtually every Iraqi whether in a war zone or soon to be within one. Its former prime minister, Nuri al-Maliki,

⁷ According to press sources, Shamkhani was responsible for getting Iraq's Shia political parties to agree to replace former Prime Minister al-Maliki with current Prime Minister Haidar al-Abadi. See Arash Karami, "Iran interior minister says advisers sent to Iraqi Kurdistan," *al-Monitor*, 26 August 2014" and BasNews, "Iran Removes Qassem Suleimani From Iraqi Affairs," 25 August 2014.

had won sufficient votes for his coalition to select him for a third term but on August 14 he resigned under pressure from his political party (Dawa) and coalition (State of Law), from the broader Shia, Kurdish and Arab Sunni communities still loyal to the state, from Grand Ayatollah Ali Sistani, as well as the Islamic Republic of Iran, the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps in Iraq led by General Suleymani, Supreme National Security Council secretary-general Shamkhani, and the United States.

It has also affected relations between the United States and Iran and brought in British and French military and humanitarian assistance. It may have put a pause on Kurdish demands for a referendum on independence, with some Kurds now identifying themselves as Iraqi and Kurdish in open discourse abroad. And, while negotiations on nuclear enrichment between Iran and the P-5 + 1 continued in July and August with the usual public acrimony, Washington and Tehran came to the same conclusions regarding aid to Baghdad and the Kurds, including warnings on Kurdish political behavior and limited military support. It is difficult to measure the amount of support given by Iran to Iraq. Press and eyewitness accounts describe military units in the north, assistance to Shia militias in Baghdad and southern Iraq, provision of some Russian-origin aircraft, and at least one funeral for an IRGC soldier. Press accounts also claim Lebanon's Hizballah has sent advisers and Iraqi Shia soldiers who had been in Syria have returned to Iraq.

Iran will include cooperation with any government in Iraq as part of its national security strategy and will expect whoever governs in Baghdad and in the KRG in Irbil to support its interests, be they nuclear or territorial, civilian or military. Tehran will not, however, heed warnings from Iraqi or Kurdish leaders nor will it consult with them on most issues. Maliki had offered to act as facilitator between Tehran and Washington and called for the establishment of a zone free of weapons of mass destruction in the region. Otherwise, he made little reference to the nuclear debate, and his successor, Haidar al-Abadi, will likely follow the same path.

What are the options for Iraq?

Even before ISIL began its war, many outside Iraq predicted that a de facto break-up of Iraq was coming, but there was no consensus on how many pieces would survive. The answer very much depended on one's views of the strength and nature of Iraqi nationalism among all the diverse populations; the willingness of the Kurds to go it alone in a land-locked and dangerous environment dependent on the kindness of strangers; and Iraq's affinity with its neighbors, of which it can be said there is little. Several scenarios are possible:

- *The One-State Solution.* Iraq hangs together, with the Kurds forgoing *de jure* independence for the short-term and cutting a deal with Baghdad whereby Iraq pays the KRG its share of the federal budget and the salaries of the peshmerga, permits the KRG to sell oil independent of Baghdad, and accepts KRG control, albeit temporary, over the disputed provinces it has occupied. Iran and the U.S. continue to provide military and humanitarian assistance but Irbil will insist all support is delivered directly to them and not pass through Baghdad. In turn, the Kurdish President in Baghdad will try to expand his influence similar to that exercised by Jalal Talabani. The Kurds will hold a number of key ministries.
- *The Two State Solution.* This scenario assumes that the Sunni Arabs currently fighting with ISIL will break with them for a better offer from Baghdad and to end what is quickly becoming a caliphate of fear. They began their journey with the single-minded goal of removing Maliki and gaining leverage over a successor government. Independence would only offer them existence as a weak state dependent on Turkey and looking to a fragile

Jordan for support, neither of which is a viable option. The Kurds declare their independence of Iraq but Iraq's Sunni and Shia Arabs are drawn closer together as ISIL turns on its Sunni Arab allies, with whom it has very little in common. The Shia draw on their history of loyalty to the state and identity as Arabs and their resentment of the Kurdish take-over of what they regard as Arab land. This could turn into a civil war but in this scenario the Kurds will almost certainly receive no support, encouragement or recognition from Turkey, Iran, the Gulf Arabs, whatever remains of Syria, or Europe. Nor does Israel appear anxious to make common cause with the Kurds outside of trade, oil and possible arms sales.

- *The Three State Solution.* In this scenario, Sunnistan, Shiastan and Kurdistan emerge as three weak states, dependent on a protector for survival, access to trade, and export of goods. Only the Shia state with its oil wealth, access to the Gulf, and linkages to Iran would be able to sustain long-term growth. The Kurds would be dependent on access to trade and hydrocarbon export thru Turkey and a constant flow of foreign investment for its financial well-being and security. In the long-term, the Kurdish model of growth may not work, especially given the dependence of the majority of Kurds on the state for jobs and their economic well-being.
- *The No State Solution.* Simply put, there is no state, only warlords, militias and urban and tribal confederations dependent on ties with Iran, Saudi Arabia, Turkey, and Jordan. In a country without a state or government, the risk of instability caused by non-state actors, meaning terrorists, operating freely in ungoverned spaces is high.

Under any scenario, ISIL advances will force change, or at minimum greater clarity, in the direction of U.S. and Iranian policies in Iraq and towards Syria and perhaps towards the Arab Gulf states. It is unlikely, however, that ISIL will alter any state's nuclear strategy or basic views of Iran. The BBC's Persian Service reported in early September that Supreme Leader Khamenei had approved co-operation with the United States as part of the fight against the Islamic State in northern Iraq and authorized his top commander, General Suleymani, to co-ordinate military operations with the American, Iraqi and Kurdish forces. Although the Iranian press quickly denied this report, pictures of the General on the internet showed him in northern Iraq around the time of the breaking of the siege of Amerli in late August, suggesting that this co-operation had already started.⁸

What do Iraqis want?

Iraq has a new government, a new prime minister and a Cabinet it hopes will reflect national unity rather than Maliki's rampant sectarianism. The Cabinet appears to meet the requirements laid out by U.S. officials for a government of national unity. Abadi has appointed practically every leader of every political faction or party since 2003 to be a deputy prime minister, vice president or minister. Former prime minister (2005) and Iraqiyyah Party head Ayad Allawi, former prime ministers and Dawa Party leaders Maliki and Ibrahim al-Jaafari have senior government positions, while Kurdish officials Barham Saleh (PUK), Hoshyar Zibari (KDP), Hussain Shahrastani (a member of Maliki's State of Law coalition), and Adil Abd al-Mahdi (ISCI) have been shifted to other ministries to placate Kurdish critics. {See Box: Iraqi Government as of September 12, 2014}.

⁸ See "Iran backs US military contacts," [bbc.com](http://www.bbc.com/news/world-middle-east-29079052), 5 September 2014, <http://www.bbc.com/news/world-middle-east-29079052>.

These changes are unlikely to resolve political tensions in Baghdad or produce harmony between unhappy political factions, tribes, and ambitious leaders. And the nature of decision making in Baghdad probably will change little. Like Maliki and many elected and unelected heads of state, Abadi will look for guidance to the small circle of advisers he trusts. His first and only priority for now is the existential crisis posed by ISIL to the survival and unity of Iraq. To do that, he must accommodate Sunnis and Shias, Arabs and Kurds and other minorities and keep the support of Tehran, Washington, Ankara and Riyadh. Anything less than total support will lessen his and Iraq's chances of surviving the ravages of ISIL. He will need to appeal to Iraqis' support for their constitution, weak as it is, and agree to compromise on federal control by conceding budgetary and local security control to the provincial governments. He will not have the strong central government under majoritarian rule (meaning no more quotas for Sunni Arabs and Kurds in government posts) that Maliki was urging. But Abadi, who spent his decades of exile in England, may be better able to negotiate with rivals than was Maliki, who spent his exile in Iran and Syria.

The *Kurds* are demanding 2 additional ministries to the 3 they have been given commensurate with the size of their population and alleged influence; the right to sign contracts and export their oil independent of Baghdad; payment of 2014 budget arrears; and Baghdad's recognition of their control of the Disputed Territories they occupied in June. They claim Baghdad owes them \$8 billion in oil-sharing revenue which they desperately need to pay salaries of government employees and the peshmerga forces, many of whom have not been paid for months. According to one Kurdish parliamentarian, Kurds will participate in the new government on a three-month trial basis while they negotiate with Abadi over key demands.

Sunni Arab politicians are also looking to settle grievances with Baghdad. They want an end to de-Baathification, greater participation in government, and an end to sectarian discrimination. One of their primary demands is the Defense Ministry, which they view as their traditional sinecure, and they especially object to an effort by the Shia coalition to make Hadi al-Amiri minister of the interior. Amiri runs the Badr Organization, a Shia militia created by Iran during the exile in Iran and incorporated into the police under the first Shia government.

Conclusions and Recommendations for U.S. Policy

The United States and Iran have kept the nuclear talks separate from other regional issues, in part because each believes the other prefers it that way. Yet because of ISIL, regional security issues threaten to intrude on nuclear diplomacy, raising the possibility that success in one area could open Iran to discussions on other issues. The United States and Iran may be headed toward some level of cooperation over how best to support Iraq's struggle against ISIL. ISIL forces are on the march, counting on their fearsome reputation and superior military capabilities to wreak havoc on what remains of a weakened and demoralized Iraqi military as they move relentlessly on to Baghdad and perhaps Mecca. The Gulf States may be more inclined to support an Iran-U.S. nuclear deal if Iran were seen to be opposing a faction that threatens them while it encourages Iraq not to incite violence or marginalize its Sunnis. However, should Iran and the U.S. work together to urge that Baghdad become more inclusive and then sign a nuclear agreement, the Gulf Arabs might believe that Washington is moving to support Iran's hegemonic ambitions.

What should the United States do?

- *Support Iraq remaining a unitary independent state.* Partition will create weak and indefensible mini-states dependent on neighbors with uncertain ambitions; division

between Kurds and Arabs without resolution of the disputed territories will almost certainly lead to a future conflict.

- *Establish U.S. priorities in the region outside the framework of the nuclear talks and not solely dependent on counter-terrorism strategies.* Consider whether counter-terrorism should remain the over-riding U.S. security doctrine, if that strategy must be linked to its Syrian policy, and how to communicate that we regard ISIL, al-Qaeda and similar extremist groups as serious threats to U.S. and regional security. Any new strategy will require sustained diplomatic and military efforts in the region.
- *U.S. policy for Iraq cannot be determined by that made for Syria.* Support for Baghdad and Prime Minister Abadi does not require the U.S. to support Damascus and Assad in his struggle for survival against ISIL and al-Nusrat. The common thread is a rejection of the seizure of power by an extremist religious or nationalist faction using violence, terror, and ethnic cleansing to establish an imagined caliphate.
- *Look for opportunities to cooperate with Iran in restoring security in Iraq and defeating ISIL.* Washington and Tehran share common interests in Iraqi stability and unity. Both object to the seizure of power and rule by extremist religious factions determined to wage sectarian war, but until now neither has been willing to cooperate with the other. Iran has already deployed at least two brigades (some 500-1000 troops) to support Baghdad, and Iraq and the Kurds will continue to seek American military assistance. Tehran may be willing to cooperate tactically with Washington, but it will oppose the return of American forces to Iraq. Cooperation should not be viewed as taking advantage of low-hanging fruit to gain Iranian compliance or cooperation on other issues.
- *Demand changes in Iraqi governance.* Iran and most Iraqis – Sunni Arab, Shia and Kurds – will continue to fear an ISIL take-over and another political failure in Baghdad. A smooth transition of power would help ease Iranian concerns about U.S. intentions in Iraq; all parties should agree on an end to de-Baathification laws, secret arrests and trials for alleged political crimes against the state (but not an end to treasonable actions against the state). Iraq needs reform of the criminal procedure code; transparency in the application of law and an independent judiciary; and limits on the powers of the prime minister to include reinstatement of independent oversight commissions and a return of his special Counterterrorist military units to the Defense or Interior Ministries (Sunni and Shia oversight here). Compromises which allow more control of local security (policing and local law enforcement) and distribution of income from local (hydrocarbon) resources may ease tensions between provincial and federal authorities, but those compromises need to recognize the obligation of the state to provide national security for all citizens and defensible borders.
- *Inclusion of Kurdish and Sunni Arab security and political officials in national security issues.* Efforts by Washington to include Kurds more intimately might encourage cooperation from Tehran, especially if it is seen as binding Irbil more closely to government security decisions rather than using its peshmerga and links with foreign governments, such as Turkey, to press for independence. KRG leader Masud Barzani has taken a great risk in relying on Turkish help in his battle with Baghdad, refusing initially to cooperate against ISIL, and in taking advantage of the fighting to occupy territories in dispute with Baghdad and claimed by Sunni Arabs. Kurds may now be rethinking declaring their independence in the midst of the existential crisis ISIL poses for all Iraqis.

- *National reconciliation has never been an option in Iraq but it should be.* It is easy to blame the U.S. for the consequences of the war in Iraq and the failures of Iraq's army and Maliki's government. But this is an Iraqi-made crisis that could probably have been avoided if the Shia and Kurds were not so bent on revenge and if Maliki could have controlled his urge to eliminate his rivals and assume "majoritarian" control of Iraq.
- *Focus on why the military and security forces failed to defend against the ISIL assaults.* Many Iraqis are questioning why the military failed in holding back ISIL and probably assume the army will fail as well in defending Baghdad or the Shia shrine cities. Iraqis accuse the army of defeatism, with many claiming that Baathist sympathizers in the senior officer corps facilitated the entrance into Mosul and Samarra by ordering their troops to stand down. Kurds complained that the Iraqi army was unwilling to work with Irbil in opposing ISIL in Mosul, and the Arabs make similar complaints against the Kurds. The peshmerga, however, are not the awesome warriors of 20 years ago and by themselves will be unable to stop ISIL. The military should be completely separated from political influences and patronage peddling. It will be difficult to return the militias to their homes and restore government control over security organizations after ISIL is defeated but the risk of revenge killings and more sectarian reprisals will be high if the government does not act quickly and decisively to neutralize what are virtually independent armies operating outside military command and control.
- *Convince the Saudi, Kuwaiti, and Turkish governments to end whatever assistance is coming from those countries to help ISIL and to stop meddling with the Kurds and Iraqi politicians.* This should apply to Iran as well and may encourage some level of cooperation in Iraq so long as Tehran's leaders believe their interests are more secure in cooperation than in conflict.

At this point in time, Iran's influence in Iraq is probably as great as it will ever be. How much influence it will continue to enjoy and how quickly it may decline will depend on how the civil war ends, how quickly Iraq grows stronger politically and economically, and if any progress is made on national reconciliation and good governance.

Box: Iraqi Government as of September 12, 2014

Prime Minister Haidar al-Abadi announced the following appointments to his government on 6 September 2014. As of 13 September 2014, he had not named a Defense or Interior Minister. Unlike Maliki, he probably has no intention of keeping the posts for himself; the delay almost certainly reflects squabbling Arab and Shia factions. The major appointments include the following prominent politicians, all of whom had served in previous governments beginning with the Governing Council created by Coalition Provisional Authority head Paul Bremer through the first elected government in 2005 and the 8 years of Maliki's leadership. Most were also elected to the parliament, called the Council of Representatives.

Prime Minister: Haidar al-Abadi

Deputy Prime Minister:

- Hoshyar Zibari (Kurd; member KDP)
- Saleh al-Mutlak (Sunni Arab; former deputy prime minister)
- Baha al-Araji (Shia Arab; member Council of Representatives, Sadrist)

President: Fuad Masum (Kurd; member KDP)

Vice President:

- Nuri al-Maliki (Shia Arab; member of Dawa Party; former prime minister⁹)
- Ayad Allawi (Shia Arab; former prime minister, head Iraqiyah Movement)
- Usama al-Nujaifi (Sunni Arab, former speaker of parliament)

Speaker of Parliament: Salim al-Jubouri (Sunni Arab; member of parliament and secretary general of the Sunni Islamic Party)

Foreign Minister: Ibrahim al-Jaafari (Shia Arab; member of Dawa Party and former prime minister)

Finance Minister: Rowsh Shaways (Kurd; member KDP; served as KRG prime minister and as a vice president and deputy prime minister under Jaafari and Maliki)

Oil Minister: Adil Abd al-Mahdi (Shia Arab; member Islamic Supreme Council of Iraq; was Finance Minister 2004-2005 and vice president 2005-2011.)

Minister of Higher Education: Hussain Shahrstani (Shia Arab, former nuclear scientist; Oil Minister under Maliki and member of his State of Law coalition.)

⁹ Maliki's appointment as one of three vice presidents was probably part of a deal to get him to resign; as a Cabinet member he is immune from arrest.

