

Helpdesk Research Report

Conflict dynamics and potential for peacebuilding in Iraq

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Question

What does the literature indicate are the current conflict dynamics in Iraq and what is the potential for peacebuilding? - Update of the information available in the October 2014 GSDRC Contemporary conflict analysis of Iraq¹.

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1. Overview

Since the beginning of 2014, the extreme jihadist group ISIL², who are also active in Syria, has gained control of territory in the mainly Sunni and contested areas of Iraq including Kirkuk, Diyala, Anbar, Salah al Din and Ninewa; although government forces, the Kurdish Peshmerga, and the Shia dominated Hashd al-Shaabi (Popular Mobilization Units/Forces, PMU/PMF) volunteer force, have regained some territory. Recently **ISIL seized control of Ramadi**, which was a major blow to the Iraqi government (al-Khoei, 2015).

The conflict has taken on an increasingly sectarian nature and minorities have been disproportionately affected. The ISIL insurgency is very brutal, with populations, especially minority groups, 'subjected to mass executions, systematic rape and horrendous acts of violence, including executions and torture' (OCHA, 2015, p. 7; IILHR et al, 2015, p. 3). Revenge attacks have taken place against civilians who have remained in ISIL controlled areas when the territory is retaken (OCHA, 2015, p. 7). The current conflict in Iraq has left

¹ Rohwerder, B. (2014). *Contemporary conflict analysis of Iraq* (Rapid Literature Review). Birmingham, UK: GSDRC, University of Birmingham. Available at: http://www.gsdrc.org/docs/open/GSDRC_Confl_Anal_Iraq.pdf

² Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant (ISIL), also known as Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS)/ Islamic State(IS)/Da'esh

8.2 million people in need of humanitarian assistance, according to OCHA, rising to an estimated 9.9 million in need by the end of the year (2015, p. 6). 2.9 million people have fled their homes since January 2014 (OCHA, 2015, p. 7).

A new, more inclusive government was formed in September 2014 which has tried address underlying Sunni grievances that have resulted in some support for ISIL (Katzman, 2015, p. 26). Recently, **mass protests** in the summer of 2015, have resulted in Prime Minister al-Abadi **proposing new reforms** aimed at addressing underlying grievances of the population which feed into the conflict (Associated Press, 2015; Cordesman, 2015, p. 9).

For more information on the conflict, and its actors, roots, drivers, trigger, and responses, please see the GSDRC [Contemporary Conflict Analysis of Iraq](#), published in October 2014 and prepared for the European Commission's Instrument Contributing to Stability and Peace. This rapid literature review is an update of the conflict dynamics and peacebuilding sections of that report, looking at the literature published since then. As this is a current and rapidly evolving conflict, much of literature emerging from this rapid review comes mainly from Western think tanks, organisations working in Iraq and opinion pieces. Much is based on observations, analysis and opinion, rather than evidence. The literature considered in this review was largely gender-blind.

- **Current conflict dynamics:**
 - **Sunni support** continues to be important to the success of either ISIL or the Iraqi government.
 - Attempts have been made to create an **inclusive government** which wins their support.
 - **Resistance to ISIL** exists in some Sunni communities.
 - **ISF and ISIL's capacity** can affect the course of the conflict.
 - **Shia militias** who have responded to ISIL have increased their power and legitimacy.
 - There is the potential for deepening **sectarian conflict**, especially as a result of revenge attacks.
 - **Intra-Sunni** and **intra-Shia** dynamics, as well as **Sunni-Shia** dynamics, and **intra-Kurd** and **Kurd-Shia** dynamics, can cause tensions and alliances which affect the course of the conflict, as well as creating potential future conflicts.
 - Changing relations of Iraq and the US with **Iran** can impact on underlying tensions and how the conflict is fought.
 - The conflict is closely interconnected with the conflict in **Syria**.
 - Recent **protests and promises of reform** could play into the conflict dynamics.
- **Potential conflict risks** include: i) rising ethnic tensions; ii) the return of internally displaced persons and lack of peacebuilding plans; iii) territorial disputes; iv) overburdened internally displaced persons/refugee hosts; v) disaffected youth; vi) southern Iraqi unhappiness with the government; vii) calls for the breakup of Iraq; and viii) control over water.
- **Potential for peacebuilding:** The **lack of a peacebuilding strategy** to compliment the military operations is a cause for concern. The literature does not engage much with **peacebuilding platforms** or actors. Some suggestions in the literature about the potential for peacebuilding includes: i) the general rejection of violent groups; ii) increasing Sunni support for the government; and iii) a sense of common identity. Some important **peacebuilding actors** could include: religious leaders, political figures, civil society organisations, and international actors.

2. Current conflict dynamics

Many of the conflict dynamics during late 2014 are still in place in mid-2015. As a result, some of the information below is taken from the [2014 report](#).

Sunni support for ISIL or the Iraqi government

The US-led airstrikes initiated in August 2014 to support the Iraqi government forces have blunted ISIL advances but have not weakened them overall; and recently were unable to prevent the fall of Ramadi to ISIL (Katzman, 2014, p. 24; Katzman, 2015, p. i). This is partly due to the support for ISIL and other armed Sunni groups from some local populations as a result of political, economic and social grievances (Adnan, 2014, p. 4). Shia political domination has led to some of Iraq's Sunni Arabs siding with radical Sunni Islamist insurgents as a way of reducing that dominance (Katzman, 2014, p. ii).

Some attempts are being made to win the support of the Sunni population in the areas under ISIL control so that they chose to side with the Iraqi government to fight ISIL on behalf of the state (Adnan, 2014, p. 4). This has been difficult (Adnan, 2014, p. 4). The lack of national-level Sunni leadership feeds the support for local insurgent groups (Adnan, 2014, p. 4). As demonstrated by the April 2014 election results, many Sunni political leaders lost their credibility with the population during the protest movement as they attempted to reach political accommodations with the former Maliki government (Adnan, 2014, p. 4). However, a military campaign to destroy ISIL which does not address the Sunni disconnect from the state is likely to accelerate a sectarian civil war (Adnan, 2014, p. 4).

Attempts at an inclusive functioning government

Iraq's new government, formed after former Prime Minister al-Maliki was strongly encouraged to step-down, was heralded as an opportunity to re-establish trust between the government and its Sunni population (PAX, 2014a, p. 2). Analysts believe that there can be no form of military victory unless the new Iraqi government can bring Iraq's Shia, Sunnis, and Kurds back together as some form of functioning state (Cordesman, 2014a, p. 1). The new Prime Minister Haidar al-Abadi has adopted policies intended to win back Sunni support, although there is continued Sunni mistrust of Baghdad (Katzman, 2015, p. 26, 27). In addition, his attempts to address Sunni demands have also caused agitation among his core Shia base (Katzman, 2015, p. 27). The inability of the US-led coalition to prevent ISIL's takeover of Ramadi in May 2015 is reported to have weakened al-Abadi and benefited former Prime Minister al-Maliki and those that continue to support him (Katzman, 2015, p. 27).

Resistance to ISIL

Active resistance to ISIL is mounting amongst some Iraqi Sunni communities, inside and outside areas under ISIL control (Adnan, 2014, p. 25). The new government has provided material and military assistance which has enabled some tribes to start fighting back, although there are complaints by some tribal leaders that support is not being delivered (Duman, 2015, p. 8; Reuters, 2014). However, the government has had limited success in recruiting Sunni forces and has not been able to pass the National Guard legislation which would create provincial National Guard forces that would have strong Sunni and Kurdish elements tied to the central government (Cordesman, 2015, p. 6-7; Katzman, 2015, p. 26). ISIL has attacked and killed those resisting it, including Sunni tribesmen (Reuters, 2014).

Iraqi Security Forces (ISF)'s capacity

Despite a number of victories elsewhere in the country, the fall of Ramadi was a major defeat for ISF, although they still control key defence positions across Anbar province (al-Khoei, 2015, p. 5). Efforts are likely to be focused on recapturing Ramadi rather than Mosul (al-Khoei, 2015, p. 5). There are some rumours that corrupt ISF members sold battle plans and logistical information to ISIL which helped them to capture the Ramadi (al-Khoei, 2015, p. 5).

ISF's lack of capacity and weakness mean that it has struggled to take back the territory which has been lost to ISIL (Allawi in Chatam House, 2014, p. 4; Fraiman et al, 2014). Relying on strong Shia militias, who often have Iranian backing, to help fight ISIL has alienated local Sunnis in those areas, especially when the militias have carried out abuses with impunity (Amnesty International, 2014a; Cordesman, 2014a, p. 1; Krieg, 2014, p. 3). Weak Sunni representation in ISF and the involvement of the Shia militias have resulted in ISF being perceived as a sectarian actor and as a result fighting in Sunni areas may be met by resistance motivated and fuelled by sectarian sentiments (Adnan, 2014, p. 25; Cordesman, 2015, p. 7). Some support for ISF does exist in Sunni areas as was shown in focus groups in Anbar, with some women who feel that ISF can protect the civilian population from clan militias and terrorists (Ali, 2014, p. 2).

Provincial governments in southern Iraq may not be able to react to emerging security concerns surrounding the current protests over service shortages and corruption, as a result of the forward deployment of many southern Iraq-based ISF units to Anbar and Salah ad-Din (Bell et al, 2015).

Increasing power and legitimacy of Shia militias

The almost wholesale collapse of the Iraqi army and security forces in the face of the advance of ISIL has led to an 'unprecedented rise in power and prominence of the Shia militias' (Amnesty International, 2015b, p. 9). As the main force willing and able to fight ISIL they gained power and legitimacy in the communities they were protecting and some of them are a growing political as well as military force (Amnesty International, 2015b, p. 9; Cordesman, 2015, p. 6, 7; Duman, 2015, p. 5). Nominally they are supposed to operate under the loosely defined Hashd al-Shaabi (Popular Mobilization Units/Forces, PMU/PMF) volunteer force but there is still a lack of concrete mechanisms to hold these militias accountable and which may make a difference to their conduct (Amnesty International, 2015b, p. 10; Duman, 2015, p. 14). There are concerns about Iran's influence over these groups, which weaken their legitimacy in the eyes of the Iraqi people (Duman, 2015, p. 8, 22). There are some Sunni Arab tribes who have joined Hashd al-Shaabi in order to fight against ISIL, although it is questionable whether they act for all Sunnis, making it hard for Hashd al-Shaabi to gain legitimacy among Sunnis (Duman, 2015, p. 11-12, 21). In addition there are concerns that the reliance on militia weakens the government's legitimacy and institutions (Duman, 2015, p. 21). If it fails to achieve total control over them there is a risk of further instability (Duman, 2015, p. 21).

With the fall of Ramadi, the Shi's militias were invited to join the operation to attempt to recapture Ramadi and surrounding areas, despite previously being discouraged from participating in military operations in the predominantly Sunni Anbar region (Amnesty International, 2015b, p. 11). Their behaviour in relation to Sunni civilians is a cause for concern (PAX, 2015a, p. 1; Katzman, 2015, p. i).

However, it should also be noted that local Sunnis requested that the Shia forces come into Ramadi and help them defeat ISIL, as they recognise that they cannot do it alone and that ISF are not capable (al-Khoei, 2015, p. 5-6). This Sunni-Shia cooperation could be 'a crucial element in this campaign' (al-Khoei, 2015, p. 6; Duman, 2015, p. 23).

Underlying sectarian frustrations and the potential for deepening sectarian conflict

Local sectarian conflicts have become part of the dynamic of violence by ISIL (PAX, 2014a, p. 2). ISIL has fed upon various local Sunni frustrations, while at the same time the Sunni population used ISIL as an opportunity to settle historical and political grievances (PAX, 2014a, p.2). A large part of the territory which is controlled by ISIL in Iraq is disputed by the Iraqi government and the Kurdish Autonomous Region and has experienced different conflicts as a result of various state policies aiming to alter the local demographics in an ethnically and religiously mixed area (PAX, 2014a, p. 2; PAX, 2015b, p. 10).

Mosul

ISIL's capture of Mosul led to inter-community violence related to 'population policies from the Saddam Hussein era and to historical grievances between communities, including economic, land and water disputes' (PAX, 2015a, p. 2).

The recapture of territory from ISIL by Kurdish Peshmerga forces, and the advance of the Peshmerga, the Iraqi Army and Shia militias led to an influx of Sunni Arab IDPs into Mosul (PAX, 2015a, p. 2). Despite ISIL's governance being cruel and violent, 'many Sunni Arabs in Iraq feel ISIL offers them some form of protection that is not provided by the Kurdish Peshmerga, and even less so by the Shia militias and the Shia-dominated Iraqi army' (PAX, 2015a, p. 3).

Violence against women

PAX (2015a, p. 3) reports that 'anger about the violence against women by security actors has become a conflict trigger on all sides'.

Revenge attacks

There are concerns about revenge actions against communities currently supporting or occupied by ISIL which could exacerbate already existing local conflicts and fault lines (PAX, 2014a, p. 2). Amnesty International (2015b, pp. 8-9) reports that men from Sunni communities in and around areas where ISIL has been operating, or where it has imposed its control, are often suspected of collaborating with ISIL and many have been targeted by Shia militias and security forces. Hundreds of Sunni men have been killed in the past year, in 'apparent acts of revenge for the heinous crimes committed by ISIL', and with the result of forcible displacement of Sunni communities (Amnesty International, 2015b, p. 9). While investigations have been called, little action appears to have been taken (Amnesty International, 2015b, p. 4). Other reported revenge attacks include attacks by Yezidis and Kurds against their Arab neighbours, who they accuse of 'having joined ISIL, or otherwise having co-operated with it, in committing atrocities against their communities and of having looted their homes and property' (Amnesty International, 2015a, p. 2). Tensions also exist between Yezidi militia and Kurdish forces who they blame for not resisting the ISIL attack on Sinjar which forced hundreds of thousands of Yezidi from their homes (Amnesty International, 2015a, p. 11).

Other commentators are concerned that sectarian violence will continue until Sunnis are convinced that Baghdad has their best interests at heart (Tucker-Jones, 2014, p. 16). The central government's actions and credibility in ensuring the protection, recovery, and development of every Sunni area it liberates is critical for long-term peace and stability (Cordesman, 2015, p. 15). There are also concerns that the redeployment from Syria of Iraqi Shia volunteer fighters will increase levels of sectarian violence (ACAPS, 2014b, p. 6).

A reductionist, sectarian narrative

al-Khoei (2015, p. 6) argues that the war on the ground does not support the 'reductionist, sectarian narrative' of war between Shias and Sunnis and is rather a war between the Iraqi government and ISIL. This

is reflected in the fact that it took ISIL so long to take Ramadi as a result of fierce local Sunni resistance (al-Khoei, 2015, p. 6).

Intra-Sunni and intra-Shia dynamics

al-Khoei (2015, p. 6) argues that intra-Sunni and intra-Shia dynamics are going to play an important role in the failure or success of the campaign against ISIL. Intra-Sunni violence has been documented in the contested areas of Iraq, including, general violence and targeted killings between various, fragmented, Sunni groups (Home Office, 2014, p. 10; Tucker-Jones, 2014, p. 14). The Sunni tribes in Anbar are split between both sides of the conflict and tribal revenge attacks and efforts to restore tribal honour could result in greater violence (al-Khoei, 2015, p. 6). ISIL have also publicly executed anti-ISIL local Sunnis (al-Khoei, 2015, p. 6).

Prime Minister al-Abadi has to deal with extremist Shia, especially those elements who are still loyal to the former prime minister, al-Maliki, who are constantly trying to undermine Prime Minister al-Abadi (al-Khoei, 2015, p. 6; Katzman, 2015, p. 27). In addition, the powerful Shia militia commanders are likely to resist attempts by the Iraqi state to assert its control over these paramilitary forces (al-Khoei, 2015, p. 6).

Arming the Kurdish Peshmerga: changing intra-Kurd and Kurd-Shia dynamics

International support to the Peshmerga in their fight against ISIL has been assessed as favouring the Kurds in the Disputed Internal Boundaries, which is further polarising the volatile situation and potentially also Iraq's future stability (PAX, 2015b, p. 12; ICG, 2015, pp. 23-25). In addition, an ICG report warns that 'building up Kurdish forces accelerated the Kurdish polity's fragmentation, increased tensions between these forces and non-Kurds in disputed areas and strengthened Iraq's centrifugal forces' (ICG, 2015, p. i). By not creating a strong, unified military response to the ISIL threat, support to the Peshmerga 'risks prolonging the conflict with IS, worsening other longstanding, unresolved conflicts and creating new ones' (ICG, 2015, p. i). By arming the Kurds in this way international support has upset the fragile equilibrium among Kurds, between Kurds and Sunni Arabs and between the Kurds and the governments in Baghdad, Tehran and Ankara, which risks weakening Iraq's unity and allows ISIL to endure (ICG, 2015, p. ii, 20).

van Wilgenburg (2015, p. 6) also suggests that 'as a result of the Shia militias' recent push northward, there has been speculation over the potential for renewed conflict between Shia and Kurdish forces'. The different dynamics between the Kurdish political parties, and their relationship with Iranian and Iraqi Shia groups, will 'determine the potential for Shia-Kurdish conflict, and with it, the potential for this rivalry to distract both parties from the conflict against the Islamic State' (van Wilgenburg, 2015, p. 6; ICG, 2015, p. i). The Patriotic Union of Kurdistan (PUK) and its Peshmerga forces have generally cordial relations with Shia groups and Iran, while there is little cooperation between the Shia militias and the Kurdistan Democratic Party (KDP) Peshmerga (van Wilgenburg, 2015, p. 6). However, Iran's involvement in the defence of Erbil, and subsequent meetings suggest attempts to improve relations between the two (van Wilgenburg, 2015, p. 7; Cordesman, 2015, p. 15).

Tensions could also erupt between Baghdad and Erbil over budgetary issues, or Kurdish control of Kirkuk, or attempts by Baghdad to recruit fighters in KDP zones of control (van Wilgenburg, 2015, p. 7; Cordesman, 2015, p. 15).

Relations with Iran

Relations between the US and Iran have altered in the last year, moving from coordinating on staying out of each other's way in the fight against ISIL, to tacit military cooperation, with the US air force taking out ISIL defences, paving the way for Iran-backed forces and the ISF to route ISIL (al-Khoei, 2015, p. 6). The US have also recently become more accepting of the *Hashd al-Shaabi* if they are under the command of ISF (al-Khoei, 2015, p. 6; Katzman, 2015, p. i, 39). There is an acknowledgement that none of the actors on their own can defeat ISIL and therefore they have a convergence of interests, even if this is not necessarily publically acknowledged and the US and Iran still compete for influence (al-Khoei, 2015, p. 7).

While Iran is a powerful external actor in Iraq, to the concern of Iraqi Sunnis and Americans, it should also be noted that there are signs that this influence is also a concern for Iraqi Shias, including Sistani (al-Khoei, 2015, p. 7-8; Duman, 2015, pp. 8-9, 22).

Interconnectedness with the conflict in Syria

The conflict in Iraq goes beyond its borders and is closely linked with what is occurring in Syria (Cordesman, 2014a, p. 1). ISIL operates in both countries and Iraqi Shia militia have fought on behalf of the Syrian government, while Iraqi Kurds have supported Syrian Kurds and vice versa (Katzman, 2014). The interlinked battle space means that what happens in one country can have a consequence in the other as the different forces move between the different countries, strengthening and weakening their different positions (ACAPS, 2014, p. 10). The extremely porous border between the two countries and the surge of trained fighter and weapons in the region has had a destabilising impact (ACAPS, 2014b, p. 2). As long as the conflict continues in Syria it has the potential to remain a breeding ground for radicalism or a safe haven for radical armed groups such as ISIL (PAX, 2014a, p. 3; Cordesman, 2014b, p. 23).

ISIL's capacity

Some experts suggest that ISIL and its allies ability to advance the conflict further is affected by their lack of capacity to take full military control of Baghdad or the Shia heartland (Brenner, 2014, p. 1; Worsdell, 2014, p. 3). In addition, experience with similar groups elsewhere suggests that ISIL will face problems such as a collapse of local support and conflict with local allies as it tries to consolidate power (Lynch, 2014, p. 3; Staniland; 2014, p. 21).

Protests and promises of reform

A brutal heatwave, with frequent power cuts has led to mass protests during the summer of 2015, even among the Shia majority (Associated Press, 2015). The protesters have been demanding better government services, less corruption and more accountability among officials (Chulov, 2015; Cordesman, 2015, p. 5). These protests have been met by a very different response to the 2013 protests which triggered the current conflict. Support for the demonstrations has come from Iraq's most revered Shia cleric Ayatollah Ali Sistani and the Prime Minister, Haidar al-Abadi, who introduced a range of reforms in response (Chulov, 2015; Associated Press, 2015; Cordesman, 2015, p. 9). Cordesman (2015, p. 5) suggests that further underlying reasons for these protests are the cumulative impact of a wider mix of problems including 'Iraq's ethnic and sectarian tensions, the uncertain character and effectiveness of its various security forces, growing economic hardships over a period of years, and gross government in efficiency and corruption in virtually every aspect of government activity'.

Prime Minister al-Abadi proposed set of political reforms including abolishing the three vice-presidential posts as well as the office of deputy prime minister in order with the aim of reducing spending and improving government performance, in the face of mass protests (Associated Press, 2015; Cordesman, 2015, p. 9). This would effectively sack former Prime Minister al-Maliki who was appointed to the largely symbolic role of vice president after he begrudgingly stepped aside (Associated Press, 2015). The plan also aims to combat endemic corruption in Iraq's political system by filling government posts with political independents rather than on the basis of party patronage and sectarian loyalties (Associated Press, 2015). The reforms were drawn up with the support of Ayatollah Sistani and the leading Sunni political figure in the current Iraqi government: the speaker of the parliament, Salim al-Jabouri (Cordesman, 2015, p. 9). The reform bill was passed unanimously on 11 August by the Council of Representatives (Bell et al, 2015; Chulov, 2015). Al-Abadi has also stated his intent to seek a popular mandate to amend the constitution (Bell et al, 2015).

However, there are concerns that Prime Minister Al-Abadi is too weak to change anything, especially as the reforms challenge the vested interests that have put him in power (Chulov, 2015; Cordesman, 2015, p. 12). Commentators are sceptical that former Prime Minister al-Maliki or any of the other politicians will let go of their positions or perks of the job and fear that if change does not happen the protests could turn violent (Chulov, 2015). There are also concerns that the reforms do not deal with most of Iraq's underlying problems (Cordesman, 2015, p. 12).

Potential conflict risks

Ethnic tensions

ISIL ethnic cleansing is 'causing irreparable damage to the fabric of Iraq's society, and fuelling inter-ethnic, sectarian and inter-religious tensions in the region and beyond' (Amnesty International, 2014b, p. 5). A recent report suggests that ethnic/religious minority refugees/IDPs are very reluctant to return to their homes because they feel they were betrayed and attacked by their neighbours (Saadullah, 2014). There have been demonstrations against Arab Iraqis in Iraqi Kurdistan and some Iraqi Kurdish politicians are even suggesting that Arabs and Kurds will not be able to coexist in areas where the local Arab population is perceived to have sided with ISIL (Saadullah, 2014; PAX, 2014b, p. 2).

Return of internally displaced persons (IDPs)

There are reports of inter-community tensions in recaptured areas, with a high suspicion among Kurds towards Arab communities who stayed behind during ISIL control (PAX, 2015b, p. 69-70). A study of minorities who have fled ISIL controlled areas also indicates that, among IDP communities 'apart from the general polarization between minorities and Kurds vis-à-vis Sunni Arabs (victims vs. perpetrators), many divisions exist between minorities and even within the various minority communities' which poses a challenge for peaceful return in the future (PAX, 2015b, p. 11, 40-53, 64). The sense of a lack of protection by either ISF or the Kurdish Peshmerga and lack of government support in IDP camps, has resulted IDP communities looking for resettlement abroad or to developing their own militias on religious or ethnic basis (PAX, 2015b, p. 11; IILHR et al, 2015, p. 3, 35). The emergence of ethnic and religious militias in this situation of inter-community distrust increases the space for acts of revenge (PAX, 2015b, p. 71). This poses a serious threat to return scenarios and further fuel renewed conflict (PAX, 2015b, 11).

PAX (2015b, p. 12) notes that in some areas which have been recaptured by Peshmerga from ISIL, some worrying incidents have been reported of displacement of Arab Sunni communities and return of predominantly Kurdish IDPs. This may severely affect peaceful return scenarios to Ninewa province if these incidents turn into a trend (PAX, 2015b, p. 12).

The return of IDPs to previously ISIL-held regions is highly problematic as each different minority group has a different interpretation of what restoration of the demographic situation would mean (PAX, 2015a, p. 4). It is unclear who would provide protection and how the rights of the various different ethnic and religious communities would be recognised and local conflicts resolved (PAX, 2015a, p. 4; PAX, 2015b, p. 71). Protection of Yazidis and Christians in a 'safe zone' in the Ninewa plain provided by the Peshmerga would lead to further claims of the Kurdish Regional Government (KRG) on the Ninewa valley and increase the potential for the breakup of Iraq (PAX, 2015a, p. 4).

Mosul

There are concerns that the recapture of Mosul province and city in the face of Sunni Arab distrust of the Iraqi army, the Shia militias or the Peshmerga, could lead to mass displacement of an estimated 1.5 million civilians to either ISIL-controlled Raqqa in Syria or KRG-controlled areas, as they might fear less violence from the Peshmerga than from the Shia militias (PAX, 2015a, p. 3). While recapture by Sunni forces may be preferable, at present non-ISIL Sunni militias are not strong enough to control the city of Mosul (PAX, 2015a, p. 4). Therefore PAX warns that it is important to have a peacebuilding plan in place that prevents a new wave of sectarian violence (2015a, p. 4).

Territorial disputes

There is a risk of potential conflict relating to lack of a resolution between the central Government of Iraq and the KRG over the disputed status of recaptured areas (PAX, 2015a, p. 1; Cordesman, 2015, p. 15). This especially relates to the Kurdish takeover of Kirkuk (Cordesman, 2014a, p. 1). Oil-rich Kirkuk has long been contested between the city's main ethnic groups, Kurds, Turkmen and Arabs, and sectarian tensions and attacks are high (Amnesty international, 2014a, p. 13; Katzman, 2014, p. 13). It is currently in the control of KRG, after the Iraqi army fled the ISIL advance. KRG have indicated that they do not intend to give up control of the city (Amnesty International, 2014a, p. 13; Katzman, 2014, p. 13; Worsdell, 2014, p. 4). However, not all Kurdish parities want Kirkuk to be annexed into Kurdistan, with the PUK preferring for it to be an independent province (van Wilgenburg, 2015, p. 6). They fear they will lose their influence in Kirkuk to the KDP who controls Erbil (van Wilgenburg, 2015, p. 6)

Influx of displaced people overburdening hosts

Hundreds of thousands of the displaced are being hosted by KRG and its officials have said they are overwhelmed (Amnesty International, 2014b, p. 5; ACAPS, 2014a, p. 6; OCHA, 2015, p. 8). Services in the communities hosting displaced persons are struggling to cope and tensions between host communities and displaced families are rising, as resources dwindle and displaced are seen to be benefitting disproportionately (OCHA, 2015, p. 7, 8). There is some suggestion that the Kurds feel abandoned by the central Iraqi government in their support for IDPs/refugees and their fight against ISIL (Rahman in Chatham House, 2014a, pp. 9-10). Social tensions between host communities and IDPs is on the rise throughout Iraq and is likely to increase if the long-term impact is not addressed (OCHA, 2014, p. 48).

Disaffected youth

Community leaders are worried that 'disaffected youth, with few positive options, will fuel tensions and violence for decades to come' (OCHA, 2015, p. 8).

Southern Iraqi unhappiness with the government

Many people across Shia dominated southern Iraq are extremely unhappy with the government in Iraq for similar reasons to many Sunni Arabs and Kurds (Khedery in Chatham House, 2014b, p. 3). The government in Baghdad has failed to deliver on the basic social contract which is to provide security, basic services, and a means for citizens to earn a living (Khedery in Chatham House, 2014b, pp. 3-4).

Calls for the breakup of Iraq

Some Iraqi Sunnis would like the same level of autonomy as the Kurds (Tucker-Jones, 2014, p. 16). However, this could fragment the Iraqi state even more, leaving it weakened (Tucker-Jones, 2014, p. 16). Basra, and other provinces in the South, may also want to declare themselves a region like Kurdistan to retain more of their oil wealth (Chatham House, 2014b; Cordesman, 2015, p. 9). Iraq's geography, water, infrastructure, economics, and demographics are not conducive to some form of political separation (Cordesman, 2015, p. 15).

Control over water

ISIL has used control over water in its fight against the Iraqi government and stopped water reaching Shia-dominated southern Iraq and the capital, Baghdad, as well as flooding farmland around the town of Abu Ghraib (Smith, 2014, p. 4; ACAPS, 2014a, p. 4). However, one commentator suggests that, following the example of ISIL's cooperation with Assad's regime over the distribution of electricity, agreements for sharing water may 'provide a basis for conflict management that mitigates the worst violence and spares civilians further harm' (Ahram, 2014, p. 30).

3. Potential for peacebuilding

There are concerns about the lack of a peacebuilding strategy to compliment the military operations against ISIL (PAX, 2015a, p. 1). PAX warns, for example, that without a peacebuilding strategy, there is a 'serious risk of gross human rights violations, revenge operations and further ethnic cleansing if the province and city of Mosul are recaptured, laying the ground for further conflict' (PAX, 2015a, p. 1). Military defeat of ISIL will not bring security and stability to Iraq if the underlying tensions between Sunnis and Shias, and Arabs and Kurds, are not addressed (Cordesman, 2015, p. 1, 2).

There is a **gap in the literature** when it comes to examining peacebuilding platforms in Iraq. There is no recent or up-to-date assessment on peacebuilding efforts in Iraq (EPLO, 2014, p. 2). Previous reviews in 2010-11 found that peacebuilding and peacemaking activities carried out in Iraq, ranged from mediation and negotiation among political parties, to trauma counselling work for victims conducted by CSOs (EPLO, 2014, p. 2). These activities were often implemented at the local or provincial level rather than the national, and their impact was often limited to those people who directly participated in the activities (EPLO, 2014, p. 2).

Common ground

Polling by IIASS, an Iraqi social research and marketing firm, in Iraq between June and September 2014 suggest the general public rejects violent extremist groups. 77.4 per cent of people polled in Sunni areas controlled by ISIL in September think that ISIL has a negative influence on life in Iraq (Dagher, 2014, p. 7).

The polls show that there are some fundamental ideological differences between Iraqi Sunnis and ISIL (Dagher, 2014, p. 19). The majority of Iraqi Sunnis are supportive of secular politics and democracy. New polls also show that trust in the government has risen dramatically amongst Sunnis since the new government was established. In September 2014 47 per cent of Sunnis now trust the government (compared with 3.8 per cent in July) (Dagher, 2014, p. 24).

Polling suggests that Iraqis do see themselves as sharing a common identity and nationality (Charney, 2014). 89 per cent of Iraqis are proud of their Iraqi nationality, including 98 per cent in mostly-Shia Basra, 94 per cent in Diyala and 85 per cent in Nineveh, heavily-Sunni provinces, as well as 57 per cent in Erbil,

the heart of Iraqi Kurdistan (Charney, 2014). However, there is also some suggestion that the different groups may have a different idea of what it means to be Iraqi, which may not be inclusive (Kadhim and Altikriti in Chatham House, 2014a, p. 5, 7).

A paper by the European Peacebuilding Liaison Office (EPLO) suggests that a non-military response to ISIL could be a replication of the widespread rejection of sectarian violence by Iraqi actors at different levels during the violence in 2007-2008 (2014, p. 2).

Peacebuilding actors

Significant peacebuilding skills have been developed by a number of political and civil society actors in Iraq since 2003, including policy makers, intellectuals, researchers, and activists (EPLO, 2014, p. 2). Focus group discussions in Anbar suggest that there needs to be local participation in the peace process to ensure a feeling of ownership, and highlight the importance of including youth and women (Ali, 2014, pp. 2-3).

Religious leaders

Religious and tribal leaders have important local knowledge, traditional values, and cultural practices that could be drawn upon to build a new national vision for the future of Iraq which rejects sectarianism and embraces diversity (EPLO, 2014, p. 2). Ayatollah Ali al-Sistani, an influential Shia religious leader, played a critical role in helping break the deadlock that allowed Haydar al-Abadi to become the new prime minister instead of Maliki (al-Khoei, 2014, p. 40). He has called for arms to be carried exclusively by official security forces and for restraint to be exercised (al-Khoei, 2014, p. 40). He is supportive of peaceful coexistence in Iraq and some commentators suggest that he can be a 'powerful moderating force' (al-Khoei, 2014, p. 40). Meanwhile, a joint Sunni and Shia fatwa was issued in June urging Iraqi citizens to back the security forces and condemn ISIL (Home Office, 2014, p. 39). In November 2014, a group of Muslim and Christian religious leaders from the region met together in Vienna and denounced violence perpetrated in the name of religion (KAICIID, 2014).

Political figures

EPLO suggests that 'key people like the Iraqi president, Fuad Masum, and the spokesperson of the COR, Salim Jaburi, are individuals who could play a role in a national reconciliation process' (2014, p. 2).

There currently are no, or at best, very weak and limited channels of communication between political parties involved in the political process inside Iraq and the political opposition, much of which is based outside of Iraq, in Jordan, and other countries in the region (EPLO, 2015, p. 2). Some of these parties are interested in reconciliation and have rejected ISIL but have not been invited to participate in any peace and reconciliation efforts (EPLO, 2014, p. 3).

Civil society

Currently civil society organisations (CSOs) have limited capacity to influence the political leadership in Iraq (EPLO, 2014, p. 2). A report from Anbar suggests that while CSOs have not been that active and have been targeted with violence, they have engaged in some peace initiatives (Ali, 2014, p. 3).

Civil society organisations such as the Network of Iraqi Facilitators (NIF) have been supported to halt violent feuds (USIP, 2015, p.1). For example, following the June 2014 massacre of Iraqi military cadets at Camp Speicher near Tikrit, the United States Institute for Peace (USIP) has 'helped NIF lead a dialogue between Sunni and Shia tribes to prevent an escalation of tensions and revenge killings' (USIP, 2015, p. 1). Attempts by civil society organisations to combat sectarianism include Kullina Muwatinin ("We are all Citizens"), a

youth project that has developed a network of 25 “citizenship ambassadors” representing Iraq’s diverse religious and ethnic backgrounds (Redvers, 2015).

EPLO suggests that local actors who are involved or could be mobilised to facilitate dialogue as part of reconciliation and peacebuilding processes include: The Iraqi Social Forum (ISF); Iraqi workers’ unions; Iraqi women networks and NGOs; Iraqi think tanks and independent organisations based in the region; The Humanitarian Dialogue Foundation (HDF); Duhok University’s Center for Peace and Conflict Resolution; and media organizations and workers (2014, pp. 3-4).

Successful examples of civil and political resistance to violent conflict are few and limited but they include (EPLO, 2014, p. 4):

- In the City of Kirkuk, civil society and local actors, including the governor and minority leaders, have engaged in effective mediation between different ethnic groups, which has prevented war inside the city.
- Religious leaders from the Sunni community together with local actors in Basra have succeeded in reducing hate and decreasing the number of attacks on minorities. Today, there are still minorities living peacefully within Basra, including Christians, Mandaee and Sunnis.

A longer list of civil society organisations who have worked on peacebuilding can be found on the Insight on Conflict website³, although the source provided no information on current activities. Please see [Appendix 1](#).

International actors

International actors supporting peacemaking and reconciliation in Iraq, including inter-tribal peace-making, or who could play an important role, include: Jordan; United Nations Assistance Mission for Iraq; The Holy See; and international civil society actors (including the international and Iraqi coalition ICSSI (Focal point: Un Ponte Per...); PAX; NOVACT; Mennonite Central Committee in Iraq; Christian Peacemaker Teams) (EPLO, 2014, pp. 4-5).

It is important that any activities are locally appropriate and adequately funded (EPLO, 2014, p. 5). Mediation and indirect negotiation with credible international facilitators are recommended as the best methods to start with for high-level political leadership and opposition (EPLO, 2014, p. 5). Public events such as “sports against violence”, art exhibits, poetry readings, and literature talks that promote and inspire widespread discussion of the potential for reconciliation and recognition of what people have in common, are recommended at the grassroots level (EPLO, 2014, p. 5).

International organisations such as USIP have helped resolve a potential security problem in Basra in 2014 for example, as IDPs arrived at the same time as police and army units were being moved to the frontlines, by assisting dialogue to develop civilian mechanisms to help fill the looming security vacuum (USIP, 2015, p. 2).

³ <http://www.insightonconflict.org/conflicts/iraq/>

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Key websites

- Institute for the Study of War – Iraq Updates: <http://www.understandingwar.org/iraq-blog>

- ACAPS Geo – Iraq Country Analysis: <http://geo.acaps.org/#geomap-tab>
- Insight on Conflict – Local peacebuilding Organisations in Iraq: <http://www.insightonconflict.org/conflicts/iraq>

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Appendix 1: List of peacebuilding organisations in Iraq

Al Messalla develops capacities of individuals and organisations in Iraq in the field of human rights and non-violence.

Al Rafidain Peace Organization was founded in 2007 and works in fields of peacebuilding and gender issues in Iraq

Al-Tahreer Association for Development works to build a free, democratic Iraq, in which justice & peace prevails.

The **Baghdad Women Association (BWA)** works on the capacity building and empowerment of women, as well as support for women who are victims of violence.

Center for Peace and Conflict Resolution at the University of Duhok is the only degree program in Iraq that is dedicated to teaching students about the emerging theory and practice of peacebuilding.

Civil Development Organization (CDO) conducts peace education and encourages dialogue among community, tribal and religious leaders and politicians in Iraq.

INSAN Iraqi Society is dedicated to ensuring peaceful co-existence among communities living side by side in Iraq, by enhancing the living conditions of communities, promoting good governance and building the capacity of the civil society in conflict resolution.

Iraqi Al-Amal Association (IAA) has worked with numerous local and international partners to work for peace, human rights and development in Iraq, operating across the country.

Iraqi Al-Firdaws Society brings together diverse groups and communities in Basra, Iraq to speak for peace in one voice

Iraqi Institution for Development (IID) works to promote peace, democracy and tolerance in Iraq.

Kurdistan Villages Reconstruction Association Organisation (KVRA) is focused on fostering the rise of the Iraqi civil society, along with the formation of truly democratic values and structures.

Muslim Peacemaker Teams (MPT) use non-violent methods to support communities struggling with violence in Iraq.

National Institute for Human Rights (NIHR) enhances skills in human rights education, conflict management and peacebuilding in Iraq.

Peace and Freedom Organization in Kurdistan (PFOK) works to promote peace and human rights in the Kurdistan region of Iraq.

Peace and Love Forum for Students and Youth (PLFSY) has a mission to spread peace and citizenship among young people in Iraq.

Reach is one of the oldest Iraqi peacebuilding organisations and teaches communities how to deal with violence and conflict resolution.

The **SILM network** is a network of 18 Iraqi organizations working in the field of conflict resolution and peacebuilding in Iraq.

Women Leadership Institute (WLI) is one of the leading voices for the women's movement in Iraq, and promotes the participation of women in the peacebuilding process.

Yezidi Fraternity & Solidarity League (YFSL) works to protect ethnic and religion minorities in Iraq.

Source: <http://www.insightonconflict.org/conflicts/iraq/> More information on each organisation can be found here.