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## The current situation in Iraq:

# EXPLOSIVE!

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***With Syria in the spotlight of the world's attention, situation in neighbouring Iraq is painted darker by the day. Latest developments in the country raise fears of descent into a civil war, as terrorism and attacks between the two major denominational groups are on the rise. And while the international and regional actors have their own agenda and motives in interfering (or not) in this gambit, the Iraqi Government is struggling to balance among the powers of the region, find common ground with the Kurdish Administration in Arbil and proposes the Iraqi Syria Initiative for the termination of the bloodshed next door.***

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## Persisting violence

Ten years after the toppling of Saddam Hussein, the Iraqi situation seems largely ignored by politicians and the world, despite a few articles on the anniversary of the 2003 invasion and some parallels between Syria and the Iraq war. This is unfortunate, considering the increasing importance of Iraq in the region for US and its allies.<sup>1</sup> At the moment, the Iraqi state is witnessing a dramatic rise in violence. A recent example is a series of bombings in the Baghdad district which killed 41 people, while another act of terrorism killed 14 in Mosul;<sup>2</sup> but this is by now commonplace in the country. Almost every day, there is at least one similar incident that makes it to the media. The numbers of the casualties are stunning: Iraq Body Count has recorded 4,573 deaths for 2012 and 6,293 from the beginning of 2013 till last month.<sup>3</sup> On top of those numbers, which describe the period after the withdrawal of the US army, a new report attributes half a million dead Iraqis to the war period (from 2003 to 2011)<sup>4</sup>.

Recent violence is closely linked to the Syrian quagmire. With terrorist groups arising by the minute, the Iraqi Prime Minister is concerned: "We are very worried about the Syrian arena transforming into a field that attracts extremists, terrorists and sectarians from various parts of the world, gathering them in our neighborhood."<sup>5</sup> Valid reports back al-Maliki's anxiety on the Syrian spill-over.<sup>6</sup>

The war-like situation in Iraq reminds onlookers of the religious hostilities between the two main denominations of Islam. As Fanar Haddad puts it, "Iraqi sectarian relations today are characterized by a pronounced state of competing sectarian 'martyrologies' " forcing Sunnis to attack Shiites and vice versa. According to a CSIS report, "Iraq faces a growing mix of related challenges in defining its "Arab" identity; in the de facto segregation of its Arab Shiite and Arab Sunni population, and in defining the role of Islam in its society and state."<sup>8</sup> A most important factor for the violence in Iraq, however, is the way the Iraqi administration took its form post-2003, which gave the leadership to the long oppressed Shiites. According to International Crisis Group, the Iraqi Government has managed to keep the Sunnis divided thus preventing the rise of a serious opposition and basically driving its opponents towards acts of violence coated with sectarian language.<sup>9</sup>

## The Kurdish factor

Apart from internal struggles, the al-Maliki Government has to face another issue, that is the Iraqi Kurds. Since the fall of Saddam Hussein, Iraqi Kurdistan has been a generally flourishing and safe area but which proved not immune to the recent rise in violence. On September 29th, after six years of peace, a series of bombings rocked the capital of the autonomous Kurdistan region, killing 6 staff members of the security services and injuring 36 people.<sup>10</sup>

Some days before, on September 21st, the Iraqi Kurds had elected their new regional Government: Massoud Barzani and his Kurdistan Democratic Party gained most seats while Jalal Talabani's Patriotic Union of Kurdistan, which ruled in a coalition with KDP until the elections, fell to the third place, making way for the "Gorran" ("Change") party.

"Gorran" is therefore a new factor in the equation of Arbil politics. This "Movement for Change" became an official member of the Iraqi Kurdish political life in May 2010. Its leader, Nawshirwan Mustafa, one of the founding fathers of PUK, left his former party in 2006 and founded a media company. It was this "strong media presence [that he used] to break silence on the public budget, corruption, lack of transparency over oil revenue, and human

rights abuses”.<sup>11</sup> In 2009, he announced the creation of his Movement for Change. This Movement’s “demand to use Kurdistan’s oil revenue to fund social programs for the poor appealed to a populace that had seen PUK and KDP party cronies get rich virtually overnight. Its candidates, many of them young and well-educated, reflected a more participatory understanding of politics than that shown by the PUK and KDP, which tend to use political appointments as an instrument of patronage”<sup>12</sup>. However, according to a Professor of Political Science in Arbil, the fact that it is a PUK “offshoot” means it cannot gain a larger support than it already has<sup>13</sup>.

With a sense of autonomy boosted after the elections and reinforced by the revenues from oil exploitation, the Kurds may dream of independence. Ever since 2003, they have been aiming at increasing KRG autonomy so as to declare a state when the time is right,<sup>14</sup> despite the fact that officials publicly speak in favour of a federal Iraq.<sup>15</sup> But according to Gareth Stansfield, Iraqi Kurdistan cannot financially stand on its own: “Constitutionally allocated 17 per cent of the national budget, the Kurdistan Region rarely receives this amount owing to disputes with Baghdad over accounting and, increasingly, over the disagreement between Arbil (the Kurdistan Region’s capital) and Baghdad in the realm of oil production”.<sup>16</sup> These disputes were recently aggravated when Arbil demanded the Kirkuk oilfield, claiming it belonged to the Kurds during the Ottoman times!<sup>17</sup> The dispute over Kirkuk almost led to a fight in early 2013 when Kurdish militias (Peshmerga) were sent to the area for “security reasons”, provoking Baghdad which sent its own troops. The two sides also compete in the armed forces domain: the more the Iraqi Government spends on its defense, the more the Kurdish Authorities respond, going so far as to create a National Security Council.<sup>18</sup> Today, despite their differences, the Iraqi PM insists that the two parties are trying to resolve their issues through dialogue.<sup>19</sup>

## **Balancing acts**

On a regional level, the al-Maliki Government seized the opportunity to engage in regional affairs as a peace agent, going on to propose the “Iraqi Initiative for Syria” in September. This 8-point Initiative calls for an immediate cease-fire and withdrawal of foreign fighters and financing by foreign powers of any side of the conflict. It also requests the neutral support of the United Nations as far as the chemical weapons are concerned and refuses any intervention, military or otherwise in the Syrian affairs.<sup>20</sup> Al-Maliki insists that his stance with regard to the Syrian war is neutral although he has been repeatedly accused of allowing the Iranian transport of weapons to the Assad regime (a fact which the Prime Minister officially denies).<sup>21</sup>

Apart from the involvement in the Syrian puzzle, Iraq has to counterbalance the other actors in its neighbourhood, namely Turkey and Iran. The Turkish AKP Government, a poster child for the so-called “soft power”, approached Iraq with its cultural activities and soap operas, its businesses, its construction projects and a boosting trade between the two countries,<sup>22</sup> an effort which, for some time, worked to the benefit of Turkey. However, too much meddling by Erdogan, taking the side of the Sunnis against the Shias, has caused resentment among Iraqi groups and the Government.

Furthermore, much to Baghdad’s annoyance, cooperation on oil exploitation is thriving between Ankara and Arbil. The first oil pipeline between the two is currently being tested and aims to use the existing Kirkuk-Ceyhan line but it is to be monitored independently from Baghdad. What is more, Arbil and Ankara are planning on a second oil pipeline which, according to the KRG Natural Resources Minister, will have the capacity of 1 million barrels

per day.<sup>23</sup> The Iraqi Deputy PM for Energy, Hussain al-Shahristani, recently called on Turkey to respect their agreement that no oil flow will ignore Baghdad's permission.<sup>24</sup> In the meantime, Iraq is to increase its oil output to satisfy the demands of India, China, Japan and South Korea.<sup>25</sup>

Iran, on the other side of the tightrope, is considered to be the most influential actor in Iraq. Its involvement in Iraqi affairs is a given and takes various forms. Despite the long history of animosity and even war between the countries, it is now widely assumed that they are allies. But despite the obvious religious affiliations, there is mistrust between the two, and the issues addressed are state-oriented, pragmatic and of strategic importance.<sup>26</sup> According to Deputy National Security Adviser of Iraq, "Iran has a different strategy than Iraq in the region. We are not on the same strategic line with Iran on Syria. Iran is trying to help the Syrian [government] to survive – or a controlled change to the regime [...] For Iran it is a matter of sphere of influence, for us it is a matter of defense [...] Of course Iran tries to make us be aligned in its policies, so do other states. We try to work on this thin and difficult line".<sup>27</sup>

But even on theology, there is competition between the two major Shiite religious centers as they promote different kinds of political and theological visions. Ayatollah Ali al-Sistani, the so-called "moderate" Shia religious authority in Iraq, is the head of the Hawza (Seminary) of Najaf that promotes a different ideological vision than that of Qum in Iran. For example, Najaf is against the clerics ruling politics, a diametrically opposite stance to the Iranian paradigm. It is argued that more and more the Shiite networks outside Iran draw away from the Islamic Republic and the politics they follow are mostly driven by the internal politics of the country they reside in.<sup>28</sup> To conclude, the influence of Iran is a result of the absence of a potent Iraqi state and not of religious or ideological proximity or the existence of a Shia community in Iraq.<sup>29</sup>

The issue of Iranian influence in Iraq always brings forth the issue of the Shiite majority in the country and its role in domestic and regional politics. The Shias in Iraq are politically organized into a few parties, most important of which are the Islamic Da'wa Party (whose leader is current Iraqi PM, Nouri al-Maliki), the Islamic Supreme Council of Iraq (ISCI) led by Ammar al-Hakim and the Sadrist Current, led by Muqtada al-Sadr. These parties, who were formed under different circumstances, also vary in terms of their social bases and goals.<sup>30</sup> Their history also reveals that two of them have allied against the third one according to their interests at the time.<sup>31</sup>

Apart from the political parties, another form of organisation for the Shias in Iraq is the militias, such as the Mahdi Army, which is affiliated to Muqtada al-Sadr, and the Badr Brigades, associated with ISCI. These small armies have fought in the past against each other and are allegedly funded by Iran.<sup>32</sup> The Iraqi Governments have also tried to dismantle them, but to no avail. According to a report, although the Iraqi politicians support disarmament of the militias, they refuse to do it in practice "because of political rivalries, insurgent attacks, ethnic or sectarian violence, and lack of faith in the ability of national security forces".<sup>33</sup>

## **What the future holds**

To strengthen the state's army and respond to internal challenges, al-Maliki is going ahead with arms deals with Russia and the US.<sup>34</sup> He has also allegedly requested the assistance of the United States in a drone-use crackdown against al-Qaeda but the Obama administration has refused to be involved in such a way.<sup>35</sup> In the meantime, eager to punish the perpetrators, the Iraqi Government was lately frowned upon by the international community when, within two days, it ordered the execution of 42 prisoners accused with terrorism charges.<sup>36</sup>

As for the continuing violence in the country, the actual numbers elude the analysts so no definite decision can be made as to whether the country is heading towards a civil war. According to CSIS, “there is no functional way to define the levels of violence that go from terrorism to insurgency to civil war or patterns of rises and falls in violence”<sup>37</sup> so the data collected via various processes and methods of analysis lead to different results, depending on the sources.<sup>38</sup> According to a Stratfor report, a civil war in Iraq is still unlikely due to the success of the Government to protect high-profile targets and administrative or oil infrastructure sites which are of utmost significance to the economy of Iraq.<sup>39</sup>

On a more positive note, analysts say that there is light at the end of the tunnel if Iraq restarts its experiment with democracy by avoiding use of force and sectarian rhetoric, focuses on development issues and sees to the demands of its people.<sup>40</sup> On its foreign policy, Iraq should shape a new “national interest” that will keep the state united. However, it will never recover without the help and engagement of its allies in the West.<sup>41</sup>

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