



Royal United Services Institute
for Defence and Security Studies



Conference Report

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Stable Governance in Northern Iraq

Prepared by Aniseh Bassiri Tabrizi, Aaditya Dave,
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RUSI Conference Report, June 2017



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This conference was jointly hosted by RUSI, the University of Exeter and the University of Birmingham through ESRC funds. It was convened to discuss the stabilisation in and challenges facing Iraq after Daesh.

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Published in 2017 by the Royal United Services Institute for Defence and Security Studies.



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ON 9 FEBRUARY 2017, RUSI, the University of Birmingham and the University of Exeter hosted a roundtable to discuss the challenges in reconstituting Iraq after the battle against Daesh (also known as the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria, or ISIS), focusing in particular on the relationship between Baghdad, the Kurdistan Region and the disputed areas between them. Peter Bartu, an international conflict-prevention specialist with a long history of work in Iraq, provided his insights and was joined by about 30 experts from academia, government and the private sector who are closely monitoring developments there. The session was chaired by Stefan Wolff.

The roundtable constituted the third of a series of workshops that form part of an ESRC-funded project on ‘The Future of Iraq and Syria’ undertaken by RUSI in collaboration with the University of Exeter and the University of Birmingham. This report summarises the major conclusions and talking points of the discussion, which focused mainly on four key topics: Iraqi identity and sectarian dynamics; the possibility and consequences of decentralisation; intra-Kurdish tension and the future of the Kurdistan Regional Government (KRG); and the role of the international community.

Iraqi Identity and Sectarian Dynamics

A prominent theme when discussing the current situation in the country was the lack of an Iraqi national identity and how this influences the perceived legitimacy of the government and provincial authorities. One of the participants noted that the concept of an Iraqi state cannot be discussed without first addressing the issue of a committed and shared national identity, which another person noted as being integral to the creation of a sense of citizenship and ultimately, statehood. However, ethnic and religious-based identities – such as Shia, Sunni, Arab and Kurdish, among others – have been taking precedence over a shared Iraqi identity, politicising the discussion over resource control and triggering calls for decentralisation.

Participants stressed how the reintegration of the Sunni identity as part of the national identity constitutes a key challenge. Bartu emphasised that in Iraq’s major cities, and throughout Nineveh, Sunni communities feel politically unrepresented. Although there have been attempts to reintegrate them since 2003, they have faced difficulties in reconstituting themselves as a coherent political stakeholder due to their dispersion across the country. He further stressed that if the Sunni community sees no tangible way of dealing with what they perceive to be an existential crisis, their grievances may manifest in the form of a ‘Daesh 2.0’.

Bartu noted that Shia militias and security personnel have borne the brunt of the fighting in key areas such as Ramadi and Fallujah. However, the legal legitimisation of Shia militias and their incorporation into a new security force has become an obstacle for sectarian reconciliation, particularly as the long-term effects of the newly created institution remain unclear.

Although some participants, as well as the speaker, expressed concern about the lack of debate over what would constitute – or how it would be possible to facilitate – national reconciliation, causes with the potential to cultivate a shared sense of Iraqi-ness were identified. Bartu cited the fight against Daesh as a driving force that had created a unity of purpose across ethnic and sectarian lines. The fight for Mosul, for example, has been a collaborative effort by the

Iraqi army (including the Special Operations Forces, known as the Golden Division), Sunnis, the Kurdish Peshmerga and the state-sponsored Popular Mobilization Units (PMU), thus facilitating coordination and division of labour among Sunni, Shia and Kurdish forces.

One of the participants suggested that military cooperation between Iraqi forces and the Peshmerga was particularly positive. However, Bartu pointed to the need to be cautious in making such an assessment: although certain security arrangements have evolved among the PMU, Peshmerga and Iraqi forces, tensions can occasionally flare. He instead pointed to the rehabilitation of internally displaced people (IDPs) as a potential unifying issue for regional governments and Baghdad, as it represents a noble principle around which to gather and create the space for dialogue between communities. This might then prevent renewed conflict and serve as a bridge towards the resolution of economic and political differences.

Towards Decentralisation?

Participants discussed the prospects of decentralisation in Iraq, on a sectarian or provincial basis, as a means to address the country's identity-based divisions and provincial competition. The group noted that although decentralisation would attempt to address the plurality of Iraq's communities, it would in itself be unable to tackle issues such as poor resource distribution, lack of transparency, corruption and weak infrastructure. These factors plagued the political system even prior to the outbreak of conflict with Daesh. In fact, participants raised concerns that decentralisation would simply transfer these very problems from the central to local level.

Corruption was mentioned repeatedly as a significant challenge and was noted as being a problem at both the central and provincial level, with participants citing the backlash against the KRG (further elaborated in the next section) and the re-emergence of corruption in liberated areas of Mosul. Nevertheless, one of the participants pointed to the work of the Iraqi Institute of Economic Reform, in cooperation with the Baghdad Provincial Council, in an attempt to rectify this. However, the extent to which this would have a negative influence on corruption at the provincial level remains unclear.

It was noted that although corruption and resource-sharing issues are often framed as sectarian or provincial and thus become politicised, these are national-level problems, as indicated by the fact that the southern city of Basra, which is far from the conflict zone, does not receive adequate clean water.

Participants also noted that there is a lack of agreement on what the post-conflict landscape would look like in practice. Bartu said that in the capital, for example, the impression is that once Mosul is liberated from Daesh, Baghdad will remain the seat of a centralised government and regain control of Kirkuk, Diyala and other contentious areas. However, things are unlikely to unfold in such a straightforward manner.

He laid out the array of transitional arrangements that have been discussed regarding Nineveh, including: retaining the current model of government; dissecting the governorate;

converting Nineveh into a region; decentralisation; and some form of autonomy for Tal Afaris, Yazidis and other groups that have suffered brutalities during the current conflict. Although stabilisation efforts have been centred on Mosul, Bartu asserted that localised complexities will necessitate discrete approaches in different parts of Nineveh, citing the uncertainties regarding post-conflict governance and security structures in Sinjar and Tal Afar, which have been heavily impacted by sectarian strife, as well as concerns about the Christian community in the Nineveh plains and Mosul.

In what was regarded as a positive outcome by participants, it was deemed likely that a north–south Line of Control would be drawn from Sinjar to Mosul and on to Kirkuk, with the northern parts controlled by the Peshmerga and the south by the PMU. Participants believed that such a development could feasibly prevent conflict between Baghdad and Erbil, even though it would not be a guarantee.

There was general agreement that discussions about decentralisation and reconciliation should occur within existing frameworks and legislation, rather than rely on measures such as installing military governors in former conflict zones. More specifically, Bartu argued that simply implementing the existing constitution and providing goods and services at the local level should remain the priority, noting that this would be widely supported by Iraqis as well. It was stated that decentralisation should be discussed only when there is actually a system to decentralise, and thus only once a basic level of governance is achieved.

Besides decentralisation, a UN-backed national compact has also been proposed, which suggests bringing together different communities in order to settle differences. However, there is a danger that due to the zero-sum nature of many of the disputes, such as those regarding territory and resources, this effort would lead to a deadlock. Even if this were to be pursued, however, it was agreed that implementing existing laws would be a good first step.

Intra-Kurdish Strife and the Future of the KRG

Discussions concerning decentralisation also brought into focus the fragmentation and conflict within Iraqi Kurdistan. Conflict between the Patriotic Union of Kurdistan (PUK) and the Kurdish Democratic Party (KDP), and subsequently a divide between their respective branches of the Peshmerga, has emerged over decisions concerning the production and export of oil, relations with Turkey as well as other Kurdish groups and economic and political decision-making.

In 2014, when oil prices were high, Kurdish President Masoud Barzani (of the KDP) took the gamble of making a deal with Turkey, hoping to reduce Iraqi Kurdistan's dependence on Baghdad. However, following the oil price crash, the central government slashed government salaries, causing massive demonstrations, particularly in the PUK stronghold of Sulaymaniyah, and public outcry against the poor economic management and corruption of the KRG.

The PUK and KDP also differ in opinion on what the KRG's linkages should be to other Kurdish groups in the region, such as the Democratic Union Party (PYD) and the People's Protection

Units (YPG) in Syria, the People's Democratic Party in Turkey (HDP) and the Kurdistan Workers' Party (PKK) in Iraq and Turkey. In particular, an incursion by the PKK into Sulaymaniyah, which had not occurred since the 1990s, caused a divergence in the KDP and PUK's approaches to Turkey. Nevertheless, even though relations between the KDP and Ankara have been largely positive, since Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdogan has ramped up his crackdown on the Kurds in Turkey, there has been increasing scepticism about the endurance of these ties.

Participants noted that in 2008–09, the Kurds were able to articulate a common stance on boundary delineation; now, it is difficult to find common ground between different Kurdish parties on this issue. Provinces such as Sulaymaniyah, where the KDP has limited influence and credibility, have expressed a desire for some level of autonomy and an active role in the political process.

One participant claimed that in 2008–09, the KRG was receiving what it regarded as its fair share of the federal budget from Baghdad, which paid for government salaries and infrastructure projects. However, a combination of reduced funds from Baghdad due to investments into the war effort, increased Kurdish spending on military operations against Daesh, migration of hundreds of thousands of IDPs from federal areas into Kurdistan and corruption within the KRG, has led to unpaid salaries and widespread discontent. Moreover, leading up to provincial and parliamentary elections, Baghdad is focused on consolidating relationships with other regions, rather than just the KRG, and thus is dedicating more of the federal budget towards these regions. This discontent has inflamed fragmentation, and as Bartu indicated, led to Iraqi flags being unfurled in Sulaymaniyah and contributed to calls for that city and Kirkuk to form a separate region.

Participants noted that Kurdish divisions will be exacerbated by the mandatory cap on total Iraqi oil exports following the decision by OPEC in November 2016 to cut oil output by 1.2 million barrels per day. Baghdad reduced oil exports from Kirkuk and increased them from Basra. However, rather than halting production altogether, the central government struck a deal with the KRG to allow oil from Kirkuk oilfield to pass through Kurdish pipelines and to Kurdish refineries, rather than being exported via Iraq's State Organization for Marketing of Oil. As most of the revenue from this was received by the KDP, the PUK, which leads the Kirkuk Provincial Council, has protested strongly against the agreement.

According to Bartu, this heightened level of Kurdish fragmentation allows Baghdad to hold separate tracks with Erbil and Sulaymaniyah, while it also inhibits Kurdish relations with international actors who are interested in addressing a united Kurdish voice. Thus, while the KDP remains the primary political party and the leader of the KRG, they are no longer popular.

Role of the International Community

Participants discussed how the international community could contribute to support the development of a peaceful Iraq. USIP's reconciliation work in Saladin was mentioned as a positive example of international efforts contributing to stabilisation, along with what were termed 'spontaneous' and 'organic' international efforts towards the reconciliation of tribal

elements in Anbar. Bartu indicated that Baghdad, the KDP and the PUK are generally open to international assistance and that there is room for external facilitators to lend support in difficult areas in Nineveh, such as Sinjar and Tal Afar.

However, the complexity of the conflict environment at the local level has caused hesitation among international organisations. The lack of clarity with regard to points of contact on the ground and basic arrangements regarding emergency assistance has inhibited international actors from working in certain areas, such as Sinjar. Participants agreed that a basic security arrangement between Kurds, Iraqis and Yazidis is needed to ensure secure conditions in which reconstruction projects and humanitarian assistance can be delivered.

Additionally, participants stressed the intertwined nature of the Syrian and Iraqi conflicts, noting that the two countries are considered a common theatre of operation with inextricably linked futures. As a result, the Russia's role in supporting Iran and the Syrian government is important, as it will have a significant impact on what transpires not only in Syria but also in Iraq.

Final Remarks

This roundtable differed from the first two organised as part of 'The Future of Iraq and Syria' project, as the conversation with Bartu was intended mainly to focus on the challenges for effective governance and stability faced by Northern Iraq. The intra-Kurdish strife and the future of the KRG, while explored in previous roundtables, was thus analysed in particular depth in this meeting. However, given the nature of the conflict in Iraq and in light of the impact that the battle of Mosul is likely to have on the future of Iraq post-Daesh, the roundtable also explored broader issues concerning the whole country. While the discussion over Iraqi identity and sectarian dynamics confirmed common trends and concerns, decentralisation and the role of the international community emerged as new themes compared to previous roundtables and might thus be analysed in more detail at future sessions.

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The authors gratefully acknowledge support from the Economic and Social Research Council under grant ES/M009211/1 as well as additional support from the University of Birmingham, both of which facilitated the organisation of this workshop.