

Report: Iraq from the ground - Two years after the fall of Mosul

Saturday 14 January 2017, by [Noria community of researchers](#), [ROVERA Donatella](#) (Date first published: 7 June 2016).

Contents

- [Introduction](#)
- [Chapter 1 - The Militias \(...\)](#)
- [Chapter 2 - After the Islamic](#)
- [Chapter 3 - Sinjar: from \(...\)](#)
- [Conclusion - Policy Brief by](#)

Introduction

The political and social developments in Iraq since the fall of Mosul to Islamic State/the conquest of Mosul by Islamic State

On June 7th, 2016, Noria, in association with Amnesty International France, organized a conference on Iraq focusing on the theme of “the political and social developments in Iraq since the fall of Mosul to Islamic State/the conquest of Mosul by Islamic State”. In order to further the discussions from the event, Noria’s Dynamics of Power in the Middle East programme [\[1\]](#) and Amnesty International France have compiled a special report on the Iraq crisis.

This report comprises expert analyses and maps produced by Noria’s cartography department [\[2\]](#). The dossier’s aim is to comprehend the strategies of the different Iraqi political organisations. Its main objective is to go beyond the prism of a purely sectarian reading of the conflict to better understand both its impact on the civilian population and the social developments which it has caused. The articles and maps presented in the dossier are the result of several fieldwork investigations carried out by researchers and experts associated with this project.

Two years on from the fall of Mosul to Islamic State and the start of a second civil war in Iraq, the political and social dynamics of the conflict remain largely unexplored. The present crisis cannot simply be presented as a consequence of the proclamation of Islamic State in June 2014, or of the American intervention in 2003. On the contrary, the crisis currently facing Iraq must be understood through an appreciation of the country’s political system and the instrumentalisation of sectarian violence by political actors. The fall of Mosul was the result of, among other factors, the violent repression by the central authorities of the protest movements that have arisen, from 2011 onwards, in the majority Sunni Iraqi provinces, and have taken on the form of an insurgency under the influence of jihadist groups. The civil war has greatly disrupted the Iraqi political field, which has been polarised notably through a process of “militisation” of Shiite and Kurdish forces. The Iraqi state remains at the centre of the crisis, but three territories now coexist under the control of three separate entities: the Kurdistan Regional Government (KRG), the Iraqi state controlled by Shiite factions, and Islamic State. Each of these entities has developed specific forms of governance and political agendas, against the backdrop of a regional context marked by the interventions of Iran and

the western coalition, whereas Islamic State has gambled on an autonomous strategy, catching the entire international system off guard.

Chapter 1 - The Militias and the State in Iraq

Since 2003, corruption, militia infiltration, or ghost soldiers have plagued the Iraqi army with different points of centralization and ethno-sectarian alliances. The militias in Iraq have become an integral part of the state's security architecture, operating both inside and outside official commands. As such, they have challenged the cohesiveness of the Iraqi military, grown and evolved in the shadow of the state's fragmentation depending on the ethno-sectarian affiliation. While present under the Ba'ath party (the national guard and then the popular army, although they were operating alongside national armed forces), from 2005 onwards, members of insurgent groups, sectarian and ethnic militias could join the military with relative ease. Iraqis hostile to the US and successive Iraqi governments took advantage of aggressive military recruitment and rudimentary background checks to acquire training and weapons.

Furthermore, newly established political parties relied on the militias to enlarge their ranks and to survive while competing for control of state institutions. Overtime, the militias played a key role in the set up of authoritarian mechanisms by acting under the banner of state's security at all costs and through the bureaucracy they set, while standing as the guardians of the Iraqi state, especially so after ISIS. The new security and military configurations following ISIS' take over of Mosul and the development of the Hashd Al Sha'abi, or the Popular Mobilization, have created new territorial, bureaucratic and political realities in Iraq that are unlikely to be reversed. In that context, Iraq is now more than ever in a state where national security, and counterinsurgency, infused with ethno-sectarian hues, are shaping the techniques of administration of the state and the parties' bureaucracies' evolution.

THE BUREAUCRACY OF THE MILITIAS

War making is as much about management of population and territory, as it is about allocation and disbursement of resources. As such, a primary concern remains the retention of men and the control of insurgents and 'liberated' territories, especially so in the disputed territories. Initially non-state armed groups which organized around loose structures of pre-existing militias such as the Mahdy Army, the Badr Organization or the League of the Righteous (AAH), the Hashd Al Sha'abi was quickly brought into the fold of state institutions under the Prime Minister's control, although in reality Haider Al Abadi has never managed to make them accountable to his office. As such, while integrated into the state and developing their own bureaucracy, they mainly continue to function as parties' militias, bypassing the state's security structure and at times competing with them.

The bureaucracy behind the militias has mirrored and supported the expansion of the Hashd in Iraq as well as ensured and secured the hold over state resources for the political parties, and accordingly redrawing the contours of society according to ethno-sectarian ideology. This is even more noticeable today, whereby the fight against ISIS has, by extension of sectarian policies, targeted individuals through social and security policies of the state.

Overnight, soldiers, deserters, insurgents, and martyrs' families have become the primary object of the state policies under the popular mobilization forces, not only safeguarding the future of Iraq, but also defining what it means to be one of its citizens. Following the fall of Mosul on June 10, 2014, Shi'a cleric Ayatollah Sistani called all Iraqi men able to carry arms to either join security forces or to join one of the numerous existing militias. As a response, tens of thousands of Shi'a volunteers showed up at recruiting offices for militias and the army, which over time have considerably

overlapped on the battlefield. The extensive patronage system that came with the support and integration of those militias also replaced to some extent the formal structures of security and of fulfilling social functions such as providing employment or access to social services, while filling a state vacuum.

Iraq : National security and counterinsurgency infused with ethno-sectarian hues are shaping the techniques of administration of the state and the parties' bureaucracies' evolution.

THE GUARDIANS OF THE STATE

More importantly, instead of the traditional military institutions, the militias have become the guarantor of the state. It is worth remembering that prior to ISIS's assault, Shi'a leaders were in negotiations to revive the defunct Shi'a umbrella political organization and failed to present an alternative candidate that would be acceptable to Iraq's Sunnis and Kurds, and at least restore the veneer of national unity. Parties such as the Badr organization and Asaib Al Haq (League of the Righteous) gained prominence among Shi'a populations, posing as the defenders of Iraq and of the Shi'a, as can be seen on social media as well as through their own media channels.

Grievances are key to the political dimension that these militias play in Iraq. Born out of a need to for protection against the former Ba'athists and Al-Qaeda, militias and the Hashd al-Sha'abi today gained momentum as political and social guarantors of specific groups, blending violence and populism with Islamic rhetoric, hence shaping at once a society aligned with the interest of the religious and political parties they represent.

The violence displayed by these armed groups equals the decapitation that can be found with ISIS, and seems to be vindicated by the mere fact that it is all in the name of a retaliatory justice, a balance for the wrongs of the past that precede ISIS. The heavy nationalist narrative, combined with the Shi'a iconography in which it is depicted, implied a reconfiguration of Iraqi national identity being equated with Shi'a identity. Other militias, outside of the Hashd al-Sha'abi (the People's mobilization), such as the Sunni ones remain very fragmented and are generally either affiliated to a tribe or a minority group, such as the Yekineyen Berxwedana Sengale (YBS, the Sinjar Resistance Units) for the Yazidis, working along with the Partiya Karkeren Kurdistan (PKK, Kurdistan Workers' Party). Even in the latter example, these have been integrated within the Hashd system and are now on Baghdad's payroll as they have become part of an integral strategy to destabilize the Partiya Demokrat a Kurdistan (KDP, Kurdistan Democratic Party)'s influence in Sinjar.

It is important to understand the militia as a type of armed political actor. These militias are unique in their degree of popular legitimacy, pursuit of a social and political agenda, and participation in the institutions of the state. As such, sectarian considerations in Iraq have long overridden national security concerns. The army's failure to become a national emblem is rooted in the fact that it has always been an instrument of one's power and ideology at the expense of national cohesion. As such, the militias filled that gap, particularly so in the context of Sistani's call for Shi'a unity at a time when divisions were rife.

It is important to understand the militia as a type of armed political actor. These militias are unique in their degree of popular legitimacy, pursuit of a social and political agenda, and participation in the institutions of the state.

STATE BUILDING THROUGH MILITIAS

1. State Paradox: In Iraq, security institutions are paradoxical with the traditional idea of a centralized power and control over the use of violence, be it through formal channels or informal

ones such as the militias. While militias are traditionally portrayed as constitutive of state failure, the issue in Iraq is not that the state cannot control the militias but rather that it won't do so because they serve the interest of multivariate parties involved in coalitions through power-sharing.

As Maliki was distrustful of the army, he built myriad of parallel security groups, empowering militias that would only answer to him. These groups today very much operate in the Iraqi theater of war, by passing the current PM who controls little more in essence but a dilapidated Iraqi army. Under the former PM, groups such as Hezbollah and AAH, and today smaller ones such as the Risaliyouns, play a key role in the military battles and trump the competition between Maliki and I ran's interests on the one hand and Abadi's struggle for power on the other. The relationship between the militias and the political parties in Iraq, grant the former actors a socio-political legitimacy that is exploited by the state, whereby the formal channels of authorities such as the police and the army remain under a system of check and balances, providing a counterweight to their influence.

2. State reliance on the militias: In light of ISIS' advances in Iraq after June 2014 and the failure of the regular Iraqi army to not only stop the terrorist group but also retreating, pointed to a collapse of the state security apparatus where nepotism, sectarianism and corruption had led to its demise, leaving a vacuum that militias quickly filled providing them and the parties they represent a new socio-political impetus.

Since 2003, the militias have a long standing history in Iraq of providing social protection and order as mentioned above and consequently have rooted their legitimacy among local populations which in turn have influenced the political ideology and aspirations of their constituencies. Militias then become an 'alternative form of governance system that has historically emerged during periods of central political collapse, either from an empire or a state'.

The delegation of violence to militias provides easy and quick solution to tactical problems, especially in cases where the state cannot intervene. This is particularly so in retaking certain key areas in the battle against ISIS, whereby Iraqi officials estimate that about 17 to 20% of the army ranks in Iraq are infiltrated by the militias, they do not comply to any international law and permit the implementation of a sectarian or ethnic re-engineering in areas that become 'liberated'.

3. Becoming political actors: In the last year, they have contributed to solidifying the competing vision of the state among the parties through their territorial gains and co-opting of local populations fighting against ISIS. The Islamist parties have been largely successful in depicting a fight against terrorism into a struggle for the survival of Shi'a nationalism.

As previously mentioned, the militias play an important political role, setting the ground for the next political battle, winning hearts and minds of specific communities aligned with their sectarian ideology. Najaf and Karbala are clearly strongly related to the sect-driven approach and socio-political dimension of the Hashd and demonstrate the Shia centric force that it has evolved into. To maintain this popular aspect of the PMF, the recruitment methods and the training processes point to very specifically rooted community and sect-based approaches, tied to political parties and religious ideology.

By developing multitude of militias and integrating them into the structures of the state, combined with the overwhelming national narrative woven around the heroic stand of the Hashd as the last bastion against Sunni invasions, the Shi'a political parties involved are developing institutional and organizational practices that transform the war into the politics and practice of everyday life. Each party that is rallied around becomes the means of organizing society to fight both internal and external enemies.

CONCLUSION

As mentioned in this article, while there is no denying that militias in Iraq have been a destabilizing factor as regards accountability and democratization, they have also been an active element in shaping the new state, ever so contributing to reformulating their role as parts and parcels of political institutions. To a number of these groups, the battlefield has transformed into an ideological advance that is likely to benefit their standings in the political arena. For example, it is assumed already that military commander such as Hadi Al Amiri may stand excellent chances to the premiership in the next round of elections. The financial and social benefits they dole out to the members of their units also feeds into the extended patronage networks that these parties have developed over the years, repeating a pattern of recruitment among their party ranks that was at its height during the civil war in the 2005 and 2006, but which will unfortunately lead to increased sectarian polarization of Iraqi society and politics and consequently bring forth intensified conflicts in a post ISIS environment.

Chapter 2 - After the Islamic State: the Case of Touzkhurmatu

In the wake of the military reversals sustained by the Islamic State (IS), the logic of a common front between Kurdish and pro-Baghdad Turkmen Shia forces fighting IS is crumbling, faced with the political stakes of territorial control. In many territories disputed between Baghdad and Erbil, inter-partisan and inter-community conflicts are resurgent. The town of Touzkhurmatu has become the first scene of such increased clashes, in the context of an institutional vacuum left by the weakening of the Iraqi state. Some 40 kilometers south of Kirkuk, the town has since October 2015 witnessed clashes between the Kurdish forces and Shia militias that both claim its control. The case of Touzkhurmatu is thus an indicator of the risks of a new civil war on the embers of the battle against the Islamic State. It foregrounds the dynamic whereby political and identity hierarchies are currently being renegotiated in the context of the weakening of the central state's institutions.

In June 2014, the rout of the Iraqi army and the arrival of Islamic State at the town's doorstep prompted increasing militia-formation among the local population, against a backdrop of political tensions. Both the peshmerga of the Patriotic Union of Kurdistan (PUK) and the Shia militias aspire to control this mixed town, whose population is 55% Kurdish, 35% Shia Turkmen and 10% Sunni Arab. The Kurds consider the town a strategic rampart against the advance of the Shia militias. The latter, led by the Badr Brigades, consider control of Touzkhurmatu a first step towards recovering the oil-rich province of Kirkuk. The increasingly violent waves of armed confrontation between the two players have created instability that intensifies inter-community polarization and has homogenized the town's neighborhoods. As society becomes increasingly militarized, mixed zones are disappearing and the local population is falling back on communitarian self-segregation, governed by the imposition of a state of siege complete with demarcation lines, trenches, no-man's-lands and checkpoints controlled by the various militia groups.

Touzkhurmatu foregrounds the dynamic whereby political and identity hierarchies are currently being renegotiated in the context of the weakening of the central state's institutions.

These inter-militia and inter-community tensions, brought to a paroxysm through the war against IS, are the outcome of several decades of violence now exacerbated by the militarization of the local population. Under Saddam Husayn's dictatorship, Kurdish and Shia Turkmen populations suffered massive repression. When the regime fell, they pressured the Sunni community in their turn. In 2003 the town was officially under Baghdad's control; in practice it was Kurdish forces that held it. As the Kurdish population displaced under the old regime returned, the Kurdish parties' seizure of state

structures and monopolization of economic networks bred deep resentment among the town's other inhabitants. In June 2014, the rout of the Iraqi army benefited the Patriotic Union of Kurdistan (PUK). By saving the town from the Islamic State, the PUK's peshmerga set up deep roots. Their presence had major effects on the fragile politico-social equilibrium, for three reasons.

First, the Kurdish control over a part of the town and its access routes broke up the existing economic networks. Turkmen and Arab traders, whose activity was primarily directed towards Baghdad, saw their economic networks close. In a territory now filled with checkpoints, the smuggling networks for illegal products that had existed since the embargo of 1991 can no longer function. Beyond the strictly political tensions, this degradation of the economic situation creates fertile ground for both organized crime and radicalization. When, for instance, political violence between militias breaks out, the general degradation of the socio-economic context brings groups of idle local youth to attack other communities, exploiting the opportunities opened up by the conflict. Second, the elites and middle classes who mediated intercommunity relations are fleeing. The departure of the town's notables and representatives has weakened relations between the local population, local armed groups and the various political centers in Baghdad and Erbil. This lack of local intermediaries makes armed clashes hard to control, in a context in which social hierarchies have been upturned by the rise of young military commanders without experience, often unable to control their men.

Fighters, very often left to their own devices in the field, find themselves caught up in local spirals of revenge that worsen even the smallest incident. Finally, while in June 2014 the peshmerga were the town's primary defence force, two years on, the Shia militias, tested in battle by the fight against IS, have become an efficient military force, able to fight the Kurdish presence. The Kurds, in response, are reinforcing their fortifications to control the Shia militias, isolating Shia Turkmen civilians inside the town.

The case of Touzkhurmatu demonstrates that defeating IS will not put an end to the second Iraqi civil war. New conflicts embedded in several years of intercommunal tensions already presage the tone of the post-IS era.

It is in this context that a first cycle of clashes took place in October 2015, in the wake of an incident at a PUK checkpoint involving a group of Shia Turkmen militiamen from the Badr Brigades. The clashes killed several dozen and destroyed many houses and shops in both Kurdish and Turkmen neighborhoods. This first cycle of clashes led to a fragile truce. The bombing and isolated incidents of shootings at the local population, however, continued. In April 2016, a second series of clashes killed 13 and injured dozens. Several dozen houses and nearly 200 shops were set on fire. Despite mediation efforts on the part of each camp's political echelon, identity-based polarization and the homogenization of neighborhoods has accelerated. Within the town, the great majority of shops are now shut and the Iraqi police, despite being deployed to separate the warring parties, is unable to face down these tensions. Turkmen neighborhoods feel encircled, while the Shia Turkmen militias vow to do away with the Kurdish military presence. The war against IS has thus created a new balance of power in the town, allowing the Turkmen to aspire to a new political role locally. Nonetheless, it seems difficult to envisage a different political equation to the one defined by the domination of the Kurdish forces, whose numbers are greater for the time being. In the absence of spaces for negotiation, the recourse to armed violence is thus perceived by the local actors as the only means of political self-affirmation.

In the nascent post-IS period, the political logjam is total, with no negotiation resolution of the crisis in prospect. The lack of consensus encourages all the players to see developing their militia structures as the only viable political option. The case of Touzkhurmatu demonstrates that defeating IS will not put an end to the second Iraqi civil war. New conflicts embedded in several years of

intercommunal tensions already presage the tone of the post-IS era.

Chapter 3 - Sinjar: from Islamic State Massacres to the Risk of an Intra-Kurdish War

In November 2015, the liberation of the town of Sinjar by the combined forces of the Kurdistan Regional Government (KRG) and Kurdistan Workers' Party (PKK) affiliated militias swiftly gave way to disenchantment. The absence of political consensus on how to administer Sinjar and institutional paralysis give free rein to a developing conflict between the two militia groups for territorial control. The struggle between them is especially salient with respect to control of local institutions and governing the local population, both issues with many stumbling blocks. On the institutional front, apart from a local council that functions at a minimal level, there is no administrative infrastructure. Of the local population, only 30 out of the 5000 families present in the area prior to the conflict have returned. Finally, apart from a small Western NGO that gathers a handful of volunteers busily repairing a few windows and doors, international organizations are absent. The situation puts a brake on any efforts towards the region's reconstruction and economic renewal. Worse, the town's various armed groups are increasingly barricading themselves in, fortifying their military positions with concrete blocks, even while the threat from IS has become a secondary concern. Yesterday's allies, especially the Kurdistan Democratic Party (KDP) and the PKK, now allude to a possible future confrontation, this time against each other, for total control of the Sinjar region.

The rise in tensions for control of Sinjar began in November 2015, and results from two dynamics. On the one hand, it feeds on the mobilization of the local population into self-defence militias against the Islamic State. This militarization is sponsored by the three dominant Kurdish parties—PKK, KDP and the Patriotic Union of Kurdistan (PUK)—each of which seeks to expand its sphere of influence. Given their isolation, the Christian Assyrian, Chaldean and Yezidi minorities are easy prey for recruitment to militia networks. The politicization of these minorities is thus premised on militia formation, splitting these communities by reproducing the divisions of the Kurdish political scene among them. These splits are further amplified by Baghdad and Erbil's strategies to project their influence, seeking to regain a foothold in the disputed territories. In Sinjar, the Sinjar Resistance Units (YBS), Yezidi militias set up by the PKK, have elected to ally with Baghdad. The payoff is a legal basis for their presence in Iraq, through registration with the Iraqi Defence Ministry, on the model of the other Shia militias in the hashdsha'bi ("popular mobilization"). As Baghdad and Erbil compete over control of the territories occupied by the Kurdish forces, the interrelation between the local theater and territorial rivalries between its two competing authorities has propelled the question of Sinjar into the conflict's regional dimension, with each of the local players able to call on the help of one of the neighboring powers, whether Turkey or Iran.

Yesterday's allies, especially the Kurdistan Democratic Party (KDP) and the PKK, now allude to a possible future confrontation, this time against each other, for total control of the Sinjar region.

Through the process of militia-formation, the struggle for influence between Kurdish parties was set up from the outset of mobilization against the Islamic State. On August 3rd, 2014, the rout of the PDK's peshmerga enabled the Islamic State to seize all of Sinjar up to the town of Rabia without a fight. On encircled Mount Sinjar, the resistance was organized at the village level. Yezidi survivors made individual decisions on which militia to affiliate to. As the smaller groups were absorbed, three armed blocs emerged, faithfully reproducing the Kurdish political landscape, with each party relying on its own savoir-faire in militia-formation. Commanders from the PKK and the Syrian Kurdish pro-PKK militia (YPG) displayed ambitions to establish themselves for the long term. They set up the same institutions as in Syria and the Turkish South-East, namely, an autonomous administration

(idara zatiya) made up of local personnel under the control of cadres affiliated to the party. On the military front, they then formed the People's Protection Units (HBS) that later became the YBS cited above. On the KDP side, the presence of Yezidi ex-peshmerga fighters in Sinjar gave the party many intermediaries among the groups of fighters that formed in the mountain. This allowed the DUP to set up a unit of close to 3,000 men under the command of Wassem Shesho, a DUP peshmerga commander. As for the PUK, it recruited fighters around Haydar Shesho, a Yezidi notable who tried to create an independent militia by leaning on his good relations with the PKK. At the end of 2015, PUK-PKK tensions polarized the situation between the two groups and forced Haydar Shesho to move closer to the PUK.

In practice, the pressures of the regional equation have forced each player to pick sides. On the one hand, Baghdad exploits the PKK to counter Erbil's ambitions to control the disputed territories. After an agreement with Baghdad, the salaries of YBS fighters are now paid by the Iraqi Defense Ministry. On the other hand, the PKK is attempting to use Sinjar as a Trojan horse in Iraqi Kurdistan. Sinjar has thus become the heart of a broader struggle between Turkey and the PUK on the one hand and the PKK-affiliated militias on the other. The PUK now see the PKK as an agent of the "Shia crescent." For its part, the PKK sees in the PUK nothing more than an agent of the "Sunni axis" that it faces in both Turkey (in the shape of the AKP) and in Syria (as the armed opposition).

Subjected to the pressures of an increasing polarization of the Kurdish political-militia landscape, the militarization of the Yezidi society gives rise to fears of the next nightmare: that of an intra-Kurdish fratricidal war.

The fact that agreements between the militias are impossible, reinforced by the absence of clear territorialization, has created a situation of turmoil that cannot, in the long run, hold without ending in confrontation. Polarization is thus hardening on several levels. First, with respect to territorial control, while the PKK has total control of western Sinjar and the KDP dominates the north, many spaces remain mixed and, as a result, deeply conflictual. On the institutional front, the autonomous administration under PKK control is linked to Baghdad, while the KDP administration has inherited the preexisting administrative structure. Finally, the effects of this political fragmentation can be seen through the question of the return of local residents, and which player can claim to control them. During the siege imposed by the Islamic State in August 2014, the PKK managed to open up a corridor between Sinjar mountain and Syria, allowing thousands of civilians to flee. It thus enhanced its aura of liberator and protector of the town of Sinjar. It hopes to be able to recruit among the local population on this basis, and thereby establish an enduring social base in Iraqi Kurdistan. For the same reasons, the KDP fears an uncontrolled return of the Yezidi population and has put Sinjar under a state of siege, imposing severe restrictions on commercial activity. Simultaneously, it is allowing a drip of families to return according to their attachment to the party, leaning on pro-KDP Kurdish NGOs gathered under the Barzani foundation. One option for the KDP would be to push for a demographic swing in Sinjar, by developing its links with the area's 90 000 Sunni Kurds in order to counter the PKK's popularity with the Yezidi population. For each party, the stake of control over the local population is thus crucial in order to hold the territory in the long term.

The absence of a legitimate authority in the area impedes the work of reconstruction and prevents the arrival of international organizations. This reinforces the politicization of aid, and prevents any return of the local population outside the framework of the militant organizations' agendas. As a result, subjected to the pressures of an increasing polarization of the Kurdish political-militia landscape, the militarization of the Yezidi society gives rise to fears of the next nightmare: that of an intra-Kurdish fratricidal war.

Conclusion - Policy Brief by Amnesty International's expert Donatella Rovera

The so-called "Islamic State" (IS or ISIS) has now lost most of the territory it had captured in 2014. Positive though this is, IS remains a formidably destructive force. It still controls Iraq's second largest city, Mosul, and its operatives are still able to carry out frequent and deadly bomb attacks in the capital and elsewhere. But perhaps the worst damage done by IS has been to the very fabric of Iraq's society, fuelling existing inter-communal tensions and pushing sectarian violence to new levels.

From the outset the IS embarked on a reign of terror, carrying out mass summary killings, abductions, torture, and ethnic cleansing of religious and ethnic minorities. Communities who had remained in their towns and villages through decades of harassment and persecution – Shi'a Arabs, Assyrian Christians, Kurds, Yazidis, Shi'a Turkmen and Shabak, Kakai, and SabeenMandaeans – were forcibly displaced under threat of death within weeks of IS fighters capturing their areas. The targeting of the Yazidi community was particularly brutal, with thousands abducted and women and girls forced into sexual enslavement.

From the outset the IS systematically targeted non-Arab and non-Sunni Muslim communities, as well as Arab Sunnis who worked with or supported the government and security forces, but generally did not target ordinary Sunni civilians who did not challenge its rule. Many in the Sunni community initially saw the IS as not necessarily worse than all-powerful Shi'a militias backed by the increasingly sectarian government of Prime Minister Nouri al-Maliki, from which they felt more and more alienated. In any case, they had neither the means nor the will to try to resist the IS' takeover of their towns and villages, which had been abandoned by the Iraqi army.

In the deadly spiral of sectarian violence which unravelled and forced millions their homes since 2014, Sunni Arab communities have been collectively blamed for IS's heinous crimes and found themselves at the receiving end of frequent revenge attacks by increasingly powerful Shi'a militias acting with the complicity or acquiescence of Iraqi government forces and authorities. The two most common type of abuses have been: Execution-style killings or disappearance of Sunni men, individually or in groups, after they were abducted from their homes or workplace or from army and militia checkpoints and at time after their families had been forced to pay a ransom for their release; and the destruction of Sunni villages recaptured from the IS and the banishment of Sunni residents from the areas.

In northern Iraq, in the territories administered by the Kurdistan Regional Government (KRG) and its Peshmerga forces, Sunni Arab communities have been similarly targeted by having their villages destroyed and being prevented from returning to their villages in the so-called "disputed territories" which the KRG has long tried to appropriate.

In both north and central Iraq sectarian attacks on Sunni communities have been motivated not only by a desire for revenge. Rather, revenge is often the expression of long-held territorial ambitions.

The Iraq that is emerging today from two and a half years of carnage and chaos is an Iraq more fractured and bitterly divided than ever. Rival factions hell-bent on destroying each other have acted with no regard for the civilian population – who has borne the brunt of the conflict. As the IS is expelled from more and more territory, many communities whose homes and towns have been

destroyed have little to celebrate. Rebuilding bridges and trust between communities is every bit as important as the physical rebuilding of the country.

P.S.

* Noria:

<http://www.noria-research.com/iraq-after-fall-mosul/>

Footnotes

[1] <http://www.noria-research.com/dynamics-of-power-in-the-middle-east/>

[2] The maps are not reproduced here.