

More ICRtoP Resources on Iraq...

[ICRtoP Blog: "Convert, Pay or Be Killed: Iraq's Minorities under Threat"](#)

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In its

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Iraq has been subject to an array of destabilizing forces, including sanctions, occupations, civil unrest, and thirty years of war; but it is only now—after over a decade of sectarian violence in the wake of the 2003 US invasion—that deep political, social, and ethno-religious cleavages within Iraqi society raise the very tangible possibility of complete state

[collapse](#)

. One of the ongoing precipitating factors of the Iraqi crisis has been Sunni political exclusion following the US overthrow and dismantling of Saddam Hussein's Baathist regime. Despite heading what was nominally a coalition government, former Prime Minister Nuri al-Maliki's Shia-dominated government was widely accused of

[excluding](#)

the Sunni minority from political life as part of a backlash against the favored position that Sunnis enjoyed under former President Saddam Hussein. As the International Crisis Group outlines in an August 2013

[report](#)

, the administration of Prime Minister al-Maliki employed an authoritarian divide-and-conquer strategy, characterized by the

[marginalization](#)

of Sunni leaders and the disproportionate deployment of security forces in Sunni areas.

This political exclusion has come against the backdrop of strong sectarian violence, mainly between Sunnis and Shias, which reached a peak in the period between 2006 and 2008. The withdrawal of US troops at the end of 2011 left a large

[power vacuum](#)

in Iraq, leading to a sharp escalation in sectarian violence and the ascent of several militant

groups. During this period, much of the violence was perpetrated by state actors. Human rights violations committed by the Iraqi armed forces were routinely classified as “anti-terrorist” operations. At the same time, militant and rebel groups in both Iraq and neighboring Syria have grown at an alarming rate. In early June 2014, the Sunni militant group known as the [Islamic State in Iraq and Syria](#) (ISIS) led a rapid, highly coordinated, and violent insurgency, taking control of large swaths of territory primarily in Iraq’s north and west Sunni-majority territories. On 30 June 2014 ISIS declared the [establishment](#) of an Islamic caliphate, adding that the group should hereafter be referred to only as the “Islamic State”. Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi is the [self-proclaimed](#) caliph of the “Islamic State”.

I. Background

The United Nations (UN) became directly involved in Iraq through the establishment of the UN Assistance Mission for Iraq (UNAMI) in August 2003 under UN Security Council (UNSC)

[Resolution](#)

1500. The mission was

[mandated](#)

to advise and assist the Government on advancing political dialogue and national reconciliation, assisting in the electoral process, facilitating regional dialogue between Iraq and its neighbors, and promoting the protection of human rights and judicial and legal reform.

UNAMI, the Government and US occupying forces struggled to cope with insurgency, terrorism and a sectarian civil war, which raged across the country from 2006 to 2008, leaving as many as

[65,000](#)

killed. In late 2007, a

[combination](#)

of US “

[surge](#)

” troops,

[co-opted](#)

moderate Sunni tribesmen and an improved Iraqi army began to push insurgents and militias out of cities and provinces they had long contested. In June 2009 Iraqi authorities took over responsibility for security of towns and cities from US forces, and Iraq’s first democratic elections were held in March 2010.

Despite the

[creation](#)

of a new coalition government led by Prime Minister al-Maliki in December 2010, the combination of nine months of post-election deadlock among Iraqi political parties and the withdrawal of US combat troops in August of that year created a political and military

[power vacuum](#)

that allowed armed groups—including those linked to Al-Qaeda, such as

[Islamic State in Iraq](#)

and Syria—to reassert themselves. These groups persecuted ethnic and religious minorities with impunity in violence that left 500 dead in August 2010 alone,

[according](#)

to Human Rights Watch.

[Peaceful uprisings](#)

in Iraq during 2011, which coincided with many others in the region, were

[met](#)

with violence and draconian punishment from state security forces and armed groups. On 24 January 2012 UN High Commissioner for Human Rights Navi Pillay

[called](#)

for an immediate moratorium on the use of the death penalty following the execution of 34 people for terror-related offenses.

II. Peaceful Protests, Forceful Government Response, and Increased Activity by Terrorist Organizations

In December 2012, a new peaceful protest movement began in

[response](#)

to repressive anti-terrorism laws and the arrest of Rafea al-Issawi, a prominent member of the Sunni Arab political movement, Al-Iraqiya. Though the government had initially responded by proposing a series of reforms in January 2013, it would eventually once again meet further protests with a show of force. On 23 April 2013, the government conducted a raid in Hawija, which

[reportedly](#)

left 50 dead and 120 injured. On 30 April, the UN Secretary General

[called](#)

on Iraqi security forces to “exert utmost restraint in maintaining law and order”. The situation was exacerbated by the

[increased activity](#)

of ISIS and Shia militias, which

[grew](#)

in response to this threat. UNAMI

[reported](#)

that in July 2013, over 1000 people had been killed and 2,300 injured in acts of terrorism and violence.

[Human Rights Watch](#)

and

[Amnesty International](#)

said a series of attacks by ISIS during 2013 constituted crimes against humanity. Indeed, the wave of violence was far in excess of anything since the 2006-2008 civil war, leaving 3,000 dead and 7,000 injured between May and August 2013,

[according](#)

to Human Rights Watch. The UN High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR)

[expressed](#)

concern in September 2013 over increased sectarian violence and on 29 July 2013 the Secretary-General

[condemned](#)

acts of terrorism and sectarian violence, calling for political dialogue. By the end of 2013, the UN

[estimated](#)

that 7,157 civilians had been killed, compared to

[3,238](#)

in 2012.

In January 2014 fighting erupted in the western province of Anbar, and ISIS

[captured](#)

key areas of the province's main cities, Fallujah and Ramadi. Government security forces had withdrawn from Anbar after provoking a tribal uprising when they

[raided a Sunni protest camp](#)

in Ramadi on 30 December 2013, killing 17 people. On 10 January 2014, the UNSC

[condemned](#)

ISIS attacks in Fallujah and Ramadi and the impact of the violence upon civilians. On 25 January 2014, UNHCR

[reported](#)

that at least 140,000 residents had fled their homes in Fallujah and Ramadi.

The Government's response has been criticized by many civil society groups, including

[Human Rights Now](#)

, [The Centre for Research on Globalization](#)

, and

[Human Rights Watch](#)

for its indiscriminate mortar attacks and use of

[barrel bombs](#)

on populated areas of Fallujah. On 22 February a 72-hour ceasefire was

[agreed](#)

to allow humanitarian aid into the city. On 27 March 2014, Mr. Mladenov

[warned](#)

that Anbar was where "the most serious threat to the security of the country stems" and that although the UN supported the government's security response, it was also necessary to

engage in dialogue and concessions. On 21 April 2014, the Government began to [surround](#) Fallujah in preparation for a final assault on the city. The fighting in Anbar should be seen in the wider context of Prime Minister al-Maliki's attempts to consolidate control of the country by the central government. Nevertheless, the Iraqi government's tactics have [fermenting](#) discontent among Iraq's provinces that are increasingly vying for more autonomy, similar to that of Kurdistan.

Ahead of national elections on 30 April 2014, numerous [media sources](#) warned of the [risk](#) of the country [plunging](#) into another civil war. In reacting to the violence, civil society organizations, including the Global Centre for the Responsibility to Protect, [called](#) on the international community and the Iraqi government to uphold their RtoP Iraqi populations. However, as is described by the Global Centre, the Security Council, regional organizations, and the Iraqi government itself have so far failed to both [mobilize](#) a robust response to the ongoing crimes being committed by all sides and address the root causes of strife between Sunnis, Shias, and Kurds.

III. The ISIS Offensive and Humanitarian Consequences

In March 2014, the Special Representative of the UN Secretary-General for Iraq and head of UNAMI, Nikolay Mladenov, [reported](#) that the crisis in neighboring Syria was responsible for fueling terrorism and sectarian tensions in Iraq (For more on the crisis in Syria, see our dedicated [crisis page](#)). His concerns have proven to be well-founded. The continuing warfare and insecurity in Syria—combined with a porous Syria-Iraq border—has facilitated the free movement and expansion of militants operating under the banner of the [Islamic State in Iraq and Syria](#) (ISIS). ISIS is often referred to in the media as an “offshoot” or “splinter group” of al Qaeda. While ISIS did indeed grow out of al-Qaeda in Iraq (AQI), al-Qaeda and ISIS have since [severed ties](#) . The objective of ISIS is to establish an Islamic Caliphate stretching across the area of Iraq and

Syria, effectively

[erasing](#)

the borders outlined by France and England in the beginning of the 20th century.

In September 2013, ISIS claimed responsibility for the

[first attack](#)

in the autonomous region of Kurdistan since 2007. In early 2014, ISIS took over the cities of Fallujah and Ramadi, both key battlegrounds during the US occupation. However, it was in June 2014 that ISIS launched its full scale military insurgency on Iraq. The unprecedented scale and speed of the insurgency shocked the international community. Militants began the June offensive by taking Mosul, Iraq's second largest city. With the goal of eventually taking Baghdad, ISIS rapidly expanded its territories across North and Western Iraq. The militants controlled enormous

[corridors](#)

of territory in both Syria and Iraq, including complete control over numerous cities, border areas and towns. The militants also took control of the strategically important Baiji oil refinery in mid-June but the Iraqi government was able to

[recapture](#)

the area by the end of that month. A

[report](#)

by the UN Office for Humanitarian Affairs indicates that as of 29 June 2014 ISIS has taken

[control](#)

of large swathes of Iraq's predominantly Sunni provinces of Ninewa, Salah El Din, Diyala. The following cities were reported to be no longer under Iraqi government control: Mosul, Tikrit, Tal Afar, Beiji, Quayyara, Sinjar, Suleiman Bek, Rashad, Hawijah, Riyadh, Fallujah, Saqlawiyah. The report also indicates that much of Anbar fell to ISIS control.

The armed struggle between pro-ISIS, pro-government and local clans is developing at a rapid pace, and there is great concern that the conflict will become a civil war. There are many actors fighting alongside ISIS against the Iraqi government. This [includes](#) Baathists, tribal militias and members of former military and army (disbanded by the US after the 2003 invasion). The partisan lines are not well defined, with several fragile alliances between ISIS and other resistance groups. ISIS militants have grown not only in size but in resources as well. Oil theft and raids on banks have been a significant source of

[income for ISIS](#)

, which has already prospered greatly from selling stolen oil. Through social media platforms, the group has been able to generate income as well as

[recruit members](#)

around the world. ISIS leadership has been calling on all Muslims to join them.

The ISIS uprising and escalating sectarian violence in Iraq has drastically exacerbated the ongoing humanitarian crisis and violence against civilians in the country. In the early days of the June ISIS insurgency, Human Rights Watch and various news outlets disseminated shocking images of what seem to be

[summary executions](#)

of Iraqis. There were also killings of

[Sunni prisoners](#)

by perpetrated by ISIS opposition around the same time.

[Minority groups](#)

such as Christians, Yazidis, Turkomans, and Shabaks have been systematically targeted by Islamic militant violence. After the June 2014 takeover of Mosul, Iraq's second largest city which is known for its religious tolerance, ISIS gave Mosul's Christians an

[ultimatum](#)

: convert to Islam, pay a tax, leave Mosul, or be killed. This

[triggered](#)

a "forced displacement", and the remaining Christians fled Mosul. The exodus of Christians from Iraq did not begin with the ISIS invasion—indeed, due to over a decade of religiously targeted violence there are only an

[estimated](#)

500,000 Christians in Iraq now compared to around 1.2 million before the US invasion—but the systematic targeting of Christians and destruction of holy

[Christian sites](#)

is rapidly erasing what exists of this ancient Christian civilization in Iraq.

Another highly vulnerable group is the Yazidi population. In early August, ISIS captured the town of Sinjar and threatened to kill members of the Yazidi religious minority if they did not convert to Islam. This provoked a mass

[evacuation](#)

to Mount Sinjar. Stranded in the mountains under the hot sun without sufficient food or water, the situation constituted a severe humanitarian crisis that many observers—including US President Obama and

[UN rights observers](#)

—warned could lead to

[genocide](#)

. In response to the ISIS siege of the Yazidis, the

[United States](#)

(followed shortly after by

[Britain](#)

) intervened to rescue those stuck on Mount Sinjar. The intervention combined the humanitarian aid provision of vital aid (via airdrop) to those on Mount Sinjar as well as targeted US military drone attacks against ISIS militants. The United States and British troops US and Britain

[called off](#)

the rescue mission on 14 August 2014 stating that the objectives had been completed and that the condition of stranded Iraqis on Mount Sinjar was better than expected. According to information given to Reuters by an Iraqi government official, the Islamic State has killed

[500 Yazidis](#)

, in several cases burying victims alive.

On 13 August 2014 Special Representative of the UN Secretary-General for Iraq Nickolay Mladenov and the Special Representative of the Secretary-General on Sexual Violence in Conflict Zainab Hawa Bangura release a joint [statement](#) condemning “barbaric acts” of sexual violence and “savage rapes” that Islamic State militants has perpetrated on minorities in areas under its control. Both expressed grave concern over continued reports of sexual violence against women and teenage girls and boys belonging to Iraqi minorities. Their statement refers to accounts of abduction and detention of Yazidi, Christian, as well as Turkoman and Shabak women, girls and boys. The special representatives state that 1,500 Yazidi and Christian persons may have been forced into [sexual slavery](#)

Iraq is experiencing one of the largest [internal population displacements](#) in the world. According to UN estimates as many as [1.2 million people](#) have been uprooted due to fighting between insurgents from ISIS, local Sunni tribes, Shia militias and the Iraqi Security Forces since the beginning of the year. UNAMI [found](#) that 7,000 people have been killed in acts of terror or violence in the first six months of 2014 and more than 13,000 have been injured. UNAMI recorded [2,417 deaths](#) and 2,287 injuries in the month of June, the [highest](#) monthly casualty rate since the sectarian civil war period of 2007

IV. Domestic and International Response to the Unfolding

Iraq Crisis

After the ISIS multi-front attacks in June 2014, Prime Minister Al-Maliki called on Shias and—with notable delay—all other Iraqis to [volunteer](#) to fight the Sunni ISIS militants, a call echoed by several high level religious clerics. It is evident at this point that al-Maliki’s legitimacy as leader was deeply compromised as he was [blamed](#) both domestically and internationally for exacerbating the sectarian divide in the country. It was very unclear whether the Iraqi government’s front would be salient enough to defend against future ISIS offensives and secondly, whether it would have the means to retake control of ISIS-controlled territories.

In the weeks following the ISIS insurgency, Iraqis and Iraq’s allies made it increasingly clear that

they did not believe that the task of defending the country should be left to

[al-Maliki](#)

. Throughout the Iraqi political crisis, there were

[numerous calls](#)

—by Sunnis, Shias, and Kurds alike—for the election of a new political leader. A hopeful

[political development](#)

took place on 14 July 2014 when the Iraqi parliament

[elected](#)

Salim al-Jubouri, a moderate Sunni Islamist, to be the parliament speaker (the parliament had failed to elect a speaker on two previous occasions). On 11 August 2014, Iraqi lawmakers successfully selected a

[replacement](#)

for Prime Minister al-Maliki. The selection of

[Haider al-Abadi](#)

to take over as Prime Minister outraged al-Maliki, who had for weeks insisted that he was entitled to serve his third four-year term. While it was initially

[unclear](#)

whether al-Maliki would cede power, on 14 August 2014 he

[accepted the candidacy](#)

of al-Abadi.

The election of al-Abadi was an important but small step in monumental task of reunifying Iraqis. Many Sunni clans unaligned with ISIS have been actively fighting Iraqi armed forces and

[have indicated](#)

that they will not put down arms until they are granted

[sovereignty](#)

. Even certain a subset of Iraq's Shia population has ardently refused to fight on behalf of the Iraqi government. The current crisis has led to the

[revival](#)

of cleric Moktada al-Sadr's well-trained Shia militant group, who also opposes an Iraqi state.

The reemergence of al-Sadr's militia is symptomatic of the rifts among Shias.

The Kurds for their part took advantage of shifting power situation following ISIS's June invasions to

[reclaim](#)

the disputed oil-rich city of Kirkuk. It remains

[unclear](#)

whether this historically semi-autonomous people will be willing to continue to be a part of the Iraqi political process. Most Kurds are Sunni Muslim, but they are culturally and ethnically different from other Sunni Iraqis. ISIS military advances into Kurdish territory in late July and August 2014 have posed a serious threat to the largely autonomous region of Kurdistan, which has by and large escaped the violence plaguing the rest of Iraq and provided refuge to internally displaced people such as Yazidis and Christians. Despite maintaining an armed front against ISIS, Kurdish territories have been under recent attack by ISIS militants. The jihadists have made

dramatic military advances, at one time even reaching as far as [35 kilometers](#) of the Kurdish capital, Arbil.

The Iraqi crisis extends beyond Iraqi and Syrian borders. There are many broader, complex geopolitical dimensions as well. The predominantly Shia Muslim country of Iran has been an important actor and stakeholder in the Iraqi conflict. Iran's national interests concerning its neighbor has been the subject of much Iraqi and international concern. Indeed, the unpopularity of al-Maliki has been largely driven by the

[perception](#)

that he is under the

[influence of Iran](#)

. Iran, which has always been openly favorable to al-Maliki being in power, has been supporting the Iraqi government in its fight against ISIS and others opposing the Iraqi armed forces. Of course, this raises concerns that the Iraqi conflict could deepen broader regional sectarian and political cleavages.

Lebanon

, whose territory falls under the range claimed by ISIS, has seen a

[surge](#)

in terrorist attacks, including several suicide bombings. Many of the attacks are intended as punishment to Hezbollah for taking part in Syria's civil war alongside Assad's troops.

Meanwhile, Jordan is also

[threatened](#)

by ISIS advances. Several key Iraqi border areas with Jordan are under control of ISIS.

Eyes have also been on Saudi Arabia, a Sunni-dominant country. Iranian officials have

[condemned](#)

Saudi Arabia for supporting terrorist groups fighting in Syria,

[blaming](#)

Saudi government for the ISIS security threat. The Saudi government has been offering a different

[narrative](#)

, claiming that Iraqi Prime Minister al-Maliki enabled ISIS to take over through his marginalization of Iraq's Sunnis. As for ISIS support, the Saudi government says that it has not come from them. Regardless of the validity of this claim, BBC

[reports](#)

, "private wealthy individuals in [Saudi Arabia] are widely believed to have been sending donations through circuitous routes." In a move that the New York Times calls "answering criticism with cash", the Saudi government has pledged

[\\$500 million](#)

to the UN to help the displaced in Iraq. Motivations aside, this large injection of funds marks a

[drastic increase](#)

from the previous total of \$312 million in emergency funds that the UN previously sought in order to deal with the suddenly escalating Iraq crisis.

In the face of a US public which largely favors non-military American involvement in Iraq, President Obama

[said](#)

during a 13 June 2014 speech that he will not send US troops to Iraq. The US has however sent 300 military advisors to Iraq to assist the struggling Iraqi military. Obama also

[said](#)

that the US will also boost up intelligence and reconnaissance missions in the area. There was initial

[speculation](#)

about the possibility of an unlikely alliance between the United States government and the Iranian government to support the Iraqi forces. For now such an arrangement seems unlikely to materialize. President Obama's

[position](#)

in June was to urge al-Maliki—and his allies in Iran—to promote ethno-religious political inclusiveness and proceed in a manner that will not exacerbate sectarian divisions in the country. As was demonstrated during the Mount Sinjar campaign, military assistance is not completely off the table. In a

[televised address](#)

on 8 August 2014 Obama said that Americans would take action if the lives of its personnel in Iraq were at risk from Islamist militants. It also remains seen

[to what extent](#)

the Americans will directly support the Kurds in their fight against ISIS. The United States government has always

[urged Kurds](#)

to stay within the Iraqi political process, and it acknowledges that funding the Kurdish peshmerga military forces could enable

[Kurdish independence](#)

. Nevertheless, given the frustration with the political situation in Baghdad, and an appreciation of the rare space of protection that Kurdistan offers both its inhabitants and displaced people from greater Iraq,

[United States](#)

,
[France](#)

, and several other

[EU countries](#)

have decided to supply the Kurds with arms to fight against ISIS.

UNAMI efforts have largely been directed towards helping the more than 558,000 people displaced by fighting in Anbar Province (see June 2014 breakdown of Iraq IDPs

[here](#)

). Valerie Amos, Under Secretary-General for Humanitarian Affairs has expressed that she is “

[extremely worried](#)

about the families urgently in need of water, food, shelter, healthcare, sanitation and protection from violence.” The UN has cited reports of deliberate violence targeting

[women and children](#)

, including reports of kidnapping, rape and forcible marriage to militants. The UN has been working on

[both](#)

political and humanitarian fronts in Iraq. The UN has been

[urging](#)

Iraqi political leaders to reach a political agreement that would allow them to address the security and humanitarian crisis in the country. This includes choosing a

[speaker](#)

for the Council of Representatives as soon as possible. UNAMI head Nickolay Mladenov has

[encouraged](#)

political actors to stay within the framework of the constitutional political process. On 12 August 2014 UN Secretary-General Ban Ki-moon

[urged](#)

countries to do more to help Iraqi civilians.

V. Looking Forward

A prevailing question concerning of the Iraq crisis is whether sectarian cleavages will continue to sharpen in Iraq and surrounding territories. Many actors are actively promoting a Sunni vs. Shia vs. Kurd scenario, while others are urging Iraqis to unify and address the country’s existential threat. The nomination of Haider al-Abadi

as Iraq’s new Prime Minister may be a much needed step in addressing the political

[impasse](#)

that has plagued Iraqi politics. Only with a unified front will Iraqis be able to protect its citizens from the expansion and consolidation of the “Islamic State”. The government up until now has been unable to fulfill its responsibility to protect its citizens.

The human consequence of the Iraq crisis is staggering and it continues to worsen. Food insecurity, sexual violence, and ethnic and religious based violence are on the rise. There are over 1.2 million displaced people and humanitarian aid cannot reach all of those affected due to ongoing [security constraints](#) . It remains to be seen whether domestic and international efforts will play a stronger role in addressing the dire humanitarian situation in Iraq.