

The Sunni Arab Intelligentsia in Iraq: State, Nationhood, Citizenship

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Introduction

Following the establishment of the state at the beginning of the 20th century, Sunni Arabs in Iraq did not perceive themselves as a minority because they were the framers of the country's political system from that time up until the fall of the Baath regime in 2003. That was the precise moment when the predicament began for Sunni Arabs and their identity. The Sunni community was split between supporting and opposing the new democratic system, while the opposition was divided into Baathist nationalism, leftist nationalism, national Islamism, pan-Islamism, clan-based tribalism, and a mix of all of the above at times. Those involved in the political process were split along the same lines as well, some of them standing with one foot in and one foot out of the political process.

All of this was lost on those who had their finger on the real pulse of the Sunni community and understood their desires, and meanwhile these complexities increased after the fall of Mosul in 2014 and the liberation of areas once controlled by the Islamic State organization (ISIS) by the end of 2017.

The goal of this research paper is to determine the attitudes of the educated Sunni elite, which constitutes one of the sources of Sunni Arab public opinion in Iraq, toward the state's structure, political system, and perceived future.

The general attitude of Sunni Arabs in Iraq is that in all the years since 2003, they have formulated no clear stance except political and military opposition to the new political system. In social terms, the Sunni Arab ship has not been set on any particular bearing, whether nationalist, Islamic, or otherwise. Identifying this bearing would enable us to dispel ambiguity in dealing with this broad sector of Iraqi society, which is currently approached through assumptions without a basis in knowledge, treating them as though they all came together behind the Baathist-nationalist movement, the ISIS-Islamist movement, the Bedouin tribal movement, or any of the other stereotyped classifications unfounded in research and scrutiny.

Methodology, Concepts, and Theoretical Approaches:

This paper is based on the analytical survey method, relying on in-person interviews with members of the Sunni Arab "intelligentsia," which procedurally is taken to mean **activists, academics, and journalists**. They observe, have a presence in, and are active in public life within

A geographic distribution covering the Nineveh, Al Anbar, Saladin, and Diyala governorates, as well as Baghdad. These governorates were selected over others because they are home to large numbers of Sunni Arab citizens; Sunni Arabs make up a small minority of the population in the other governorates.

Seventeen interviews were conducted using a matrix of varied questions that addressed the respondent's stance on the state and the political and administrative system, their view on other sects and ethnic groups, and the Sunni Arab community's self-perceptions.

These members of the elite, who were interviewed in April 2018, are affiliated with various Islamic, liberal, nationalist, regionalist, and tribal groups. The goal was to provide broad representation covering all segments of the Sunni Arab elite.

The term **"Sunni Arabs"** is applied in this study as an **ethnological** term, i.e. it is not necessarily used to indicate sectarian religious belief in Sunni doctrines or the adoption of an Arabist political ideology. By contrast, the criterion for identifying a "Sunni Arab" in this study is affiliation with the culture, space, geography, or folkloric identity that is called Arab Sunnism in Iraq.

"The state" means a political entity that is legally recognized within a particular geographic area. Its citizens feel that they are part of it and that its institutions function to unify them.

Of course, the state in this case is a project continuously under construction, through which a stable administrative, financial, judicial, and military apparatus is built. Through the state, these organs carry out monopolized tasks to enforce the rule of law.¹ The natural result of the state-building process is a modern state in the Weberian sense of monopolizing violence within a given territory. Thus, the state is characterized by four components: the government, the territory², sovereignty, and the people. It's clear that building and developing these capabilities proceeds in accordance with certain priorities, starting with security capabilities, continuing with political capabilities, and not ending at economic and service capabilities and capacities³.

¹ Ertzman, Tomas. "State Formation and State Building in Europe." *The Handbook of Political Sociology*, edited by Thomas Janoski (Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 2005), p. 367.

² Max Weber. *Basic Concepts in Sociology*, translated by Salah Halal (Cairo, National Center for Translation, 2001), p. 93.

³ Fukuyama, Francis. *State Building: Governance and World Order in the 21st Century*, translated by Mujab Al-Imam (Riyadh, Obeikan Publishing, 2007), p. 11.

“Nationhood” means “the will of people living in a part of the earth under an economic system, certain common cultural symbols, and a political system through which they feel they are represented.”

The nation here, of course, is the Iraqi nation, which continuously interacts as part of a process aiming to ensure political stability within the mould of the Iraqi state. This process rests on several dimensions: First, developing a sense of integration with the state, its ideals, and its political philosophy. Second, extending social ties among subgroups and subcultures in various regions. Third, the gradual melting away of old social, economic, and psychological obligations and acquisition of new ideals and values based on the social acceptance of others.⁴

This study argues that the interpretive theoretical approach generally taken by Sunni Arabs toward building the Iraqi state and nation has undergone multiple transformations since 2003, which taken together are consistent with the response patterns of a community alienated from its surroundings. These patterns begin with the experience of withdrawal, then resistance, then adaptation to the environment formed by the majority of groups that make up Iraqi society and its members. In the first case, withdrawal, the Sunni Arab community abandoned its objectives and the means to achieve them, taking a passive, patient stance. In the second case, the Sunni Arab community chose objectives it sought to achieve by any means necessary, including negative means like taking up arms. In the third, the Sunni Arab community transformed to choose objectives compatible with positive means guaranteed by the democratic mechanisms steering the political process in Iraq.

With regard to the driver of those response patterns, this study argues that it goes back to what we can call “patterns of communication” that are affected by face-to-face interactions with individuals from other sectarian and ethnic groups and the government, in addition to the effects of the media and political discourse on opposing sides. These patterns of communication shape the community’s response to state- and nation-building issues.

ISIS: The Final Blow?

The Sunni Arab community in Iraq has suffered heavy blows since 2003, putting it on the list of broken communities that feel defeated. The first blow was the

⁴ Kazemi, Ali-Aghar. “The Dilemma of Nation-Building in Post-Saddam Iraq.” *Journal of Law and Politics* Vol. 1 Issue 2 (2005, Tehran, Islamic Azad University, Science and Research Campus

fall of the Baath regime in 2003, when Sunni Arabs found themselves alone and unprotected. The second blow was the execution of Saddam Hussein in 2006 because that was the precise date when the Baath saga ended in the Sunni Arab community. The third blow was the attempt to enter the political process through the front door, exploiting its distinguishing features to meet their demands. Thus, Sunni Arabs participated extensively in the 2010 elections, with broad Sunni support in the region, achieving the longest list of candidates in those elections. But the reading of the results according to the Federal Court's interpretations was a blow to the Sunni community, blocking their political participation. The fourth blow was Sunni Arabs' identification with laying the groundwork for the Islamic State organization's takeover of Sunni Arab areas, remaining silent about it, or furthering the conditions leading to that outcome. The result was that the organization wiped out the people of these areas before others, which became the fourth blow to the Sunni Arab community, ultimately leading to a stance of rejecting, fleeing from, or fighting this organization.

ISIS was not an instrument of vengeance against the local community in western and northern regions but rather an ideological enterprise that in essence expresses a long-standing social current. The rise of ISIS was an expression of protest against the state's crisis in carrying out its responsibilities to create balance within democratic openness and to institute pluralism.⁵ And that was not all – the degree of external provocation in the form of regional interventions, including the degree of Iranian influence in particular, plus the doctrinal and religious legacy built up since the Baath regime allowed Salafists to operate in various Iraqi governorates in the 1990s, were all mutually reinforcing factors in ISIS's emergence in Sunni Arab areas.

Sunni Arab elites agree that the reasons why many in the Sunni community sympathized with the Islamic State organization are attributable to the accrual of government measures after 2003. One of the most important reasons is the extent to which citizens were subjected to harassment and humiliation by military forces at security checkpoints in the Nineveh, Saladdin, and Al Anbar governorates, listed here in order of the measures' severity.

The severe restrictions imposed by those military forces, the provocation created by unprofessional measures, feelings of economic marginalization due to the issues of unemployment and the resources allocated to those governorates, the absence of development programs – all of these created favorable conditions for ISIS to be welcomed in protest of those conditions.

⁵ Abdul Jabar, Faleh. *The Caliphate State: Advancing Toward the Past – ISIS and the Local Community in Iraq*. (Beirut, Arab Center for Research and Policy Studies, 2017), p. 12.

When ISIS came to Sunni Arab areas, it was a moment of salvation for many people, according to the Sunni Arab elite, a relief from the severe tension that those areas had experienced for years. ISIS exploited those dashed hopes, feelings of “loss of power” sit-ins, and pressure from sectarian media to form alliances with many Baath Party supporters in these areas.

Thus, ISIS seemed strengthened by an environment weary to the point of suicide, searching for a defender and so reckless as to do anything, while the unresponsiveness and lack of vision of the various Shia and Sunni political forces, as well as that of the state’s official institutions and agencies, had a big role in the success achieved by ISIS. Although the Sunni Arab elites stressed that the community in the western and northern governorates did not unanimously adopt a pro-ISIS stance, they – that is, the elites – acknowledged that the majority of people, including many educated people and community leaders, supported ISIS, especially at the beginning of the organization’s occupation of their cities and regions.

Things were fine until a few days after the fall of the cities of Anbar, Mosul, Saladin, and the Baghdad belt. The moment that the Sunni Arab community turned on ISIS came soon after the organization began targeting the people of these areas by displacing them, engaging in exemplary punishment, and punishing acts that citizens did not consider crimes, like smoking, playing games, throwing parties, dancing, and the like.

The Islamic State organization imposed harsher measures on citizens than the central government had, such that the people came to realize that ISIS was not a revolutionaries’ revolution but rather a terrorist gang.

Specifically, ISIS’s action to displace residents was a turning point in the citizenry’s revolt, when they shifted from rebelling alongside ISIS to accommodating the government’s orientation.

On the other hand, a number of Sunni Arab elites point out that a significant portion of the Sunni community still believe that ISIS would not have found a foothold in their areas but for an Iranian conspiracy. Meanwhile, a number of them mentioned a widespread belief that ISIS is an American organization run by Washington for its own interests.

In any case, The Sunni Arab community still does not trust the security forces that imposed security and liberated their areas due to their doubts about the performance of those forces, which had previously abandoned their areas to ISIS.

Contradictions in Stance on Shiite Rule

The liberation of Sunni Arab areas signaled the transformation of the stance of citizens there toward the government and its measures. What the people had called “Al-Maliki’s Army” they began calling “Iraq’s Army” because of the community’s desire for the state to retake the reins and rescue them from oppression by ISIS. Citizens are still rushing to give information to the military against those they see as “ISIS members” or saboteurs. The people’s view of the government has changed dramatically for the positive. Few find fault in the political leadership at the helm in the Baghdad government, which is affiliated with Shiism, as long as it is just and fair concerning their demands as citizens. Thus, sectarian tension is little known in the minds of the citizenry today due to Shiites being the ones governing in Baghdad. Educated individuals have even observed a new phenomenon: Rhetoric disparaging Shiites such as “rejectors” and “Safavids” is now rejected by the Sunni community itself (perhaps because of its connection to ISIS’s dogmatic system).⁶ Today, nothing is left of sectarian feelings in these areas except the calls for solidarity and harmony in the “house of Sunnism” that do not shy away from calling for confrontation and hostility toward others.

It is clear that feelings of gratitude and appreciation prevail in the Sunni Arab community toward Prime Minister Haider al-Abadi as the architect of the great success of achieving victory over ISIS and freeing entire governorates from the organization’s abuse. There is no better proof of that than the significant vote percentages that al-Abadi’s Nasr electoral list obtained in the Sunni Arab governorates, which was inconceivable for a Shiite-led list just a few years ago.

The enormous wave of displacement experienced by Sunni Arabs fleeing from the yoke of ISIS to Kurdish areas in the Kurdistan Region and Shiite areas in central and southern Iraq contributed to changing the perception of other sectarian and ethnic groups. For the first time since 2003, Sunni Arabs found that they were not necessarily licit for killing. They sought refuge in Shiite areas, where Sunnis found themselves in the middle of an experiment in social integration they had never before tried, at the heart of which was the national identity and Arabism that had bound them to Iraq’s Shiites.

Sunni Arabs even seem more broad-minded about Shia rites that fill the public sphere every year, sometimes endeavoring to participate in those rites, specifically through initiatives in Tikrit and Ramadi that met with varying reactions, as noted by several of the elites.

⁶ Said, Hayder. “The Islamic State in Iraq and the Levant and Its Iraqi Context.” *The Rise of Radicalism in the Arab World – Significance, Implications, and Counter-Strategies*, conference papers and discussions (Amman, Jordan, Friedrich Ebert Foundation, 2014), p. 70.

The elites in the study proudly mentioned that these days there are thousands of students coming from central and southern Iraq to study at the universities of Mosul and Anbar in particular, which they said was inconceivable in previous years charged with sectarianism.

Despite all this, this positive outlook does not stave off an internalized and repressed but unmistakable feeling that many people in the western regions still believe that “ruling Baghdad is their inheritance, and they are best equipped for it.”

On the other hand, in recalling Shiite Arab politicians’ rapprochement with Iran, it is worth noting that the Sunni Arab stance has not budged from expressing hatred toward that country. The attitude toward the ruling Shiites has never been detached from the attitude toward Iran. The Sunni Arab elites were unanimous in stating that Iran is pushing agendas harmful to the interests of Iraq and its citizens, such as cutting off water and supporting militias. Furthermore, in the opinion of the elites, Iran is encouraging the entrenchment of a divisive, sectarian system through its support of a political faction from one sect at the expense of another.

Several members of the educated elite mentioned that Sunni politicians in particular contributed to this attitude toward Iran held by citizens in the western governorates. The politicians had sectarian motivations and sought to link Shiite Arab politicians to Iran through media campaigns and shrewd and focused speeches. They benefited from the considerable cultural legacy of hostility toward Iran left behind by the Baath Party, as well as the eight-year war that the Iraqi people hold in their memories to this day.

The Baaths: An Overplayed Card

The Sunni Arab intelligentsia did not differ in the view that the Baath Party is organized and active but has a negligible presence on the Sunni scene at the present moment. They did not disagree that “the Baaths are an overplayed card,” especially given that the moment of Saddam’s execution was a symbolic end to the Baath Party, as the party’s popular support disappeared almost entirely at that time. Meanwhile, the alliance between many Baathists and ISIS was the real end of the party in the eyes of Sunni Arab citizens.

Nonetheless, few elites mentioned that the Sunni Arab populace believes that the Baaths still exist but see them as wholly ineffective and lacking influence. That does not, however, stand in the way of mentioning that many of those who were linked to the Baath Party through interests and privileges that were stripped from them still bring up their grievances, “meted out against the Baaths,” although that was

not necessarily the case. They were affiliated with the party by virtue of employment, not doctrine and membership.

On the other hand, the elites note that the political regime in Baghdad has been playing the Baath card for years for political and electoral purposes. It is a card played openly against people affiliated with the Baath Party, when in reality it is a means to extort and target Sunni Arabs, the elites say, pointing to politicians' stance toward Baathists from other sects.

From the viewpoint of the Sunni Arab elite, it is possible to turn the page on the Baath Party and associated laws like the Accountability and Justice Act by repealing that law and making it a judicial and security issue, whereby perpetrators of crimes and activists for the Baath doctrine would be subject to penalty of law and the Constitution. Such a measure finds support from a majority of Sunni Arab citizens who do not see any harm in punishing Baathist criminals, especially because the Baaths are now part of the past that injured them just as it injured others throughout the Baaths' 35-year rule.

Federalism: Contradictions of Possibility and Impossibility

Sunni Arabs have long felt "cheated" by the federal system that the Kurdistan Region enjoys. The services and assets that Kurdistan obtained, with Shiite support, belong in principle to all citizens and Sunni Arabs should have access to the same in their governorates as well. This sense of being cheated has continued for years on end, with the Kurds as the fulcrum of Iraqi politics. The Kurdistan Region expanded its borders to include vast territory in the wake of the security collapse and ISIS's advance on the Sunni Arab governorates, which enabled Kurdistan to take control of Kirkuk Governorate and much of the territory of Diyala and Saladdin governorates and Mosul.

But much of the balance in relations with Kurdistan was restored by the government's recalling of its troops, the restoration of those regions controlled by the Kurdistan Region's Peshmerga forces, in particular the restoration of Kirkuk Governorate, and the measures taken by Baghdad against Kurdistan, such as cutting off salaries, the air embargo, and other measures. This rebalancing of relations resulted in greater adherence to the option of unity under central governance by Baghdad.

Sunni Arabs tentatively adopt a vision of a centralized state without federalism. The elites insisted that calls to establish a region in Saladdin or the other Sunni governorates are put forth by political forces for the purpose of gain or

extortion and are not actually a popular demand from the people of those governorates.

Of course, the elites rejected any possibility of establishing a unified Sunni Arab region from the governorates where that group makes up the majority, sometimes because the governorates are in competition, and sometimes because of the lack of cultural, tribal, civilizational, and political ties among the governorates in question.

Nonetheless, following the displacement of hundreds of thousands of citizens to Kurdistan by ISIS or the military operations for liberation, they have witnessed the degree of development, stability, and autonomy that the Kurdistan Region has enjoyed through the years. As a result, citizens in these areas do not rule out the idea of governorate-based federalism as an alternative option. The driving force behind federalism will be the Baghdad government's handling of citizen demands in these governorates.

Social Trust: Failure or Optimism?

The Sunni Arab elite assesses the general mood of the people as feelings of failure and defeat accumulated since 2003, accompanied by a list of social stigmas concerning Sunni citizens.

The moment of disillusionment with the new system's direction after the issuance of the decisions dissolving the security agencies; the feelings of defeat from the absence of a sheltering aegis after Saddam's execution; the loss in the bloody sectarian conflict of 2006-2007 in Baghdad; losing the wager on real political participation due to the Federal Court's decision in the elections won by the Sunni-supported Al-Iraqiyya List; the overwhelming sense of error and transgression that accompanied the support for ISIS by a significant portion of the western and northern governorates' citizens; the failure to liberate areas except through bloodshed, mostly by Shiite Arabs; the return of displaced residents to their demolished and devastated homes – all of these successive events could only leave feelings of frustration and failure in the recesses of Sunni Arabs' minds.

The community in these areas express their displeasure with the descriptors commonly applied to their people: cronies of the former regime, Baathists, ISIS members, etc.

A descriptor like "ISIS's incubator," frequently used in political and media rhetoric, is a sneering insult and unjustifiably vengeful – how could an entire community support, accommodate, and coexist with ISIS, when millions of people

from those areas were displaced, in addition to the presence of those called Al-Maliki's Sunnis, the Awakening, and others?⁷

The Sunni Arab community's failure is due to social trust that appears to be at its weakest point, as the elites insist that people's feelings toward Sunni Arab politicians are shrouded in frustration with the degree of corruption, weakness, and inability to achieve anything noteworthy for the citizens of these areas.

The same attitude encompasses tribal leaders and clerics, toward whom the community evinces great discontent, blaming them for the tribulation they have undergone as a result of the community being dragged into ISIS's orbit.

Many of the educated elites mentioned the diminished standing of the tribal sheikhs after many of them attended sit-ins in support of ISIS. Meanwhile, a new class of young tribal sheikhs began emerging in governorates like Al Anbar to assume leadership of the folk and customary aspects of the tribes and resolve everyday problems for tribal members.

Trust in the tribes was shaken at the foundations, especially in western Anbar, where people welcomed ISIS more out of vengeance and retaliation against certain tribes due to competition over local standing, influence, and privileges than as a specific political or ideological stance, as stated by some members of the elite.

In addition to the shaky standing of the sheikhs after ISIS, regard for tribe subsided thanks to the strong presence of the state's legal and law enforcement agencies. That probably is precisely what pushed the tribal sheikhs to take an interest in official ties to state agencies under the banner of "Tribal Mobilization" and "Awakening," etc., as an alternative to the abatement of their traditional social standing.

In general, regard for and trust in the tribe seemed to be at its weakest point among young people in particular, although it should be noted that the tribe and its culture are not strong to begin with in urban centers like Tikrit and Mosul.

With regard to religion, the overwhelming majority of the elites noted a proliferation of liberalized religious practices, especially among young people, manifesting in phenomena such as atheism, abandoning the veil, and alcohol consumption in the western and northern governorates. It seems that phenomena such as these are a reaction to the stringent interpretation of religion experienced by citizens who witnessed ISIS's practices in their areas.

Trust in clerics also seems to be at its weakest point. It has become common to see mosques empty but for a few worshippers. Loathing of clerics, especially the hardliners among them, manifests in their not returning to their governorates post-liberation. The citizenry in Sunni governorates, meanwhile, have not hesitated to cast

⁷ Abdul Jabar, Faleh. Op. cit., p. 14.

aspersions on those clerics, as there is a general air of skepticism toward the intentions of clerics who took part in any way in colluding with ISIS in the past.

In general, the Sunni Arab community in Iraq is especially “religious by habit,” not truly “religious,” meaning that there is a high degree of separation between religion and public life at the bedrock of the community. Religion’s influence is not decisive; in fact, religion has significant impact only at the stage at which the community chooses rebellion, when in its radical Salafist version it becomes a tool for mobilization and ideological targeting of the other.

The extent of the failure and division in the Sunni Arab community, as well as the lack of social trust in the community’s local leaders, can be sensed in the citizenry’s electoral behavior in the parliamentary elections held on May 12 of this year. For the first time, important Shiite lists like the Haider al-Abadi-led Nasr, and Hadi Al-Amiri-led Fatah competed in western and northern regions and earned a significant percentage of votes there.

The citizenry’s electoral behavior also accompanies a general feeling of frustration with participating in elections at all because of the persistence of old figures in Sunni Arab political groups and lists and their participation in the elections. This frustration translated into low turnout in the last round of elections.

It is also notable that the people of these areas often practice self-flagellation, placing responsibility for the experiences undergone by the community in the western and northern governorates on the behavior of their residents, which led everyone to dispersion and division, in addition to destruction and ruin.

On the other hand, trust in the government and Shiite politicians seems to improve continuously, accompanied by feelings of optimism for the future, especially in Nineveh Governorate. Educated Sunni Arabs pointed to an improvement in the image of the government as the basic umbrella protecting all citizens. As a general matter, the improvement seems clear, especially in the perception of certain individuals, such as Prime Minister Haider al-Abadi and Staff Lt. Gen. Abdul Wahab al-Saadi, one of the leaders of the Counter-Terrorism Service who took part in the battle to liberate Mosul. But attitudes toward government institutions and security agencies are shrouded in wariness in spite of the enormous improvement in their image. Sunni Arabs in these areas still do not seem to much trust that the government will help them in rebuilding, and the attitude toward the Popular Mobilization Forces seems extremely unsettled.

Demands: Major Issues to Everyday Matters

The crisis in the western and northern governorates “brought shame on the Sunni leadership;” it was “as if the scales fell from people’s eyes,” as told by two of the elites in the study. Sect and marginalization, calls to amend the constitution and change the state’s identity, pardons for prisoners, achieving balance in public institutions, limiting Iranian influence – these and other major demands no longer strike a chord or occupy a place of prominence for the Sunni Arab community. The Sunni intelligentsia unanimously agreed that the first and most important demand these days is merely to obtain the necessities of a dignified life.

The people of Mosul, for example, want nothing more than the removal of bodily remains and rubble. Meanwhile, the people of Nineveh, Saladdin, and Al Anbar governorates share in the meager hope of obtaining compensation or loans to help rebuild their homes demolished in the liberation effort.

Citizens in these governorates complain about youth unemployment, the hiring freeze on government jobs, and the irregular and sometimes nonexistent supply of ration card items. These are the common problems Iraq has suffered from the start of its fiscal crisis in mid-2014 to the present day.

Thus, the overwhelming majority of the elites in the study boiled down the current demands of Sunni Arab citizens to economic considerations. Political demands are no longer on the overall list of concerns.

Some of the educated elites even stated that the community demands nothing more than recognition of their citizenship and rights, such as the absence of double standards for the people of the northern and western regions in interactions with traffic departments and other official transactions. That is the whole of it.

Trust in the government and its ability to meet citizens’ demands for services seems scarce. Some of the elites in the study noted that the people of these areas have begun to depend on international organizations for rebuilding assistance since “the government has shirked from fulfilling its duties toward the people.”

The Popular Mobilization Forces: A Time Bomb

The elites in the study did not shy away from discussing the PMF. The driving factors behind their stance on this topic seem extremely complex.

In general, people in Sunni Arab areas feel that the PMF had a decisive role in the defeat of ISIS, and this makes them deeply appreciative and grateful, but they would not express this to the PMF directly! In this case, people are inclined to mention the people of central and southern Iraq or the names of certain figures like al-Abadi and al-Saadi.

Furthermore, the Sunni Arab elites generally believe that the PMF is responsible for committing offenses against citizens, including burning and stealing property, suspected murders, imprisoning people through extortion and coercion to obtain confessions, and extracting bribes.

Attitudes toward the PMF differ for the marja'iyya mobilization (fighters directly linked to the Shiite religious establishment), the armed factions mobilization (like the Hezbollah and Asa'ib Al al-Haq militias and others), and the tribal mobilization consisting of people from western and northern Sunni areas.

Overall, none of the educated elites studied expressed a stance hostile to the marja'iyya mobilization, perhaps because of its interactions with the people and contributions to projects related to Mosul residents specifically, such as removing rubble from residential areas, disarming explosives, and helping people in need. Meanwhile, the perception of the tribal mobilization was extremely negative in Saladdin and Mosul, but it was somewhat positive in Al Anbar. And the Sunni Arab elites were unanimous in a sharply negative stance on the armed factions, viewing them as sectarian militias close to Iran.

The Sunni intelligentsia blamed the tribal mobilization for blackmailing the people of the Saladdin and Mosul regions on elections-related issues and protecting ISIS criminals at times. They also accused them of financial extortion under the cover of the Shiite mobilization. But the elites in Al Anbar indicated that attitudes toward the tribal mobilization in their governorate are moderate.

It could be said that the consensus tendency in the Sunni community is to distance the PMF from association with the citizens of the western and northern governorates by removing them to the outskirts of cities and keeping them away from city centers.

It can also be stated that this issue in particular is a time bomb that could detonate sectarian tension at any moment, as indicated by several of the elites.

Synopsis and Assessment:

Tattered social trust in the Sunni Arab community, its demands for nothing more than the basic needs for life rather than major issues, and the accumulation of shocks to this community have prepared it for a new stage: adaptation to the general political and social reality in Iraq.

This stage followed the Sunni Arab community's experiment with withdrawal and patience after the American military operation in 2003 by giving up the armed defense of the former regime. Sunni Arabs were not unified under the Baath flag during the fight; the liberals believed that renewal was necessary, while fatwas were being issued from the major Sunni religious schools (Salafist, Sufi, and Muslim Brotherhood) prohibiting combat under the Baath flag because it was a "client flag." But Sunni Arab community's patience and withdrawal lasted only a few months before the community entered the rebellion stage after civilian administrator Paul Bremer issued decisions dissolving the security agencies specifically. The Sunni Arab community was searching for a "Sunni nation" at the Arab level, taking up arms against the political process or at least staying silent about that choice.

Today, after long years of rebellion and the deep sense of defeat following the bitter experience with ISIS, and owing to the manner of interacting with other sects and national groups following the displacement experienced by millions of people from the western and northern regions, in addition to the national sacrifices that crossed sectarian lines to liberate territory and the presence of the Shiite mobilization in Sunni Arab areas, this same community is witnessing its entrance to a stage of adaptation and adjustment to the political process.

In another push in this direction, there are signs of professional change in the way that the security agencies and political officials in the government interact with the people of the Sunni Arab governorates, which contributed to a change in citizens' response to their alienation from the political system established in 2003.

Sunni Arabs' adaptation manifests in their rejection of armed rebellion, the improvement of the perception of certain Shiite figures, and even the Baath issue. It can be said that the end of all these complexities that burdened the building of the Iraqi state and nation requires a final push for the sake of a constructive relationship with the community in the western and northern governorates.

From another standpoint, other issues are emerging where it appears that Sunni Arabs are not adapting fully, such as the PMF issue and to a lesser extent the demand for federalism and relations with Iran.

It seems that the matter of dealing with the PMF could be a cornerstone in the building of the state or the failure to build it. This appears to be an imminent danger on the road to lessening sectarian, social, and political tensions.

As for federalism, the Sunni Arab community seems to have adapted to the centralized system currently employed by Baghdad. But a problem in the government's manner of interacting with citizens, or disregard for these areas' pressing need for post-liberation reconstruction and sustainable development, could push the people of these areas to rebel against Baghdad again, through constitutional means this time, to ensure the establishment of federalism as an alternative to armed insurgency.

To go into more detail, decisions must be made to increase social intercourse between the people of the different governorates in order to build Iraqi nationhood.

One of these measures would be the repeal of Ministry of Higher Education decisions mandating that students in a number of disciplines stay in universities within their governorates rather than creating a mix of students from different governorates. The Ministry of Education and the Ministry of Higher Education can also encourage school trips and educational exchanges between governorates that differ on the basis of ethnicity and sect.

In the context of curriculum design, the Ministry of Education can involve school districts in the governorates instead of limiting it to the central office in the capital.

The NGO Directorate should encourage organizations to work to achieve geographic diversity in their community activities.

In this context, the Communications and Media Commission and ministries including Culture, Trade, and Planning can initiate work to ensure that the governorates are involved in cultural and economic activities in order to achieve cultural and economic cooperation among the governorates.

The Sunni Arab community in Iraq seems more prepared today than at any time in the past to accept adjustments and completely adapt to the political process if the other side possesses a corresponding consciousness receptive to a community ready to venture toward a single national identity. In addition to all of the above, such a consciousness requires a solution to the major issues represented in the Constitution and laws; activation of the Federation Council, the Federal Public Service Council, and the governorate's powers; and prisoner pardons. It also seems that repealing the Accountability and Justice Act and making it a security and judicial issue is one of the quickest ways to ensure the adjustment of citizens living in the western and northern governorates.

CVs of study participants (in alphabetical order)

Dr. Obay Said Al-Dewachi – University of Mosul president

Sanaa Ahmed Shawkat – journalist and war correspondent, Nineveh Governorate Media Council Office, member of the Iraqi Center for Negotiations and Dispute Resolution, has worked for an array of newspapers and news agencies

Dr. Abdulrahman Najm Almashhadani – Al Iraqia University economics professor, civic and political activist

Abdulaziz Aliwi – journalist and instructor at the University of Anbar College of Law and Political Science

Abdulaziz Younis Al-Jarba – activist in civil organizations and generalist in peace-building issues in Nineveh, president of the Al-Tahreer Association for Development specializing in peace-building

Ali Tahsein Al-Hayani – journalist and independent civic activist, Youth Solidarity League in Al Anbar

Omar al-Shaher – journalist and civic activist

Dr. Essa Ayal Majid Al-Mazrouei – Media and Public Relations Department chair in the Tikrit University College of Arts, vice president of journalists' union in Saladdin

Ghailan Qahtan Hamza – electrical engineer in the communications sector, has a management degree, peace-building activist, working to establish the Ghad Organization for Dialogue and Development, currently working on peace-building in regions north of Baghdad

Dr. Mohammed Khaled Buraa – associate dean of the College of Law and Political Science at University of Anbar

Mahmoud Abdulsami Alhiti – Peace Forum in Hit secretary

Dr. Munir Marwan Shehab Al-Shahwani – Al Iraqia University College of Islamic Sciences, civic activist in Mosul on some charitable causes (Peace Not Violence Project), works at the Sunni Waqf Directorate

Nusair Tareq Faleh – Tikrit Voluntary Youth Council president

Naghem Talal Nouri – Media Department director at University of Telafer, journalist and civic activist doing aid work and volunteering in Mosul, works at Nineveh First Team and Soutuna News Agency

Dr. Hisham al-Hashimi – security and strategic affairs researcher

Wurud Khaled – Commercial Law professor in the University of Anbar College of Law

Yusef Yasser Al-Najdi – legal team chief for the organization Adala in Mosul, civil activist, activist in the organization Soutuna in Baghdad with Amal al-Jubouri, holder of international training certificates

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