



Meet Iraq's Sunni Arabs

A strategic profile

by Florence Gaub

Baathists, jihadists, insurgents: stereotypes about the Sunni Arab community of Iraq abound. They formed the backbone of the Saddam Hussein regime, invaded Kuwait, gassed the Kurds and helped Daesh capture more than one-third of Iraq's territory – or so the story goes. But this community numbering some 5.3 million people is more than just a political troublemaker – and its grievances have been neither fully understood nor addressed.

A non-sectarian sect

Somewhat at odds with the sectarian image of Iraq, the country's Sunni Arab community defines itself the least via its ethno-religious identity. 81% of Iraqi Sunnis are in favour of a separation of state and religion, while 60% see themselves first as Iraqi rather than Sunni or Arab. Sunnis do not care much for Sharia law, either: 86% want laws to be based on the will of the people rather than along religious lines, and they have consistently voted for secularist parties with national agendas. In contrast to their Shia counterparts (and before relations with Baghdad turned sour following the US withdrawal), Sunnis were long-standing supporters of a centralised government rather than federalisation. This contradicts notions of Iraq's 'artificial' nature and need for segregation (or even partition) along ethnic lines: in fact,

one-third of the country's total population (which numbers over 37 million) still live in ethnically mixed areas.

But precisely because the identity of Iraq's Sunni Arabs is rooted more in nationalism than that of their Kurdish and Shia Arab counterparts, the community is less mobilised in sectarian terms. It consequently lacks a cohesive political platform, a party, or even a shared movement to express its grievances and demands. There is no single authority, individual or entity which could clearly articulate what the Sunni Arab community wants. Given their decentralised, nationalistic and fragmented nature, it therefore seems all the more absurd that Iraq's Sunni Arabs have been treated (not to say punished) as a unified collective.

Perpetrators...

The fact that Saddam Hussein, important elements of the Baath party and key officers in the Iraqi military were Sunni Arabs created the impression that the community as a whole benefited from the regime. Successive lustration laws (designed to remove civil servants associated with Saddam's rule) were based on 'guilt by association' rather than individual crimes, and therefore disproportionately targeted



Sunni Arabs. Even if this is now common knowledge, it is worth emphasising as this stigmatisation of Iraq's Sunni Arabs continues to underpin their self-perception as victims of discrimination today.

It is worth noting that, although unjustly applied, the first round of de-Baathification in 2003 only adversely affected a small section of the community in the long term: of the around 400,000 civil servants which had been Baath party members, a significant number were reinstated, including 70% of the military's officer corps.

De-Baathification measures therefore directly hit 10% of Sunni Arabs. While this sounds like a modest number, it is still ten times higher than the number of Germans affected by denazification efforts after the Second World War. To make matters worse, the reform of de-Baathification laws in 2008 rendered lustration even more visible – although it effectively concerned fewer people. Whereas the first round of de-Baathification had targeted anonymous civil servants, the second round targeted Sunni politicians seeking to integrate themselves into Iraq's political system. In the run-up to the 2010 elections, the commission in charge of lustration attempted to disqualify 511 candidates and bar 15 political parties from running – most of them Sunni. The ban included prominent Sunni politician Saleh al-Mutlaq, who had been expelled from the Baath party in 1977 (the ban was later revoked and he went on to become deputy prime minister).

But the ostracising of Sunnis did not end there. Sunni leaders, such as Vice President Tariq al-Hashemi and Finance Minister Rafi al-Issawi, were tried and sentenced to death on the basis of evidence which Interpol judged to be unreliable in 2012. Both now live in exile, but their indictment provoked widespread demonstrations against Prime Minister Maliki's 'sectarianism'.

Adding to the sense of injustice, Sunni Arabs do not perceive themselves as having been the backbone of Saddam Hussein's regime. His inner circles were not chosen along ethnic lines, but on the basis of personal loyalty. If any group was overrepresented, it was not Sunni Arabs but small-town Arabs – especially from Saddam's hometown of Tikrit, but also Raw, Anah, Haditha – and individuals from his own tribe, the Abu Nasir (which is, with 20,000 members, one of the smallest of Iraq's roughly 80 Arab tribes). Christians (such as his foreign minister) and Shias (such as his chief of staff), although underrepresented, were part of these circles, too. The feeling of injustice is particularly strong among what remains of the previous officer corps – only half of which were Baath party members. In fact, military

officers tried on at least three occasions in the 1990s to remove Hussein from power, often paying for the attempts with their lives.

With the rise and fall of Daesh, Sunni Arabs are, once again, being collectively accused of having facilitated a reign of terror. On several occasions, then Prime Minister Maliki labelled Sunni protesters in Ramadi and Baghdad 'terrorists' with 'links to al-Qaeda', and used these allegations to violently quash demonstrations. Using even stronger sectarian rhetoric, he likened the military operations in Iraq's western Anbar province to an ancient war between 'the followers of Hussein and the followers of Yazid', a reference to a 7th century battle between Sunnis and Shias. Even today, as the lack of transitional justice in territories liberated from Daesh shows, there is a lingering suspicion that Sunni Arabs gave birth to the terrorist group.

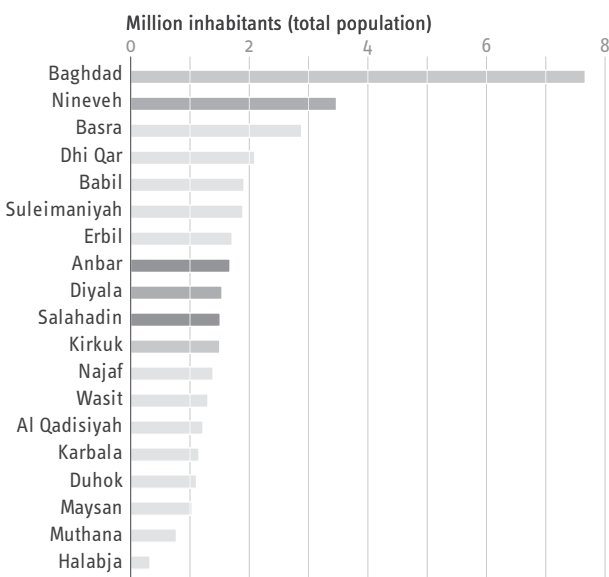
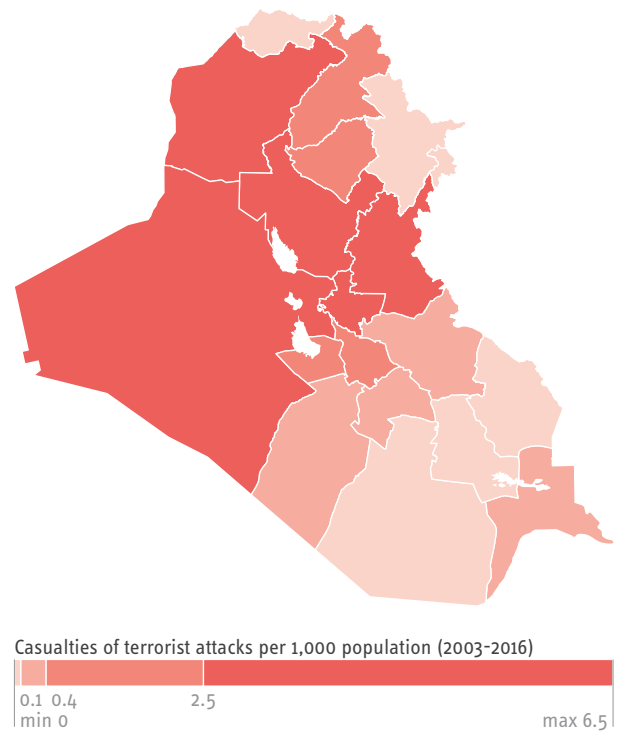
This assertion is based on the fact that Daesh took over cities and areas populated mainly by Sunnis (such as Mosul, Tikrit and Ramadi), that the organisation's core is made up of Iraqis, and that it has entered an unholy alliance with remnants of the Baath party. The latter has taken two forms: several former Baathist officers serve in Daesh's ranks (particularly its military council – both deputies of Daesh's leader Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi, as well as the heads of the group's operations in Syria and Iraq are former officers), and Daesh has colluded, at times, with Baathist-military insurgents. These include the Army of the Men of the Naqshbandi Order (which has a maximum of 5,000 members) and other groups organised under the General Military Council for Iraqi Revolutionaries.

But once again, this needs to be nuanced: the Sunni insurgency in Anbar alone includes more than 40 armed groups made up of former disgruntled military personnel, the vast majority of which do not share Daesh's ideology. In addition, Daesh is not as Iraqi as it often appears to be: it is rooted in conflicts in Afghanistan and Jordan, and it has had, from its inception, a sizeable share of foreigners in its ranks (something which contributed to its disconnect from Iraqi society and ultimately its demise in the years of the Anbar Awakening). In fact, precisely due to the organisation's multinational nature, its second leader, Abu Omar al-Baghdadi, was even rumoured at one stage to be a foreign actor posing as an Iraqi.

Last but certainly not least, even at its peak, Daesh had no more than 7,000 Iraqi members – 0.13% of the Sunni Arab community (in comparison, the Irish Republican Army's (IRA) membership equalled 1% of Ireland's population). And even if *all* of Daesh's roughly 30,000 members were to have been Iraqi,



Iraq's Sunni areas: hardest hit by terrorism



Data: Global Terrorism Database (University of Maryland) and Columbia University.

they would have constituted a mere 3% of Sunni Arab men of military age.

...or victims?

In stark contrast with the narrative which paints Iraq's Sunni Arabs as the willing collaborators of Daesh, it is this community which has suffered the

most from the organisation's violence – and, in fact, from Iraq's post-2003 violence in general. While not even a fifth of Iraq's population, Sunni Arabs constitute half of all victims since 2003. The community has also suffered disproportionately in terms of displacement – the majority of the country's 3 million internally displaced persons (IDPs) are Sunni Arabs. In a 2014 survey, more than 30% of Sunnis said they felt they would have to leave Iraq temporarily or permanently – double the number of Kurds and a third higher than Shia Arabs which said the same.

Sunni Arabs have not only suffered at the hands of Daesh, but have also been targeted by Shia militias such as the Badr Organisation and the Mahdi Army, and more recently by their reincarnation as the Popular Mobilisation Forces (PMF). This has been a constant feature since 2003 – in fact, it indirectly contributed to the rise of Daesh. For example, in the run-up to the 2014 elections, militias such as Asa'ib Ahl al-Haq harassed and killed Sunnis in Diyala province. And the militias were not alone: in Mosul, the Iraqi police force (especially its 3rd division, which is largely Shia) arbitrarily arrested Sunnis, mistreated detainees and used excessive force against the population. Unsurprisingly, 80% of Mosul's inhabitants stated in a 2014 survey conducted shortly before the city fell to Daesh that they felt unsafe – up from 25% in 2013. While Daesh lacked strong ideological support in Mosul – overall, 90% of city's Sunni Arabs viewed it as a terrorist organisation – satisfaction with its rule increased over the course of

the first year. In December 2015, 55% of Mosulites stated that 'life is better than under the government', despite the fact that 61% did not share Daesh's views.

In contrast to the sectarian rhetoric of Daesh and others, inter-sectarian tolerance is actually higher in Iraq than anywhere else in the region. Both Shias (99%) and Sunnis (92%) recognise each other as a Muslim sect – in comparison, only 52% of Egyptians consider Shias to be Muslim. The arrival of Daesh must therefore be understood as the result of extremely poor relations between Iraq's government and people rather than an ideological split.

More in common than divides

Interestingly, this rift is not exclusive to Sunni Arabs: Shia Arabs are also thoroughly dissatisfied with the government's performance, albeit to a lesser extent. Roughly the same amount (60%) of Sunnis and Shias are unhappy about the lack of electricity or clean water, while poor infrastructure, schooling, and medical care appear on the list of grievances of both communities – as does corruption. Both Sunnis and Shias, including cleric Muqtada al-Sadr, have protested against the *muhasasa* (quota) system which distributes key posts along ethno-religious lines. In a pluralistic society like Iraq, abandoning this system is easier said than done: to assuage fears, every cabinet will by default have to be diverse.

The problem with this system is not so much that it entrenches sectarian divisions in Iraq – but that it is entirely opaque. In contrast to Lebanon, where the ethno-religious quota translates population statistics into posts, there is no census on which Iraq's system is based, nor are there clear rules on what this means for top cabinet jobs, as well as the recruitment and appointment of military posts. (Neither in Lebanon nor Iraq is the quota officially enshrined anywhere in writing). Making the system more transparent would therefore be a small step forward as it would reduce corruption – at least to some extent. Shia and Sunni Arabs share other problems, too: unemployment rates are roughly the same (16%), and poverty is a concern for both. That said, while poverty in the mainly Sunni provinces of Anbar and Nineveh is worse than the national average, Iraq's poorest provinces (Maysan, Muthana, Dhi Qar) are still predominantly populated by Shias.

What do they want?

Sunni Arabs have grievances that go beyond good governance and service provision – in fact, they are largely symbolic and therefore even more difficult to

address. First, is the desire to end de-Baathification – even if the impact of these measures is by now negligible in numerical terms, it remains an easily abused tool and symbolises the unequal treatment of Sunnis since 2003. In addition, the Baath party (which had been banned under the Coalition Provisional Authority in 2003), was formally banned by Iraq's parliament in 2016. Sunni lawmakers have argued that the law renders specific de-Baathification measures superfluous, but to no avail. There can be no doubt, however, that the abolishment of these procedures would do more for Iraqi reconciliation than anything else.

Second, Sunni Arabs still feel disengaged from Baghdad's political classes. Although successive governments have been comprised of 22% Sunni Arab ministers on average (including the post of defence minister), the perception remains that Sunnis lack any real influence in decision-making. This is also visible in party affiliation: no province is as disengaged in politics as the largely Sunni-populated Anbar, where a mere 0.3% of the population are members of a party. In comparison, the Iraqi average is 8%, with the Kurdistan region having a particularly high rate of 33%, and the largely the Shia Najaf governorate 18%. Trust in the democratic process will have to be regained through evidence of direct influence on decision-making in Baghdad.

Third, Sunni Arabs are very concerned by the unchecked role of the PMF. This is, of course, rooted in their experience with Shia militias since 2003, but the PMF's behaviour over the last years has reinforced their fears. Militias such as the Badr Brigades and the League of the Righteous have executed Sunnis in revenge for terror attacks conducted by Daesh. This occurred, for instance, in Muqdadidiya (Diyala province) in early 2016 – even though the attack itself also killed a large number of Sunnis. Protecting the community from unchecked sectarian violence will have to be the number one priority or a new armed group will emerge to fill the security vacuum.

Despite all these concerns, Iraq's Sunni Arabs are currently more upbeat than at any point since the 2003 invasion: 51%, as opposed to 36% of Shias, say the country is heading in the right direction (up from 10% in 2014). 71% of Sunni Arabs support Prime Minister al-Abadi as opposed to 62% of Shia Arabs (in comparison, a mere 5% of Sunni Arabs had a favourable view of his predecessor, Maliki). Sunnis are even cautiously optimistic about the government, with 53% believing that it will treat Sunnis and Shias equally. Given this sense of optimism, there is now a window of opportunity which must be seized.

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