

Iraq in the Eyes of the Islamic State

This short briefing paper discusses IS' view of Iraq, its government and Kurdish population. It surveys IS' newsletter, *al-Naba'*, and the magazines *Dābiq*, *Rumīyyah* and *Dār al-Islām*, to investigate the group's perception of the country.

The 2003 war on Iraq and the following chaos unleashed another wave of Salafi-Jihadism in the region. In 2006 *Jama'at al-Tawhid wal-Jihād* and several other Sunni jihadi groups merged under the Islamic State of Iraq (ISI). The latter evolved into the Islamic State in Iraq and Sham (ISIS) in 2013 and the Islamic State (IS) in 2014. In other words, Iraq is the cradle of IS, and the Iraqi context shaped the group's identity. Yet, interestingly, the country of the two rivers was relatively spared by IS' discursive attacks, compared to Syria. This was especially true is the group's Arabic outlet, *al-Naba'* newsletter.

IS mainly represented post-2003 Iraq as a major campaign against Islam – the locus of the Crusaders' invasions – and as the result of the cooperation between Iran and the United States. In IS' words, the same year, Iran and the United States allegedly collaborated “through the British Foreign and Commonwealth Office”, which resulted in “the formation of the Safawī regime of Iraq” (*Dābiq* 11: 48). IS deliberately used the adjective “Safawī” – a reference to the Safavid dynasty that reigned on Persia – to depict the government in Iraq as a puppet Iran (*Dābiq* 11: 48). The group alleged that “the Safawī Iraqi regime” was but a third party that allows Iran and the United States to unite in secret, while faking their mutual hostility in public (*Dābiq* 11: 49).

In the same line, IS accused the Iraqi government of being “backed by Iranian intelligence, military, and finances” (*Dābiq* 4: 40). The group went further, arguing that Iran was the “founder” of post-2003 Iraq (Ibid). Therefore, the Iraqi government is considered “*rafidhi*” (rejectionist) that refers to its Shi'a identity and, consequently, lacks religious legitimacy. The group also pointed to the Iranian Shi'a militias – such as *Hezbollah* and the *Abul-Fadl al 'Abbās* battalion – fighting to defend Baghdad and other major Iraqi cities in the context of the 2014 conflict. The group, thus, urged its Muslim audience to acknowledge the Iranian influence and take action: “Take a lesson from our people in Iraq, for history repeats itself [...] They (Sunnis) tasted humiliation, disgrace, and many misfortunes at the hands of that army [Iranian] over a period of ten years [...] So take a lesson” (al-Adnāni, 9 September 2014).

Furthermore, a cornerstone of IS' delegitimizing discourse was the animosity of the Shi'a-led government against the Sunnis. According to the group, the Iraqi regime resented IS for the severe and rapid defeat it faced in Mosul and elsewhere. As a

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consequence, explained al-Muhajir, the group's spokesperson, the Iraqi government sought to "inflict harm on Ahl al-Sunna [the Sunnis]" (al-Muhajir, 5 December 2016). One instance of this "thirst for vengeance" was described in the eleventh issue of *al-Naba'*. The newsletter narrated that the Iraqi army – helped by Iranian Shi'a Popular Mobilisation Forces (PMU) – voluntarily opened the door of a water dam in Diyala in order to drown Sunni villages in Diyala province, in the East of Baghdad (*al-Naba'* 11: 6). It was believed that the action was taken in retaliation for recent defeats against the Caliphate.

In another instance of IS' delegitimization campaign of the Iraqi government, the group insisted on Iraq's incompetence and inability to defend itself against the *mujāhidīn* (holy fighters), in spite of the strong and costly support of the Crusaders (*Dābiq* 6: 32). The country, IS claimed, has neither strength nor legitimacy, it was "a disjointed jumble of regions and tribes that never recovered from the American invasion and cannot return to what it once was" (*Dābiq* 12: 49). As a result, the Iraqi army "ha[s] been largely superseded by the Popular [Mobilization] Units", fostering the Iranian control over the country and its populations (*Dābiq* 2: 48).

On the military front, IS recognized the Peshmerga leading role in the fight against the Caliphate in Iraq since 2014. As such, the Kurdish forces, and the Kurdish political parties were targeted by IS' discourse. First, the group discredited the Islamic credentials of the Muslim Kurds 'who fight against them'. True Muslims do not fight Caliphate, the group argues. Thus, IS questioned the religiosity of the Kurdish forces, referring to them as "atheists" (al-Baghdadi, 26 December 2016; *Rumīyyah* 4: 5). In a similar discursive practise adopted against several leaders and governments in the Middle East, IS described the Peshmerga as *murtaddīn* (apostates). This word denotes those Muslims who rejected to pay *Zakat* (charity), to Caliph Abū Bakr.

While the group acknowledged that the historical Peshmerga – who fought against the nationalistic Arab regime of Saddam Hussein – were respected warriors, it criticized the current Kurdish fighters. IS claimed that they are "fainthearted mercenaries void of any creed who only wait for their meagre wages" (*Dābiq* 4: 41). In the group's words, the Peshmerga did not fight for their "ideology" – the Kurdish identity and independence from Iraq – but had become a professional army that only fought because it gets paid for it (Ibid). Yet, in spite of their expertise, the Peshmerga allegedly remained unable to "effectively wage war on the Khilafah", and had a "largely inept role on the frontlines against the *mujāhidīn*", claims the group (*Dābiq* 10: 30 and 33). IS maintained that the Iraqi Kurds had clear goals in the conflict in Iraq and Syria; they were believed to fight against IS in order to please the Crusaders and secure the latter's support regarding the Kurdish claim for independence from Iraq (Ibid).

To conclude, IS depicted Iraq as an occupied country where allies of the United States and Iran abuse the Iraqi Sunni community. Portraying Iraq as dominated by Iranian and Kurds – devoid of Islamic credentials and immediate enemies of the Caliphate in the region – the group pictures an endangered Arab Muslim identity. These claims result in the justification of jihad and IS’ actions to liberate Iraq from illegitimate invaders. Doing so, IS’ discourse also feeds the sectarianism that keeps dividing Iraq since the toppling of Saddam Hussein.

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