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RADICALIZATION OF RELIGION, ETHNICITY AND SECTARIAN CONFLICTS IN THE MIDDLE EAST

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ABSTRACT

The article analyzes the process of radicalization of religious, ethnic and sectarian conflicts in the Middle East region. Especially discusses the deepening socio-political changes in the region as an example of ethnic and religious conflicts in Iraq and Syria, after the "Arab Spring".

INTRODUCTION

According to new report released by the UN during its special meeting (*Security Council Urges to "Stop the Madness" as Terrorists Trample Cultural, Religious Diversity of Middle East. United Nations, 27 March 2015, SC/11840, 7417 th Meeting*) concerning catastrophic situation with ethnic minorities in the Middle East in March this year, more than 420,000 Yezidies (*A historically misunderstood group, the Yazidis are predominantly ethnically Kurdish, and have kept alive their syncretic religion for centuries, despite many years of oppression and threatened extermination. The ancient religion is rumored to have been founded by an 11th century Ummayyad sheikh, and is derivered from Zoroastrianism, Christianity and Islam. See more detailed: Raya Jalabi, Who are the Yazidis and why is ISIS hunting them? The Guardian, Monday 11 August 2014*) has been displaced and were living in camps in Iraq's Kurdistan region, Syria and Turkey, and that thousand of girls had been sold into slavery. As Islamic extremists refused to live with non-Muslims, a member of Iraq's Parliament Vian Dakhil underlined during the meeting, "minority communities were being targeted with crimes

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unprecedented in the history of the world" (*Security Council Urges to "Stop the Madness" as Terrorists Trample Cultural, Religious Diversity of Middle East. United Nations, 27 March 2015, SC/11840, 7417 th Meeting*). Therefore, the forced displacement of Iraq's ethnic and religious minorities, including some of the region's oldest communities, is a tragedy of historic proportions. As international non-governmental organizations, for particular Amnesty International's field investigations have concluded that the IS is systematically and deliberately carrying out a program of ethnic cleansing in the areas under its control (*Ethnic Cleansing on a Historical Scale: Islamic State's Systematic Targeting of Minorities in Northern Iraq. Amnesty International, 10 August 2014. amnesty.org. Iraq: The Situation of Ethnic and Religious Minorities. D-IQ Meeting, European Parliament/20 June 2013, Briefing paper.*). This is not only destroying lives, but also causing irreparable damage to the fabric of Iraq's society, and fuelling inter-ethnic, sectarian and inter-religious tensions in the region and beyond. In addition the calls for ethnic separatism are growing in Turkey and Syria – clearly connected to ethnic assertion in Iraq. Identity politics is a key component in Iraq and has spread to other quarters of the Middle East. As local experts argue, the rise of identity politics in the Middle East has raised a number of practical implications (*Manjoob Zweiri,*

Mohammed Zahid, 2007), such as the creation of ethnic and religious zones, leading to the fragmentation of existing nation states in the region. For example, in Iraq a tripolarisation of identity has been firmly established – with Kurds, Shiite and Sunni zones creating a cleavage and instable society in Iraq. The rise of the Shiite in Iraq has added vitality to Shiite movement across the Middle East strengthening Shiite identity and leading to fears of a Shiite crescent forming (*Aaron Reese, 2013*).

This rise in power of the Shiite has in fact strengthened the Sunni and Kurdish identities in Iraq and the Middle East as they fight to preserve their positions in the midst of the growing influence and power of the Shiite (*This has added to further instability in Iraq as different ethnic and religious groupings compete with one another for power and influence in society*). Turkey and Syria recently have been beset by clashes with their respective Kurdish populations who are demanding greater rights, inspired by the Kurds in Iraq. In fact the demand of autonomy by the Kurds in Iraq has been met resistance from Syria and Turkey out of fear of similar demands being made by their own Kurdish populations (*Kumaraswamy P.R., 2006*). Therefore not only does the case of Iraq provide a clear demonstration of the practical implications of identity politics for stability in Iraq but also the entire Persian Gulf and the wider Middle East.

Background of the crisis: the "Arab Spring"

Independently of its outcome, the Arab spring (*From a policy perspective, the use of the term "revolution" could be useful, as it underlines the ambition of radically turning away from Arab authoritarianism. From an analytical point of view, however, the term should be avoided because the theory – laden concept of revolution refers to long processes of profound political and social change. There have only been a few successful revolutions in world history, and at the present time it can not be determined whether the Arab Spring has actually initiated revolutions. In the following, the term "Arab Spring" is used for pragmatic reasons: it has become common, and the search for a theoretically more sophisticated concept is meaning less considering the fact that the subject is still very much in flux*). can be regarded as an event of global historical significance (*Martin Beck and Simone Huser, 2012*). From its onset in early 2011, it has been understood as a process of political change in the Middle East (*In this paper, the term "Middle East" is used as synonym for "Middle East and North Africa" and "Arab world" – that is, states with a predominantly Arab population*). The Arab world was the only major area where regimes managed to defy global beyond the threshold of the twenty-first century. In the coming years, one of the main tasks of theoretically oriented social sciences will be to critically follow and explain the Arab Spring.

A first approach to the Arab Spring argues that change was inevitable because of the critical socioeconomic development in the authoritarian states of the Middle East. According to Volker Perthes, the most important triggers for this change was the democratic development of the Arab world (*Volker Perthes, 2011*). From 1970 to 2010, the population nearly tripled, going from 128 million to 359 million inhabitants (*Hegasy Sonja*). An estimated 41 percent of these people live below the poverty line (*UNDP, Development Challenges outlined in New Arab States Report, online: http://204.200.211.31/contents/file/DevChallenges_Report_Vol01_Eng.pdf, 2 February 2012*), and nearly 30 percent of the population between the ages of 20 and 35 (*Volker Perthes, 2011*). Although the current generation is better educated and qualified than the previous one – due to a strengthened education sector and increased networking through digital technology – many are unable to find employment.

The unemployment rate for the population cohort between the age of 15 and 25 was 25.6 percent in 2003, the highest in the world (*Global Employment Trend for Youth 2004, International Labour Office, August, online: www.ilo.org/wcmsp5/groups/public/@ed_emp/@emp_elm/@trends/documents/publication/wcms_114351.pdf, 2 October 2011*). Additionally, the labor market offers limited opportunities for university graduates. The consequent lack of prospects, rising costs of living, and anger over obviously corrupt and repressive rules compelled this generation rise up against the authoritarian regimes. Another view, held especially by Philip Howard and Muzammil Hussain (*Philip Howard, Muzammil M.Hussain, 2011*), attributes the outbreak of the Arab Spring to the access to the digital media, including social media such as Facebook, Twitter, YouTube, and text messages. Advocates of this approach make clear that the dissent between and populations already existed long before the spread of the internet (*Martin Beck, Simone Huser, 2012*). However, virtual communication gave people and instrument that made it possible for them to share their resentment with like-minded people and to organize movements against authoritarian rulers.

Ethnic minorities in Iraq, Syria and Islamic State (ISIS/ISIL)

Conflict in Syria and Iraq is causing particular suffering for religious minorities in the countries' diverse societies. The group that calls itself the Islamic State (IS) (*Previously known as the Islamic State in Iraq and al-Sham (ISIS/ISIL)*) has carried out ethnic cleansing (*This term is used to describe a "purposeful policy designed by one ethnic or religious group to remove by violent and terror-inspiring means the civilian population of another ethnic or religious group from certain geographic areas"*) on a historical scale in northern Irak. The IS has systematically targeted non-Arab and non-Sunni Muslim communities, killing or abducting hundreds, possibly thousands, and forcing more than 830,000 others to flee the areas it has captured since 10 June 2014 (*Christopher M. Blanchard. 2014*). Ethnic and religious minorities – Assyrian Christians, Turkmen Shi'a, Shabak Shi'a, Yezids, Kakai and Sabean Mandaenas – have lived together in the Nineveh province, much of it now under Islamic State's control, for centuries. Today, only those who were unable to flee when IS fighters seized the area remain trapped there, under threat of death if they do not convert to Islam (*The possibility of paying jizia (minority tax) was mentioned in some cases, mainly to Christians, but generally not implemented and superseded by mass exodus due to increased threats. Most Yezidis have been told to convert or be killed*). Hundreds, possibly thousands, of Yezidis, most of them women and children from the Sinjar region, were abducted as they fled the IS takeover in early

August last year. They continued to be held by the IS and, with a few exceptions, little is known of their fate or whereabouts. According to reports (*Ethnic Cleansing on a Historical Scale: Islamic State's Systematic Targeting of Minorities in Northern Iraq. Amnesty International, September 2014*), some of those who managed to make contact with their families said they are being pressured to convert to Islam and some have reported that some of the women and children – both girls and boys – from their families were taken to unknown locations by their captors. Some families say their detained relatives have also told them there have been cases of rape and sexual abuse of detained women and children (*ISIS and the sectarian conflict in the Middle East. Research Paper 15/16, House of Commons Library, 19 March 2015*).

Moreover, hundreds of Yezidi men from towns and villages in the Sinjar region, which put up armed resistance in a bid to repel the IS advance, were captured and shot dead in cold blood, scores in large groups, others individually, seemingly in reprisal for resisting and to dissuade others from doing so (*Ethnic Cleansing on a Historical Scale: Islamic State's Systematic Targeting of Minorities in Northern Iraq. Amnesty International, September 2014, pp. 4-7*). It is from these towns and villages that most of the women and children were abducted. Since 10 June 2014, more than 830,000 people, have been forced from their homes in IS – controlled parts of northern Iraq (*IOM Weekly Situation Report #1: Weekly update for 16-23 August: http://www.iom.int/files/live/sites/ iom/files/Country/docs/IOM-Iraq-Crisis-Response-23-August-2014.pdf*), resulting in a humanitarian crisis which prompted the UN to declare its highest level of emergency on 14 August 2014 (*UN declares Iraq "Level 3 Emergency" to trigger more resources, speed up aid delivery, 14 August 2014: http://www.un.org/apps/news/story.asp?NewsID=48483*).

Most of the displaced are sheltering in the semi-autonomous region of Iraqi Kurdistan, under the control of the Kurdistan Regional Government (KRG), with small numbers sheltering across the borders in Syria and Turkey (*More than 10,000 in Syria http://www.unhcr.org/53f32b5b9.html and more than 2,000 in Turkey, but figures are rapidly changing, with more refugees crossing the border into Turkey daily http://www.dw.de/refugees-pour-into-turkey-amid-middle-east-chaos/a-17889468*). While the IS has mainly targeted the minority communities, many Arab Sunni Muslims known or believed to oppose the IS or to have worked with the government and security forces, or previously with the US army (present in Iraq until 2011), have likewise been forced to flee to avoid being killed, and their homes have been appropriated or destroyed. In the case of Syria the civil war has displaced half the population of 22.4 million and has placed extreme pressure on inter-communal relations (*Christopher M.Blanchard, 2014*). For decades, the country's authoritarian government has been led in large part by members of the Alawite religious minority, who have sought to cultivate the regime's image as a guarantor of a non-sectarian society while manipulating group identities and stifling dissent to stay in power. Syria's citizenry is mostly Sunni Muslim, but it includes a multi-denomination Christian minority, smaller Druze and Shiite Muslim communities, and member of other faiths. The political uprising that preceded the conflict in 2011 started in mainly Sunni Muslim areas but

was not overtly sectarian in nature (*S.Heydemann, 2013*). However, the government labeled activists as extremists and terrorists and has indiscriminately targeted opposition-held areas populated mainly by Sunni Muslims, exacerbated sectarian tensions. Some armed Sunni Islamist extremist groups have used vicious sectarian rhetoric and carried out violent sectarian attacks, driving some minority group members, including Christians, to support Asad. In some areas, violent Sunni Islamist extremist groups have imposed harsh conditions on members of religious minority groups and continue to call for the destruction of the country's Alawite community. These acts, and the lack of dependable security guarantees for civilians on all sides, have encouraged some individuals and groups to adopt more exclusive identities and prioritize their own interests, complicating efforts to resolve the conflict.

As the prominent American expert on the Middle East Anthony H.Cordesman underlines, ISIS/ISIL did not suddenly materialize in Iraq in December 2013. For years, as expert argues, the group exploited growing Sunni and Shi'ite sectarian divisions and steady drift towards civil war. According to him, for at least the last three years, Iraqi Prime Minister Nouri Al-Maliki's actions of building his own power structure around a Shi'ite dominated state with close ties to Iran alienated Sunnis and exacerbated tensions (*Anthony H. Cordesman, 2014*). However, the different mixes of religion, ethnicity and language in each country help explain their current internal instability and struggles for power, and the limits of any effort to create a stable pattern of Iranian influence, Pan-Arab influence, or any other form of regional stability. They also help explain why the strategic map of this part of the Middle East has produced so much tension, conflict, and change over time (*F.Gregory Gause III, 2014*). At least for the present, the rise of ISIS/ISIL has shown there is nothing approaching a continuing Iranian zone of influence – or Shi'ite crescent – from Iran to Lebanon, but rather a divided Arab Lebanon, a Persian Shiite Iran and now Sunni Islamists extremist protostate located between and Alawite-controlled bloc in Syria and largely Shi'ite blocs in Iraq and Iran. In practical terms, however, the idea of some form of stable Shi'ite crescent and zone of Iranian influence that extended from Lebanon through Iran has always ignored the different characters of Lebanon, Syria, Iraq, and Iran, and their different national interests (*Robert Lee and Lihi Ben Shitrit*).

Lebanon is heavily influenced by the growth of power of its Shi'ite population and the rise of Hezbollah as a key military factor. It is not, however, a Shi'ite state or under Iranian control. It remains a multi-confessional mess that is now greatly complicated by a massive influence of Syrian refugees and a growing faction of Sunni Islamist extremists in the north. The CIA estimates its native divisions as follows: 18 religious sects recognized (2012 est.): Muslim 54% (27% Sunni, 27% Shia), Christian 40.5 % (includes 21 % Maronite Catholic, 8 % Greek Orthodox, 5 % Greek Catholic, 6.5 % other Christian), Druze 5.6 % very small numbers of Jews, Baha'is, Buddhists, Hindus, and Mormons. Ethnic population: Arab 95 %, Armenian 4%, other 1%.

Syria has relatively few actual Shi'ites and its Alawites are a Gnostic sect with Christian and other non – Islamic elements

that Iran threats as Shi'ite only for political reasons. The CIA estimated its pre-civil war divisions by sects as Muslim 87% (official; includes Sunni 74% and Alawi, Ismaili, and Shia 13%), Christian (includes Orthodox, Uniate, and Nestorian) 10%, Druze 3%, Jewish (few remains in Damascus and Aleppo). It estimated its ethnicity as Arab 90.3 %, Kurds, Armenians, and other 9.7 %.

Iraq is also deeply divided, but has an Arab Shi'ite majority – most of which follow quietist religious leaders and do not support the concept of a Supreme Leader as advanced by Iran. The CIA estimates Iraq's sectarian, ethnic, and linguistic differences as follows: ethnicity: Arab 75%-80%, Kurdish 15% - 20%, Turkoman, Assyrian, or other 5%. Sect: Muslim (official) 99% (Shia 60% - 65%, Sunni 32%-37%), Christian 0.8 %, Hindu 0.1%, Buddhist 0,1%, Jewish 0,1, folk religion, unaffiliated – 0,1. Religion: Muslim (official) 99% (Shia 60-65 %, Sunni 32%-37%), Christian 0.8 %, Hindu – 0.1%, Buddhist and Jewish – 0,1%.

Iran is primarily Shii'te but is nominally "Persian" rather than Arab and is controlled by religious leaders firmly under the control of a Supreme Leader. The CIA estimates Iraq's sectarian, ethnic, and linguistic differences as follows: Ethnicity: Persian 61%, Azeri 16%, Kurd 10%, Lur 6%, Baloch 2%, Arab 2%, Turkmen and Turkic tribes 2%, other 1%. Sect: Muslim (official) 99.4 % (Shia 90-95%, Sunni 5-10%), other (includes Zoroastrian, Jewish, and Christian) 0.3%, unspecified 0,4% (2011 est.). Languages: Persian (official) 53%, Azeri Turkic and Turkic dialects 18%, Kurdish 10%, Gilaki and Mazandarani 7%, Luri 6%, Balochi 2%, Arabic 2%, other 2%.

The deep sectarian and ethnic differences within Iraq show how difficult it is for any one faction to dominate the country on a stable basis or to assume that Iraq can now be divided into stable sectarian and ethnic blocs (*Anthony H. Cordesman, 2014*). Moreover, Iraq's sectarian and ethnic structure has changed steadily since 2003, as civil fighting and terrorist violence steadily divided Iraq back along sectarian and ethnic lines. According to A.Cordesman, it is too soon to assume that Iraq will remain a divided crisis state in spite of current U.S. efforts, but this seems more likely than some sudden Iraqi return to national unity and lasting defeat of Sunni Islamist extremists. What some once feared would become a "Shiite crescent" now seems to be likely to remain a series of unstable enclaves. As is all too often the case in the Middle East, the game board is changing without any stable rules. New players are being added, and no one can really predict the outcome of the game.

Radicalization of Islam and sectarian conflicts

The increasing religiosity which spread all over the Middle East after the Arab Spring was largely propelled by the failures of state building and development approaches that have been characterized by severe centralization; unplanned or random urbanization; a neglect of agriculture that was accelerated by growing dependence on oil and the opportunities it provided for ruling elites to act independently from their "societies". In most Arab countries, these "modernization" approaches resulted in massive migration from rural areas into urban

centers. It also widened the gap between city and countryside (*H.Beblawi, 1990*). The modern state managed to dismantle traditional relations and structures without succeeding in completely replacing them with modern ones. As a result, semi traditional and semi modern social sectors were brought into existence. They lived in the insecure conditions of mobility, uncertainty and cultural perplexity. Some scholars called this transformation the "ruralisation of the city" (*G.Salamee, 2008*) to distinguish it from modernization's classical objective of the "urbanization of rural spaces". On the one hand, traditional loyalties and patterns were no longer responsive to the social realities. On the other, the necessary conditions of economic, social and cultural modern patterns only were available to steadily shrinking social minorities. Today, it is common in large Arab capitals like Baghdad, Cairo and Damascus to notice an intellectual discourse lamenting the disappearance of urban culture and "civilized" manners (*H.Barakat, 1993*). With the rise of political Islamism, sectarianism gained more prominence and it was accompanied by reconstruction of collective narratives able to serve today's conflicts. Sectarianization was the latest stage in the broader process of Islamization. While early versions of the new Islamism tried to present a trans sectarian vision, socio cultural, geopolitical and ideological differences gradually reemphasized the Sunni-Shi'a schism (*Elizabeth Hard, 2015*). This transformation has been triggered by the rivalry among Islamist groups and institutions to gain constituency support, hence encouraging a shift towards identity politics. Accordingly, differences between Sunnism and Shiism in religious culture, doctrines, institutions and conceptions of state society relations, were increasingly underlined.

Like all collective narratives, sectarian identities need elites and "guardians" who "invent" and present them to be the "group's mental map" (*D.A.Smith, 1999*). Heightened sectarianism in the region was accompanied by processes of reinventing Sunni and Shi'a identities and these processes have intensified proportionally with regional conflicts. One major shift was the quasi official presence of sectarian identities as public and valid political categories. A significant outcome of this war was the empowerment of Iraqi Shi'as. This "Shi'a revival", as Vali Nasr (*V.Nasr, 2006*) put it, was represented by the dominant position Shi'a political groups have gained within the new institutions or through the role played by their collective narratives in shaping public stances and national culture. Furthemore, the new Shi'a political parties that gained this influence adopted a political view which stressed their sectarian identity, further deepening Sunni suspicions (*F.Haddad, 2011*). This is not only sent alarming messages to the ruling Sunni elites in the region, but also encouraged the formation of a counter sectarian identity among Iraqi Sunnis (*H.Al-Qaeawee, 2013*). However, as far as the Shi's Sunni divide is concerned, different histories must be cited. On the Shi'a side, politically motivated clerics such as Khomeini in Iran, Mohammed Baqir al-Sadr in Iraq and Mousa al Sadr in Lebanon invented new versions of political Shiism both as a philosophy and a movement. It was an ideology opposing existing regimes and aimed at mobilizing people against their marginalization. Political Shiism managed to take power in Iran and Iraq, while building large constituencies among the Shi'a population in Lebanon and Bahrain. These were events of historical significance because

they challenged the status quo in the region and empowered Shi'a communal identity, which has long been repressed by ruling "secular" elites. Sunni dominated regimes, especially Saudi Arabia in which Salafism is the main shaper of state identity, reacted by seeking to reconstruct a regional Sunni identity which views political Shiism as its main enemy (*Matthiesen Toby, 2014*). This was compatible with official policy, greatly concerned with the objective of combating Iran's regional influence. Therefore, power was the main catalyst in a conflict that mainly took place between anti-status que forces and pro-status quo forces.

Sunni-Shi'a Divide in the Middle East: the Iran Factor

The first half of 2013 has demonstrated clearly that sectarian conflict is spreading in the Middle East. This conflict is a product of developments over the course of 2012, including Iraqi Prime Minister Nouri al-Maliki's consolidation of power and the development of an armed opposition movement in Syria (*Aaron Reese*). A turning point, however, came in 2013 with the Syrian opposition's loss of the strategic town of al-Qusayr in early June 2013 to regime forces backed by Lebanese Hezbollah (*ISIS and the sectarian conflict in the Middle East. Research Paper 15/16, House of Commons Library, 19 March 2015*). The intervention of this prominent Shi'a militant group has heightened the "sectarization" of the conflict. Sectarian narratives provide an emotional rallying point for popular mobilization, and are easily leveraged by actors involved in the conflict to achieve their goals. The rise in sectarian violence sponsored by external actors poses an existential threat to these already fragile states. In Syria, the Assad regime has played upon the fears of minority groups to rally support. Shi'a militias from outside Syria, such as Lebanese Hezbollah and the Iraqi groups Asa'ib Ahl al-Haq and Kata'ib Hezbollah, have defined their role as protecting holy sites like the mosque of Sayyeda Zeinab. On the other hand, Sunni and Salafist militant groups have used anti-Shi'a rhetoric and anti-Iranian sentiment to justify their own actions. With the repeated occurrence of sectarian massacres in Syria, both by pro-Assad militias and Salafist groups, these justifications risk the creation of a self-fulfilling prophecy. The mainstream opposition, in the form of the Supreme Military Council, has defined their role in nationalist terms as a struggle for Syria. Devolution of this fight into communal violence threatens an already beleaguered civilian population.

The conflict has expanded beyond the boundaries of Iraq and Syria and has become increasingly regional in scope. Particularly in Syria, a number of external actors, such as Lebanese Hezbollah, have engaged in the fighting either directly or by providing funds or weapons (*The New Sectarianism: The Arab Uprising and the Rebirth of the Shi'a-Sunni Divide. Geneve Abdo. The Saban Center for Middle East Policy at Brookings. Analysis Paper Number 29, April 2013. pp.34-51*). As a sign of the weakening of the state, Syria's borders have become increasingly porous, facilitating such flows of man and material. Displaced persons, too, have been driven across these borders. Iran has put forward and enormous amount of support, deploying advisors and launching a thorough resupply mission to keep its Arab ally afloat. It has also supported sectarian militias entering from Lebanon and Iraq. Lebanon and Iraq themselves have tried to

avoid overt engagement, nut non-state actors have repeatedly crossed these borders to fight. Qatar and Saudi Arabia have each separately funneled support to opposition groups, in addition to leading media campaigns to bolster regional support for the opposition. Each views the Syrian conflict as an opportunity to support its role as regional powers as well as to deal a blow to rival Iran (*S.Heydemann, 2013*). Turkey has also become a player, motivated in no small part by more than 500 miles of border that it shares with Syria. In this case as the Arab scholar Harith Hasan argues, sectarian tendencies and antagonisms grew into levels previously unknown in the modern Middle East. As he believes, they were exacerbated by conflicts in Iraq, Syria, Bahrain and Lebanon, and by the social and political uprising following the Arab Spring (*Harith Hasan, 2013*). Some argue that the Sunni-Shi'a divide, in particular, is "on its way to displacing the broader conflict between Muslims and the West as the primary challenge facing the Islamic societies of the Middle East for the foreseeable future" (*G.Abdo, 2013*).

The toppling of Saddam's regime and the occupation of Iraq by US forces in 2003 intensified sectarian conflict and resulted in extreme forms of inter communal violence. As a consequence, a process of identity construction that emphasizes the sectarian divide within Islam has further evolved and its geopolitical implications begun to be noticeable. This process gained momentum after the uprising in Syria in 2011 that led to a bloodshed that has the characteristics of sectarian civil war. The Syrian war became a proxy war; involving states and non state actors divided between predominantly Sunni and predominantly Shi'a camp's. Following the literature on "ethnicization" (*R.Brubaker, M.Loveman, P.Stamatov, 2004*), as many other researchers point out "Sectarianization is a process caused by complex social, economic and political transformations. It cannot be simplified as a "revival" of ancient religious hatreds (*Harith Hasan Al-Qarawee, 2013*). There are sociological and cultural conditions that strengthened sectarian solidarities in societies characterized by weak "national" identities. Political exclusion produced new social hierarchies, based on personal loyalty, cronyism and patronage. Tribal, regional and sectarian considerations played significant roles in shaping these hierarchies. In Iraq, Syria and Bahrain, sectarian differences converged with socio political stratification and economic disparities, generating communal solidarities among the disadvantaged groups (*Harith Hasan Al-Qarawee, 2013*). Communality requires narratives and collective symbols that no institution except religion was able to communicate and cultivate.

Implications for the region: conclusions

The international community faces years in which Iraq is divided by sectarian and ethnic power struggles, the Syrian civil war continues, facilitating some form of radical Sunni threat crossing the border between Syrian and Iraq. However, the strengthening of identity politics in Iraq has had a regional impact in the Middle East. It is clear that the consequences of such conflict will reach far beyond Syria and Iraq. Both countries seem more likely to headed for years of enduring instability where the Assad regime and some form of Shi'ite dominated Iraqi government either face on ongoing Sunni

Islamist extremist protostate or an enduring form of sectarian conflict. The Iraqi Kurds may create a separate enclave or state – affecting the stability of the Kurdish minorities in Syria, Turkey, and Iran in the process. For example in Iran the calls for Kurdish (*Kurdistan: Birth of a Nation?, The Independent, 22 June, 2006*) and Arab separatism have escalated with demands gaining more media coverage than ever before. A potential Iraqi federal state has had a knock on effect in Iran – with ethnic grouping making stronger political demands than before. Therefore it no longer sufficient for Shiite demands to be neglected, with the Shiite in power in neighboring Iraq – it has raised the bargaining power of Shiite communities in the Middle East and made ruling regimes more willing to listen. So, the human rights situation facing minorities in Iraq remains in dire straits on all levels: political, civic, and cultural. Iraq's ethnic and religious minorities, along with other vulnerable populations, continue to face threats of violence, religious discrimination, exclusion, and denial of their property rights. The consequences are far-reaching for Iraq's social cohesiveness, national unity, and ability to overcome sectarian violence. The scale and gravity of the abuses and the urgency of the situation demand a swift and robust response – not only to provide humanitarian assistance to those displaced and otherwise affected by the conflict but also to ensure the protection of vulnerable communities who risk being wiped off the map of Iraq. A quick resolution is unlikely and impossible, but an increased understanding of the regional scope of these problems is an important step towards addressing them. In this case, as many experts underline, the U.S. should not follow withdrawal from Iraq with disengagement from the region – productive efforts with regional allies are still possible and will be vital to preventing the further deterioration of an already bad situation. It should be very clear that increasing sectarian polarization and violence is in the interests neither of the regional players and their allies nor the whole international community.

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