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The State of Sunni Discord in Iraq

by [Omar Al-Nidawi](#)

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ABOUT THE AUTHORS

[Omar Al-Nidawi](#)

Omar Al-Nidawi is an Iraq analyst based in Washington DC. He is a guest lecturer of Iraq history at the Foreign Service Institute.



Articles & Testimony

As the battle to retake Mosul from ISIS approaches, it is time to prioritize questions of post-ISIS governance and political settlement. Integrating Sunni Arab leaders and communities in the political process is essential for long-term stability and preventing a resurgence of extremist movements. While civil society engagement promotes reconciliation on the local level, Sunni reconciliation on the national-level requires a top-down approach.

Fragmented Sunni Arab leadership faces a shrinking window in which it has a chance to present a unified vision of their future role and goals in Mosul, and ultimately Iraq as a whole. This week's flurry of [accusations](#) between two of Iraq's most senior Sunni politicians highlights the acuteness of this fragmentation. Moreover, Foreign Minister Ibrahim Jaafari's recent [denial in Washington](#) that Iraq has a sectarian problem shows that Iraqi diplomacy is not prepared to acknowledge, let alone live up to the challenge of reintegrating the country's alienated Sunnis.

To catalyze a coherent Sunni position, U.S. leadership can play a crucial role by engaging Sunni states that have influence with Iraq's Sunni Arabs in focused multilateral dialogue to understand their respective agendas and forge a unified vision with realistic objectives.

The fragmentation of Iraq's Sunni leadership has left Prime Minister Abadi and U.S. mediators without dependable counterparts who speak for Sunni interests and with whom they can reliably make and implement agreements. Historically speaking, Sunni Arabs lack a central religious authority that can play a similar role to Najaf among Shia Muslims. They also differ from their Shia counterparts in that they have multiple regional patrons who provide financial and political support, including Saudi Arabia, the United Arab Emirates, Turkey, and Qatar. These states have different and often competing interests. More recently, intense pressures on one hand by al-Qaeda in Iraq and later ISIS, and on the other hand by former PM Maliki's [campaign](#) to marginalize them have pitted Sunni leaders and factions against one another.

Two big-ticket issues for Sunni Arabs are relations with the central government and their role in the national security forces. On the former, they need consensus on whether their autonomy and governance aspirations could be satisfied by any of the following: implementing existing provisions requiring decentralization and power-delegation; winning federal region status for their individual provinces; or by carving a pan-Sunni federal region encompassing all Sunni majority provinces. These options exhibit the differences between seeking administrative decentralization that is already enshrined in the constitution and rejecting the entire post-2003 order and opting for de facto partition.

Sunnis also need consensus on whether they should press for implementing the deadlocked [National Guard project](#) to get a meaningful role in the security of their provinces. Otherwise, they would need to support conscription as a means to ensure proportional participation in the armed forces. On the extreme end of the spectrum are those Sunnis who want to boycott state security forces and stand up as a Sunni army completely independent of Baghdad.

Moreover, Sunni leaders themselves often fail to come to a consensus on what is best for their groups. One pragmatic Sunni figure recently commented in Washington that former army officers should receive a major role in a post-ISIS local Mosul government with the support of Baghdad. But politicians like former Nineveh governor Atheel al-Nujaifi seek a pan-Sunni region and think that the ISIS occupation of Mosul provided an example of [effective decentralization](#) from Baghdad. There are also tribal leaders from the western districts of Anbar lobbying Abadi to split their own province into two, presumably to disassociate themselves from the troublesome Fallujah in Anbar's east. Meanwhile, Sunnis in [Diyala province](#) have already lost much power in what used to be considered a Sunni-majority province since Iran-backed militias declared the area "liberated" in early 2015. The Sunni governor was soon after replaced with a Shia hardliner under questionable circumstances.

Several initiatives to build Sunni unity and promote reconciliation between Sunni Arabs and government failed before they began because of the failure of preceding intra-Sunni dialogues. Sunni conferences in [Amman](#) in August 2014, [Doha](#) in September 2015, and [Paris](#) in April 2016 have failed to produce any meaningful points of agreement. In fact, these avenues for discussion have in some ways proved more divisive than unifying. Sunnis within the political process and those in the rejectionist camp consistently attempted to exclude each other, leading to greater mutual frustration.

Saudi Arabia, Turkey, the UAE, and Qatar have weight with various Iraqi Sunni Arab actors that they could leverage to overcome this obstacle. It is common knowledge to the average Iraqi that most politicians, regardless of affiliation, are in some way supported or influenced by a regional power.

Turkey is [directly arming](#) and training hundreds of fighters commanded by Nineveh's former governor al-Nujaifi. And it is reasonable to assume that Saddam's former deputy and leader of the Naqshbandi Army insurgents Izzat al-Douri's [praise](#) of Saudi Arabia's war in Yemen and call to fellow Baathist leader Bashar Assad to work with Saudi-backed opposition forces are the result of generous Saudi support for his anti-Iran forces.

Currently, Saudis and other Sunni states are using this influence to channel the energy of Iraqi and Syrian Sunnis in the general direction of antagonizing Iran and its allies instead of securing the interests of their communities.

The focus on Iran, combined with these regional backers' often-incoherent positions on national-level Sunni interests, has deepened the problem of Sunni representation in Iraq. However, U.S. diplomacy and leadership could

help mitigate these challenges. The United States should convene these states' policy leaders on Iraq to both hear their concerns and let them hear from each other. The United States could then push them to cultivate a unified vision for the future of their clients in Iraq. This mission could be undertaken either as part of existing anti-ISIS diplomatic initiatives or even by a new special envoy.

If nothing changes, Iraq's Sunnis risk losing more of what little leverage they currently have. The slow but steady progress of the Iraqi military and allied militias in retaking ground from ISIS suggests that the modest Sunni participation on the battlefield, while certainly important, does not need to expand in order to defeat ISIS militarily. Iraqi Shia hardliners will likely conclude that Sunnis are increasingly irrelevant to the fight and thus deserve no political 'rewards.' The closer the army and allied militias get to Mosul, the more these Shia hardliners will oppose any arrangements that provide Sunni Arabs their fair share of legitimate power.

But developing a vision and ensuring its realization are two different tasks. Even if Sunni Arabs presented a unified platform for negotiating with Abadi's government, they will still have to navigate opposition to power sharing from Shia hardliners and Iran.

The next challenge is tackling the double standards employed by Iran and its Sunni rivals in the broader regional conflict. Iran wants Iraq's Shia majority to dominate the country and is not willing to give the country's Sunni Arab minority a meaningful role. Iran employs a contradictory dynamic in Syria, trying to keep Assad and Syria's Alawite minority in power while condemning the Sunni majority opposition as terrorists. Sunni states exhibit similar double standards, working to undermine Shia majority rule in Iraq, while insisting on replacing Assad with Sunni majority rule in Syria. In these battles, both sides have supported both moderate and less than moderate forces. And neither side will be able to make real gains if they insist on total victory in both theaters.

Perhaps the only solution is to attempt to have the Saudis, Turks, and Iranians look at the region from a perspective of net gains and losses, in which a perceived loss in one arena could be offset by a gain in another. This realignment of interests, while imperfect, could offer a better chance to break the current deadlock and reach a new stable balance of power in the region. ❖



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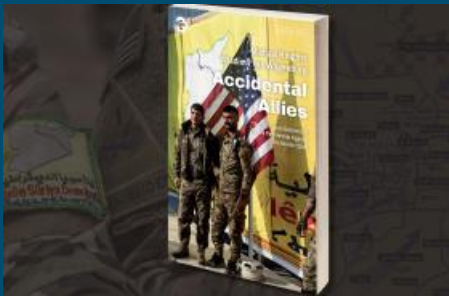


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THE
WASHINGTON INSTITUTE
for Near East Policy

1111 19th Street NW - Suite 500
Washington D.C. 20036
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