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MAY 2, 2019 – THANASSIS CAMBANIS

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Iraq's most recent brush with calamity triggered an outpouring of nationalist sentiment. The sudden rise of the Islamic State (known also by its acronyms—ISIS in English and Da'esh in Arabic) focused the minds of Iraqis at all levels of society. Poor Iraqis of every sect and ethnicity volunteered to take up arms against the militant Islamist rebels who in 2014 took over Mosul, Iraq's second largest city, and declared a medieval-style caliphate. At its zenith, the Islamic State controlled a third of Iraq's territory.<sup>1</sup> At the same time, Iraq faced a governance crisis at least as threatening as the Islamic State.

It was in this context of existential national crisis that, in the summer of 2015, the Shia cleric Moqtada al-Sadr, one of Iraq's most charismatic and unpredictable politicians, made common cause with the Iraqi Communist Party and a coalition of civil society protesters.<sup>2</sup> They demanded an end to corruption and the creation of a secular state. And Sadr's full embrace of nationalism and secularism was only the most visible manifestation of a wider societal shift. Today, after years of turmoil—sixteen precipitated by the United States' invasion, and twenty-five before that under Saddam Hussein's authoritarian rule—Iraq appears to have entered a new phase.

A distinguishing characteristic of this new phase is a focus, among some of Iraq's most notable political and religious figures, on acknowledging the need to partner with multiple identity groups, address gaps in welfare, and adopt a rhetoric of allegiance to the entire country and the national interest. Most politicians no longer believe they can retain power by paying attention only to the welfare of their religious, sectarian, or ethnic communities. Iraqi nationalism is back on the table as a guiding purpose for political action, after a long, chaotic, and deadly absence. The most common strains of Iraq's new nationalism stress concepts that are meant to be compelling but vague: they evoke “the nation,” unity, and a shared struggle against corruption and terrorism, which unite Iraqis of every sect, ethnicity, or other identity group. Exclusive religious movements have had their turn trying to govern Iraq, and have abjectly failed. Rulers and ruled both seem to agree on the need for a new, more inclusive approach, and that the “nation” is a good conceptual starting point.

Most Iraqis avoid details when invoking a new nationalism, because of unresolved questions with profound implications. Members of minority groups—such as Kurds, Christians, and even some Sunni Arabs—aspire to a nationalism that will include them on an equal basis and restrain Shia

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This report can be found online at: <https://tcf.org/content/report/social-engineering-samarra/>

dominance. And some Shia understand nationalism as a way of reintegrating vanquished or dominated groups of Iraqis on a more stable, but still subservient footing. Even those Iraqis who enthusiastically deploy the rhetoric of the nation worry because they want to avoid any unintentional parallels with Saddam Hussein's brand of Iraqi nationalism, which undergirded a long reign of terror and oppression.

In any case, the present "national moment" is a work in progress, still in its emerging form. Across Iraq, a plethora of experiments are underway in nonsectarian, nationalist governance. These experiments differ by area and feature a divergent array of militias and politicians. But they all have in common an effort to rebuild society across lines of fragmentation—in some cases restoring and in others building, for the first time, a functional space shared by communities that were recently engaged in murderous violence.

The city of Samarra, on which this report focuses, offers one of the most explicit tests of the power of nationalist social engineering.<sup>3</sup> Here, a notorious Shia militia holds most of the power on the ground. Under the firm guidance of Sadr, the cleric's Peace Brigades militia ("Saraya al-Salam" in Arabic) has adopted an overtly nationalist, anti-sectarian strategy. The city itself is almost entirely Sunni and Arab. But because it is home to an important Shia holy site, the Askari Shrine, it attracts a substantial daily flow of Shia pilgrims. During nearly five years of Sadrist tutelage over Samarra, mistrust and reluctance have given way to partnerships in business and politics. The city suggests one version of what an emerging nationalist Iraqi society might look like and how it can be brought into being.

This report's detailed look at the process underway in Samarra exposes some of the limits of social engineering in a fragile post-conflict society, but also serves as a reminder that politics and identity are mutable. Periods of sectarian strife and civil war are not fixed conditions or societal death sentences. Just as sectarian mobilization can reshape society, so can other forms of identity that rally the same population along different, potentially broader, axes. Sadr's nationalist shift, and the experiment he has catalyzed in

Samarra, suggest one possible path to reverse the entropy and fragmentation that characterized much of Iraq's painful history under Saddam Hussein, American occupation, the sectarian civil war, and its fledgling new political order. The Sadrist experiment is particularly important for Iraq's next phase. His movement is a rare example of local control paired with a clear ideological concept, which will require the Sadrists to more clearly define the content of their nationalism: who it includes, how it might evolve in a more democratic way, and just how deep its commitment to equality really is.

## Shia Shrine, Sunni City

Sprawled dramatically on a bluff overlooking the Tigris river, the desert entrepot town of Samarra, population five hundred thousand, boasts multiple claims to fame. For Shia worldwide, it is a venerated pilgrimage destination, for it marks the spot where the twelfth imam—God's representative on earth—went into occultation in the ninth century, and where he might return when the world comes to an end. Samarra is, in some ways, a byword for sectarian strife in Iraq. In 2006, when Sunni extremists blew up the dome of the Askari Shrine, a thousand-year old mosque, it set off a sectarian civil war—one of the most nightmarish periods in Iraq's recent history. The city is also known for being the hometown of none other than Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi, the self-anointed caliph of the Islamic State, who grew up in the old city, in view of the shrine's walls and shining onion dome.

And yet Samarra actually has a long history of functioning outside of rigid sectarian binaries. Though the vast majority of the population is Sunni, millions of Shia pilgrims visit the city's Askari Shrine every year. Historically, the money these pilgrims spent accounted for a major share of Samarra's economy. Before 2003, under Saddam's rule, Sunni authorities controlled Samarra's shrine. By the time of the 2006 attack, control had shifted to the Office of Shia Endowment (Awqaf), a national body. It's unclear whether that administrative change took place as part of wider legal changes when Iraqi authorities reestablished power after the American occupation ceded direct control in 2005, or whether it was a political change made in the

wake of the February 2006 shrine attack. But ever since the reconstruction of the shrine's dome began in 2006, rumors have periodically flared that Shia authorities were taking over Sunni land near the shrine, or trying to "turn Samarra into a holy Shiite province."<sup>4</sup>

Those worries were overshadowed by the Islamic State's onslaught in 2014, when the group attempted to take over Samarra. Sunni locals resisted—in contrast to neighboring cities in Salahaddin governorate, where the Islamic State was welcomed or found willing partners. The Islamic State attempted to conquer Samarra in June of that year, around the same time as its successful push into Mosul. Local fighters, supported by police, repulsed the Islamic State advance, and a rotating cast of Shia militias patrolled the city. During that time, according to Sunni leaders in Samarra, hundreds of men went missing, allegedly detained without charge by Shia militias. The bitterness over those disappearances still lingers.

After the Islamic State onslaught against Samarra was repulsed, Iraqi authorities made a great production of the December 2014 pilgrimage to the Askari Shrine. The Office of Shia Endowment claimed that three million pilgrims safely visited Samarra without incident, which boosted the morale of anti-Islamic State forces. Still, some Sunnis in Samarra sniffed a Shia sectarian plot to change the city's demographics. Those Sunnis' discomfort grew when Sadr's Peace Brigades entered the city, establishing martial law under the guidance of a Shia cleric known for his unpredictable policy shifts, strident speeches, and his blindly loyal, sometimes savage fighters.

Yet, as this report shows, something strange has happened in Samarra under the Peace Brigades. Rather than ramping up, public expressions of sectarian anxieties have gradually declined in the relatively short period since Shia militias took over the city in 2014. A senior Peace Brigades commander, Sheikh Safaa al-Tamimi, said that the militia was under orders to avoid any sectarian rhetoric or slogans, and routinely cleaned any sectarian graffiti from the city's walls.<sup>5</sup> In 2014, the Sadrists signed up 158,000 volunteers for the Peace Brigades. Tamimi said his forces suffered 280 deaths in their

first year of operations in Samarra. Sadrists participated in many operations against the Islamic State, but have only stationed their forces long-term in Samarra, which they argue requires special security care because of its shrine. The shrine's religious importance, as well as Samarra's recent historical role as a trigger of nationwide sectarian conflict, gives legitimacy for a Shia militia presence that is harder to justify in other mixed or Sunni-majority areas.

By 2015, Sadr's Peace Brigades had established their dominance in the city, and Sadr declared that, because of the shrine, Samarra was the only place where he wanted to deploy his militia long-term.<sup>6</sup> By the fall of that year, Sadr's Peace Brigades had assumed full command of the city, and other militias had pulled out. Federal police and intelligence services maintained a presence, as did local police, and a small contingent of guards controlled by the Askari Shrine Authority. Outside of city boundaries, the Iraqi army, as well as other militias, maintained checkpoints.

Below, this report discusses the particulars of the Sadrist experiment in Samarra. But first, I examine the historical context that has made this experiment possible. Samarra's trajectory in the last four years is less an isolated example of visionary leadership than evidence of a country returning to anti-sectarian currents that were damaged but not destroyed by years of war. Samarra suggests one early example of how Iraq might emerge from a long period of conflict. The features of a new equilibrium or order are still taking shape, but Iraq's current state of dynamism offers some cause for hope—and at a minimum, the expectation of further flux and experimentation by political movements, leaders, and individual allegiances that do not hew solely to sect.

## Reevaluating the Sectarian Paradigm

Samarra's newfound stability under what at first might seem a combustible mismatch between its administrators and its populace provides a counternarrative to Iraq's relatively fresh memories of sectarian violence. However, the accord in Samarra should not necessarily be shocking: Iraq actually has a long history of nationalism and coexistence, which thrived in other equally messy and sometimes violent eras.

Authoritarian rulers brought together Iraq's various sects, ethnicities, tribes, and other communities under movements that were neither universalist nor liberal—for example, the banner of monarchy or the Ba'ath Party. Tribal and religious subcultures in various contexts found expression in nonsectarian ideologies and political movements, including the Iraqi Communist Party and Arab nationalism.

Iraq has also long held the potential for sectarian division, and none of this pluralistic context is meant to diminish the centrality of sectarian violence to Iraq's trajectory after 2003. Since 2003, the country has demonstrated many of the different ways that a society and state can come apart. Already strained from decades of misrule, much of the surviving infrastructure of state and society was destroyed by the United States-led invasion and occupation. The U.S. military occupation entrenched new sectarian quota practices when it apportioned seats on the Iraqi Governing Council by sect and ethnicity. Conflict broke out along many overlapping fault lines. Shia Arabs, Sunni Arabs, and ethnic Kurds (most of them Sunni, but focused on their ethnic identity) allied together in pursuit of collective interests that many understood would be divided in a zero-sum game. Political and religious opportunists inflamed and exploited sectarian identity, granting a sectarian dimension to other (often preexisting) social, political, and economic fissures. Sectarian and ethnic identity surged, for a time, to the forefront of Iraqi life, defining otherwise hazy conflicts and political groupings. The country's Shia majority, long repressed, insisted on a dominant political role, while an array of Shia figures and movements entered politics—often with a heavily religious or sectarianized inflection. Sectarian mobilization climaxed in the sectarian civil war that began in 2006. During that war, Christians almost entirely fled the country after facing systematic, targeted violence. Some mixed Sunni-Shia neighborhoods in urban areas were ethnically cleansed, while minority communities shrank or diminished in parts of Anbar governorate or the South.

But even Iraq's recent history was never as completely sectarianized or fragmented as sometimes portrayed. Not all Iraqis self-identify with a sectarian label. Officials and analysts—Iraqi and foreign alike—misunderstood, sometimes

willfully, many of the dynamics of the period from 2003 to 2014 in inaccurately sectarian terms. De-Ba'athification, for example, targeted members of Saddam Hussein's ruling apparatus, which disproportionately benefited Sunnis and penalized Shia and Kurds, but which was not exclusively a Sunni regime. Saddam Hussein's victims included plenty of Sunni Arabs, and the Ba'ath's Party membership included all of Iraq's demographics.

After the fall of Saddam Hussein, even as identity politics came to dominate, there were also many Iraqis—including the political actors themselves—who neither subscribed to identity politics nor considered their interests to lie in sectarian representation. Shia politicians formed alliances with other groups, and quickly realized that Shia identity and piety did not easily translate into a political program. By 2008, the predominance of Shia politicians—without any accompanying consensus about policy direction—made clear that there was no distinct “Shia politics” or “Shia agenda.” A secular Shia politician, Ayad Allawi, led a nationalist grouping considered the primary political home for Sunnis. Nouri al-Maliki, the Shia prime minister from the Islamic Dawa Party, led government forces in open civil war against Sadr's militia in Operation Charge of the Knights in Basra in 2008. Sadr, a pedigreed Shia “sayed,” a direct descendant of the Prophet, had from the beginning of his political ascendance in 2003 cloaked himself in a nationalist banner. He had embraced Sunni resistance fighters in their armed struggle against the U.S. military occupation, and had welcomed secular and non-Shia Iraqis into his fold even in 2006, at the peak of Iraq's sectarian civil war—when, however, Sadr's militia was responsible for some of the worst sectarian killing.

And even while much of Baghdad and many of Iraq's governorates were in the throes of ethnic cleansing, Iraqi society remained decidedly mixed, including in areas under the local control of sectarian Sunni or Shia militias. Areas under control of ethnonationalist Kurds retained their Arab populations and, in many instances, saw the Arab share increase as Kurds welcomed internal migration to their more stable zones of control. Almost all the nation's tribes, which became increasingly important after the state

weakened after 2003, consist of mixed-sect membership. Mixed neighborhoods and regions remained common, as did intermarriage and conversion. Iraq's culture remained diverse, even as the tone of its governing class shifted from Sunni and northern Iraqi, under Saddam Hussein, to Shia and southern under the new post-2003 ruling elite. Najaf replaced Tikrit as Iraq's spiritual capital.

Politics, like culture, was anything but monolithic. The sectarian narrative was further complicated by other developments: the "Sahwah," also known as the Awakening or the Sons of Iraq, mobilized mostly rural Sunni tribesmen to fight alongside the Americans and the Shia-dominated central government against al-Qaeda. Kurds fought each other—mostly in politics but occasionally with arms—while also uniting against Arab-dominated Baghdad. Time and again, close attention to Iraqi politics and culture reveals that the country's potential for pluralism has survived alongside its tendency to splinter.

## A Unifying War

A major catalyst for a deepening of nationalism was the war against the extremist Islamic State, which brought Iraq's growing anti-sectarian trends to the fore. By the time that the Islamic State rose to its peak power in 2014, Iraq's politics had entered a new period that could no longer be defined simply by Shia dominance or sectarian mobilization.<sup>7</sup> The highest Shia religious authority in the land and the single most influential Iraqi figure, Grand Ayatollah Ali Sistani, who initially maneuvered to secure Shia political dominance through the ballot box, criticized sectarian politicians who fostered division and failed to deliver services to their constituents. Sadr already had more solid nationalist bona fides than many of his political peers; he had partnered with Sunni militants in the fight against the United States, and he had condemned the violence against Sunnis by his own Shia fighters during the sectarian civil war. The crisis of 2014 prompted Sadr to go further and enter a secular-nationalist alliance. The Sadrist movement had to evolve to address Iraq's daunting governance challenges, according to one of his top advisers, Dhiaa al-Asadi. "The work of government

has nothing to do with religious background," Asadi said in February 2018, explaining Sadr's views. "What about non-Shia or non-Muslims under Shia government? We have to coexist with other currents." Sadr, he said, wanted "to modernize the religious people to adapt to the secular or civic government."<sup>8</sup>

Haider al-Abadi, the prime minister from September 2014 to October 2018, led a ragged but widely representative coalition of armed Iraqis on a methodical campaign against the Islamic State.<sup>9</sup> In the fall of 2017, as government forces marched on Islamic State-occupied Mosul, Iraqi Kurds made their own secessionist bid—this one nonviolent—with an independence referendum. For Kurds with ambitions for independence, it was a historic miscalculation. Many Iraqis interpreted the vote as a Kurdish claim on mixed, disputed cities like Kirkuk. A confrontation ensued that many feared could lead to civil war. It was, however, resolved quickly and almost bloodlessly, with Baghdad taking control over disputed areas, and for the first time since 2003, setting limits on Kurdish autonomy.

After the failure of the Kurdish referendum, optimistic talk of a "national moment" imbued Iraqi political discourse, reaching a peak level for some months, at least among Arabs.<sup>10</sup> Baghdad had more authority over a wider stretch of Iraq than at any time since Saddam Hussein was removed from power in 2003. Further, the government had unprecedented legitimacy. Some if not all of the most powerful Shia politicians convincingly revealed themselves to be more nationalist than sectarian, even if both terms were fuzzy and open to multiple interpretations. Iraq-based Sunni leaders were gaining currency over a previous generation of more sectarian figures, who had mostly exerted influence from exile.<sup>11</sup> Sunni, Shia, and Christian Iraqis, among others, had fought and died to liberate Sunni areas from the Islamic State. The main Kurdish and Arab military forces had first collapsed and then reorganized with a renewed sense of purpose to join a coordinated military campaign, underwritten by both Iran and the United States. Some Kurds subsequently sided with Baghdad to resolve the independence crisis. Simplistic ethnic and sectarian labels were more inadequate than ever.

While there are limits to the depth of this “national moment,” it marks a clear departure from prevailing practice in the 1990s and 2000s. “After the last election, things changed; the biggest blocs were formed of Shias and Sunnis, and there was big demand for a nonpartisan government,” said Deputy National Security Adviser Safa al-Sheikh Hussein in January 2019, referring to the national vote of the previous May.<sup>12</sup> He characterized the current system as a “hybrid,” something between nonsectarian interest-based politics and the purely identity-based sectarian politics that predominated immediately after 2003.

Iraq’s changeable political coalitions are still developing, but all parties acknowledge that Baghdad will retain some say over all the country’s regions, and that sectarian or religious identity no longer suffices as a substitute for a program of governance. The central government holds a veto over certain extremes, but its authority has clear limits. It can corral Kurdish secessionism and check some of the worst excesses of nonstate Shia militias; but it cannot fully control the plethora of armed groups active across Iraq. The central government cannot even actively administer all the territory under its nominal control. Foreign governments continue to exert considerable influence, and in many cases have deployed major military and intelligence assets on Iraqi territory. Among them, the United States and Iran wield the most power. But neighboring states, including Turkey, Saudi Arabia, Jordan, and Kuwait, also play an important role.

## Governance Failures Focus Minds

Quite apart from the threat of the Islamic State, other problems with no sectarian tint seized the political attention of Iraqis in 2014. Throughout the country, daily life for all Iraqis was hobbled by epic corruption and failing services in every single critical area, from health care, to water, to electricity. A sense of emergency permeated public life.<sup>13</sup>

Shirouk al-Abayachi, leader of the National Civil Movement and a member of parliament until 2018, blames Iraq’s impasse on a deeply entrenched culture of corruption and religious interference in politics. “Iraq is 100 percent a failed state,”

she said shortly before losing her seat in 2018. “We had a tyrannical dictatorship, but the state was there, deteriorated but not destroyed. Now they are destroying all this through sectarian quotas.”

In response to this governance crisis, politicians who in the past had carelessly mobilized sectarian sentiment for personal gain or that of their parties began to speak of the national interest. Clerics with a checkered record now encouraged a unity of purpose explicitly opposed to sectarianism and parochial interests. “We want to separate state and religion,” Abayachi said, explaining this impulse. “One year ago, they would say, ‘You are kuffar, infidels.’ We need to build this term, civil state, in an Iraqi way.” She contrasted the term “civil”—“madani” in Arabic—to “almani,” meaning “secular.” “Almani” in Iraq makes people think we are against God and religion,” she said.<sup>14</sup>

Abadi, who successfully defeated the Islamic State as prime minister and won the support of many Iraqis as well as of the United States government, failed in his bid to retain the job in the May 2018 elections because of the governance crisis.<sup>15</sup> In August and September of 2018, protests rocked Basra, a Shia city in the south; veterans of the fight against the Islamic State began criticizing their former commanders, who had now become politicians, for failing to give them clean water, electricity, and health care.<sup>16</sup> In their rebellion, these veterans broke taboos that had previously insulated some militias and religious parties from criticism.

Other aspects of Iraqis’ dissatisfaction with their governance may, at first blush, seem to be sectarian issues. On closer inspection, however, these deficits of governance owe as much to corruption and poor capacity as they do to sectarian feelings. Across Iraq’s Sunni-majority areas, Shia militias have taken charge. Their authority and deployment operate in a fluid patchwork, with no single chain of command. Local control usually takes the form of an informal power-sharing agreement between the competing branches of the national government (the prime minister’s office, the commission in charge of militias, the federal police, and the armed forces), the local police, local armed auxiliaries, and whichever Shia militia is dominant in a given area of operations.<sup>17</sup> These Shia

militias governing Sunni-majority areas have a mixed record, and the populations they preside over have reacted to their presence accordingly. In some cases, especially around Mosul, the militias employ sectarian rhetoric and have engaged in predatory practices that have sown mistrust and resentment among the populace.<sup>18</sup> In other cases, as in Anbar governorate, the dominant Shia militias have struck alliances with local Sunni tribal leaders and their militias, often keeping Shia troops out of the centers of Sunni cities and exerting their control at a remove.<sup>19</sup> This approach appears to have created pockets of security while building effective, if untested, security partnerships.

Few of the situations in which Shia militias govern a mostly Sunni population provide clear-cut case studies from which can be extrapolated more general trends about Iraq's future. For example, while the cases in Anbar governorate are worthy of more research, they do not categorically address questions of identity, coexistence, and shared governance. Iraqi authorities want to contain any security threat from Anbar, which is demographically homogenous, but they are not interested in direct control. As a result, Anbar does not set a precedent for other, more fraught areas of the country with mixed populations.

The most telling experiments come in places with mixed populations or with frequent interactions between different groups, roughly clustered in the territory between Baghdad, Mosul, and Erbil. It is here, if anywhere, that a new way of coexistence and cooperation might be established across the various identity cleavages in Iraq: Arab, Kurd, and Turkomen; Sunni, Shia, and Christian; and so on. Sadr's militia in Samarra is one example.

## The Peace Brigades in Samarra

Once the Peace Brigades established dominant control over Samarra in 2015, they cultivated relationships with some previously weak Sunni tribes, and with pivotal local officials and business owners. They won some loyalty right away among Sunni locals, but they also faced critics. Some local Sunni leaders began agitating for the militia to leave, and turn over control to the local police. "Samarra is like an

armed camp. People cannot breathe," said Ahmed Krayem, leader of a small but wealthy and locally powerful Sunni tribe. He described the city this way in early 2018, at a time when his family was jockeying for influence ahead of national elections.<sup>20</sup> Krayem serves as head of the governorate's council and represents one powerful constituency in the area. The Krayem tribe had grown wealthy during Saddam Hussein's era. After 2003, the tribe had initially opposed the U.S. occupation, but had subsequently joined forces with the United States and the Iraqi government to fight al-Qaeda, as part of the Awakening. The Krayem resisted the Islamic State, drawing heavy retribution from the armed group. The tribe is based in the village of Mkeishife, outside Samarra's boundaries, and Islamic State fighters took over the village and destroyed the mansions of all the Krayem family elders. The Krayem represented a faction of the establishment Sunni elite in the city that viewed a Sadrist order in the city—at least initially—as a direct threat to their interests.

But many Sunnis did not have such a negative view of the Peace Brigades' presence. The mayor, Mahmood Khalaf, has held his largely symbolic position since 2005, relaying the concerns of his politically marginalized city to a changing cast of authorities, including the American military, the Iraqi government in Baghdad, the shrine authority, and the various militias that have at different times had a presence in the city. Khalaf found an open channel of communication with the Sadrists. Hundreds or thousands of men had been detained in the city, and the Sadrists set out to find and release those who had been taken by other militias but had not been charged with any crimes.<sup>21</sup> The Peace Brigades offered to mediate between Sunni property owners and the shrine authority. And, notably, the Sadrists worked to create profitable new opportunities for local business owners. The Peace Brigades also took other measures to earn trust, such as keeping the more than one thousand fighters who are deployed to the city on a short rotation schedule, which the Sadrists say minimizes the chance of individual fighters getting involved in any corrupt schemes.<sup>22</sup>

Khalaf, like much of Samarra's Sunni leadership, enjoys a comfortable relationship with the Sadrists. But he said that some entrenched, powerful, local figures would rather the



entire city languish than give up their personal stakes in property and business. The obvious solution, in Khalaf's view, is straightforward, but out of reach because it would require political initiative and the overcoming of certain sectarian fears. First, the shrine authority would take control of the areas surrounding the shrine, through purchases or eminent domain. Secondly, the city's markets would be opened to pilgrims, who currently follow a tight route from the outskirts of the city to the shrine and back out, without stopping to spend money on so much as a meal. Third, security forces would continue to impose order, as they do today, in a manner that satisfies the central government, the Shia authorities and pilgrims, and the local population. For five years, Khalaf has shuttled to Baghdad with this proposal. He also airs it regularly at the council of the governorate. No one, he says, is willing to tinker with the status quo:

Local landlords used to be rich and now they're not. Our Sunni politicians do not fear from God and they don't care about the welfare of the people—they are only interested in their personal business ventures. The Shia politicians come here but they don't trust that it is safe. They are not willing to invest. People don't want to solve the problem of the city and face the unknown future. They think it's better to leave [in place] the status quo rather than change and possibly create new problems.<sup>23</sup>

Samarra registers as a managed solution in comparison to the crises pressing elsewhere in Iraq—hundreds of thousands of displaced Sunnis, legions of detained Islamic State supporters that have not been accused of crimes or allowed to return to their communities, unruly Shia militias trying to expand their political and economic power, a Shia heartland suffering an acute lack of services. The city's residents aspire for a better outcome than the status quo, but the status quo itself is a model for the kind of arrangement that evolves by practice rather than policy. Khalaf's easy relationship with the Peace Brigades is one manifestation of the city's trans-sectarian cooperative *modus vivendi*. "Normal people seek security, no matter who achieves it," Khalaf said. "It's all about coexistence. We are all partners in the same country. We are all Arabs, all Muslims."

## Balancing Security and the Economy

Samarra's shrine draws five thousand pilgrims every weekday, and twenty-five thousand on Fridays and Saturdays. During the major annual pilgrimage, two million visitors pass through the shrine. "And they don't spend a dollar in the city," Khalaf pointed out. Shrine officials said that because of security concerns, they don't allow pilgrims to spend any time or money in Samarra, in contrast to the other major shrine destinations (Kadhimiya, Najaf, and Karbala), which support thriving economies that cater to pilgrims from abroad and the rest of Iraq, especially through markets, restaurants, hotels, and travel agencies.

According to their spokesman, the Peace Brigades maintain a careful cordon around Samarra. The tightest layer of security surrounds the shrine and its immediate approach, flanked by the old city on one side and by an open area around the historic Malwiya minaret on the other. At the second security ring, which includes city limits, the militia seeks to stop the movement of weapons and Islamic State fighters. The third perimeter extends into the farmland and desert around Samarra; the Peace Brigades patrol out twenty-five miles to prevent insurgents from firing mortars at the shrine. Security forces regularly repel attacks and catch suspected Islamic State infiltrators on Samarra's outskirts. One intelligence official showed surveillance footage dated January 2019 of men crossing the Tigris River upstream from Samarra and later being arrested; the official said the men were Islamic State militants planning attacks on Samarra.<sup>24</sup> The allegation is impossible to confirm, but the official had time-stamped photos of himself during the raid and described the operation and the suspects in detail.

Muhannad Azawi, the Peace Brigades' media officer, suggested that Samarra has an outsize importance, which makes its security paramount. "Samarra is like the heart of Iraq," Azawi said during a meeting with the mayor (which took place at an office of the federal agency responsible for electricity lines). "People think that keeping the city safe and closed is the safest solution. If the shrine is blown up again, all Iraq explodes and we have a civil war." Keeping the city

effectively closed, Azawi pointed out, also “prevents suicide bombers from coming in.”<sup>25</sup>

Security is also a primary concern for the small pockets of displaced people from surrounding villages who have taken refuge in Samarra. Jassim Nsaif Hmoud fled his village, Surshnas, in 2014. A mostly rural hamlet, Surshnas is located north of Samarra, across the Tigris River from Mkeishife. Its residents opposed al-Qaeda and the Islamic State, and as a result were singled out for punishment when the Islamic State controlled the area. For the last five years, Hmoud has lived with twenty extended family members in an unfinished mosque in downtown Samarra. The Islamic State destroyed his home and business, a car dealership. Militants still roam freely in their rural farming area, which is not safely under the control of the Peace Brigades or any government force. “ISIS is still there,” Hmoud said. “It’s like a jungle of wheat. There are reeds, small islands. It’s easy to hide.” His seven children share a single room with their parents and attend public school in Samarra. The extended family receives some food aid and otherwise depends on donations from neighbors in the city. “We just want to find a place we can stay until it’s safe to go home,” Hmoud said.<sup>26</sup>

But civil society activists and even some Peace Brigades fans believe that the city could be opened up, without creating undue risk. They ask that the Peace Brigades remove the gates sealing the old city, and remove the blast walls that restrict some roads through town. They also want fewer checkpoints, outside and inside of the city.

For security reasons, the Peace Brigades and the shrine authority have shut down several streets just beside the shrine. The few residents who still live there must pass through guarded iron gates to go to their homes. Ghazwan Ismail, a retired civil servant, used to shop with his family in the now-closed parts of the old city. “Now it is so hard for us to reach the old city, as if we were crossing into another country,” Ismail said.<sup>27</sup> He recalled a hubbub of restaurants, teahouses, and shops selling dry goods, textiles, appliances. During a tour of the old city, an appliance merchant appealed directly to the Peace Brigades’ Azawi. “There is no real reason for this closure,” the merchant said. “If the market is

reopened, there will be more jobs for workers. Poverty leads people to ISIS—they will plant a bomb for \$100.”<sup>28</sup>

The properties immediately abutting the Askari Shrine have likewise been declared off limits for security reasons. Some Sunni property owners have been willing to sell to the shrine authority, which itself is a very wealthy entity with a major revenue stream from pilgrim traffic. In other shrine cities in Iraq, shrine authorities have bought out properties around the shrine and built vast and profitable commercial areas—entirely under the shrine’s control—through which the pilgrims pass. Plazas surround the shrines in Karbala and Najaf, and the shrine authority in Kadhimiya bought up many of the properties surrounding the shrine there. Some Sunnis in Samarra grouse that the security closure of the old city is really a scheme to depress property prices so the shrine can buy them at a bargain. Others report that Sunnis who were willing to sell to the shrine received insultingly low offers—or when they agreed to an initial offer, subsequently saw the offer revised to a lower amount. Several people in Samarra repeated such rumors in interviews, but none were able to point to a specific verifiable instance where the shrine authority had made an unfair offer on a Sunni-owned property.

In any case, shrine control in the old city is a major point of contention, one that could be resolved through property deals and a new administrative arrangement. Any outcome that involves Shia shrine authorities taking control of areas historically owned by Sunnis will have some unmistakably sectarian undertones, but local property owners said they would be satisfied if they felt the terms were fair. Until 2003, a Sunni clan in Samarra for centuries had administrative responsibility for the Askari Shrine—one of many examples of Iraqi trans-sectarianism. In the new order that took shape after the toppling of Saddam Hussein, Shia Iraqis gained new religious and political freedoms, and the top Shia clerical authorities in Iraq gained direct control over the Askari Shrine Authority.<sup>29</sup> Today, Samarra city leaders say they’d like to regain control of the shrine, or at least some kind of joint administrative arrangement that includes local Sunnis as well as national Shia authorities.<sup>30</sup> And many of the property owners are willing to sell if they can get high enough prices.

The sums of money at stake are considerable.<sup>31</sup> In other shrine cities, commercial real estate can sell for more than \$10,000 per square meter. In Samarra, merchants are hard-pressed to find buyers willing to pay \$1,000 per square meter.<sup>32</sup>

However, while some city residents are eager to ease access to the economic opportunities that pilgrims provide, Samarra's newfound security has also clearly benefited the local economy. Ali Majid Alawi used to run a hotel and restaurant near the shrine, which closed after the 2006 attack and never reopened. He claims the property was valued at \$5 million but he eventually sold it at a loss for \$1 million to the shrine authority. The Peace Brigades offered Alawi financial support to open a large restaurant in the new part of downtown Samarra in 2015. "Samarra used to be a ghost town, until the Saraya al-Salam came and reached out to the families," Alawi said.<sup>33</sup> He gets along well with his Peace Brigades counterparts.

Not unusually for a Samarra resident, Alawi's view of sect and identity is fluid. He identifies as a Sunni. His father had two wives, one Shia and one Sunni. Most of the employees at his restaurants have been Shia from southern Iraq. He and his friends are more likely to lapse into conspiracy theories about meddling foreign powers than they are to talk of grievances based on sectarian identity. On multiple visits to Samarra over several years, for example, Alawi repeated the theory that foreign agents—in his view probably Americans, but possibly Iranians—blew up the Askari Shrine in 2006 in order to sow chaos and sectarian violence, making Iraq weaker and easier to control. The Peace Brigades had made common cause with Sunni merchants in Samarra to resolve long-standing disputes with the shrine authority. The tensions have a sectarian dimension, but Sunni leaders and merchants from Samarra mostly talk of financial concerns. Today, Alawi sees the (Shia) shrine authority as the primary villain in his city, and the (Shia) Peace Brigades as the staunchest partisans of disenfranchised locals; in his view, the conflict is about revenue and real estate, not about identity.

Outside the city, numerous other Iraqi security forces demand bribes at their checkpoints. According to Alawi, a "frightening number" of people in Samarra believe that the

U.S. occupation of the city, which was considered rough and indiscriminately violent at the time, rates favorably when compared to the brutality of today's Iraqi government forces.

The Sadrists have done a better job than previous security forces stationed in the city at managing relationships with Samarra's residents, reducing tensions that are caused by poor communication or heavy-handed rhetoric. There is an inescapable gap, however, between what the residents of Samarra consider justifiable measures and what the Peace Brigades (and the Iraqi government) consider necessary to prevent an Islamic State surge in Samarra. Peace Brigades commanders listen respectfully to requests to ease their security measures, but point to the steady stream of Islamic State activity in the area to explain why it's too soon to drastically change the security regime. "ISIS didn't come from outside this city—they came from here. Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi grew up here," Azawi said after listening to merchants on a now-empty market street complain that they can't survive without customers and pilgrims. "ISIS is still here. And we haven't totally uprooted them."

Some local Sunnis see eye to eye with the Shia security forces. Mohamed Izzat, a journalist at the privately owned Al Sharqiya television station, said that the Islamic State, and before it, al-Qaeda, cultivated a wide following among the governorate's rural residents and police forces. Approximately 90 percent Samarra's police officers, he said, were fired after 2014 for suspected Islamic State ties. "Uneducated rural people accept the ideas of al-Qaeda. They only trust religious leaders," Izzat said. "Change should start from the early stages of elementary school."<sup>34</sup>

## Road-Testing Nationalism

Whether or not the Sadrists set out to create a renaissance of nationalism when they took over Samarra in 2015, their particular recipe for managing the city stands out in Iraq for the relative fairness and nonsectarian quality of its administration. Samarra now offers the country's most direct test of nationalist community building and cross-sectarian rule. Perhaps most crucially of all for Samarra's prospect as a model for a new approach in Iraq, the militia

that took control of the city has a decidedly nationalist, anti-sectarian mandate, imposed by its undisputed leader, the Shia cleric Sadr. “The sectarian war started when the shrine was destroyed,” explained Hakim al-Zamili in March 2018. Zamili is a senior Sadrist who has operational control over the Peace Brigades. “The shrine is Shia, the people in the city are Sunni, the security forces are Shia. If something happens in Samarra it will negatively impact the general situation in the country.”<sup>55</sup>

All these factors have combined to make Samarra a pilot for an alternative Iraq: a city still hobbled by grave problems, but where control and patronage are shared with new networks (with Shia outsiders at the top). Samarra has succeeded in novel ways. Many Sunni locals (though not all) have placed trust in a Shia militia that was once reviled, during Iraq’s most intense period of sectarian warfare, for its brutality and excesses. During the 2006 war, followers of Sadr were blamed for some of the most intimately violent acts of ethnic cleansing, with a reputation for using drills to kill prisoners—although Sadr himself criticized such acts and eventually expelled sectarian extremists from his militia. (One of his lieutenants formed *Asa’ib Ahl al-Haq*, which has a reputation for sectarian violence and corruption).<sup>56</sup> But in many cases, Sunni locals in Samarra have come to view the Peace Brigades as relatively competent and fair—after initially assuming, based on their dealings with other militias, that the organization would be corrupt and arbitrary.

Sectarian identity continues to serve as an important marker in Samarra, and corruption is a way of life in the city, as it is all over Iraq. But the Sadrists have established alliances with new as well as old elites, which has helped convince residents that, at the least, the militia has longer-term and more benevolent goals in the city; what corruption may exist is normal by Iraqi standards and its profits are shared with locals. Further, through their economic plans, the Sadrists have revealed their interest in spurring the development of profitable businesses that can enrich the city (and its occupiers) while contributing to the rise of a new nationalist elite. Politically, the Sadrists have won trust with a non-sense style of occupation—it is certainly not democratic, but the Peace Brigades have established a reputation for

being nonsectarian that distinguishes them from other Iraqi Shia militias (and from an earlier period of their own history.)

Sadr’s ideology is not, however, distinguished for its sophistication. His credo aspires to put “Iraqi” identity first, which it carefully frames as (vaguely) patriotic, connected to the many peoples and interests included in the geographic boundaries of Iraq—and decidedly not connected to any single religion, sect, ethnicity, or political movement. Like all simple ideologies, the Sadrists’ is easy to misinterpret. He has skirted the question of whether his project is Arab nationalist (and therefore exclusionary of Kurds) or whether his vision of Iraqi nationalism can successfully transcend or minimize ethnic difference, as it seeks to do with sectarian identity. Further, while his militia’s approach has wrought observable gains in Samarra, and on Iraq’s national political scene, much of that progress relies on Sadr’s nearly authoritarian individual power. His charismatic pull within his political movement gives that movement internal continuity. These qualities have, justifiably, drawn criticism. Mowaffak al-Rubaie, a politician in a rival camp allied with former prime minister Maliki, described Sadr’s followers as an undemocratic mob blindly loyal to Sadr because of his family background: “If he orders these people to set themselves on fire, they will do it.”<sup>57</sup>

Still, what makes Sadr’s movement so notable is the degree to which it breaks with other notions of politics that have been prevalent for so much of Iraq’s post-2003 history. Sadr has clearly articulated a communal project that is open to Iraqis whether they are Shia, Sunni, Christian, or secular. Since the U.S. invasion, no other movement that advocates for a pluralistic Iraqi nation has managed to mobilize meaningful popular support. It is all the more surprising that the most successful proponent of an inclusive Iraqi identity movement should be a former sectarian leader as feared on the battlefield as he is adored by his followers. Sadr’s militia has invested in new relationships, deftly intertwining political, economic, and social interests not only to profit but to create new wealth and webs of power. Along the way, Sadr’s ideology, simplistic though it may be, has evolved into an Iraqi nationalism that seeks to galvanize without excluding. In another context, his overbroad definition of nationalism

might be derided as vague and shallow, but in Iraq, it is at least notable—and cause for some limited optimism.

Sadr's version of nationalism differentiates it from its peer competitors, and has earned it a growing swathe of respect from skeptical constituencies such as secular leftists and, increasingly, tribal Sunnis. The individual success of Sadr's political party might well wane, but the achievement of his experiment in Samarra suggests that ambivalent ideologies such as nationalism, or patriotism—or even, less benignly, chauvinism—might quite effectively serve as a unifying force that can reverse Iraq's violent entropy and forge functional cross-communal bonds. These potentially unifying vectors carry risks of their own, open to abuse by demagogues and a new class of violent or exclusionary militants. Few Iraqis want to return to a time of state collapse, and even groups that previously took up arms are capable of evolution. At best, however, contemporary developments may offer a glimpse of a centripetal process—the coalescing of a shared identity and the building of a state.

Whether Samarra's gains can be replicated elsewhere is an important question beyond the scope of this report. A close read of Samarra's qualified success, however, suggests that other power centers in Iraq might do well if they study—and when possible, emulate—some aspects of this particular Sunni city's experiment in collaborative rule. This is what reconciliation and state building look like at the point of contact, where the grandest of plans for Iraq meet the messy reality of an actual community. Iraq is a diverse place, with a vexing mix of sectarian and ethnic identities that don't usually fit into neat categories. Most of the country functions in some way like Samarra: through uncomfortable, intimate, and sometimes violent partnerships between complicated rival factions.

In Samarra, the constraints of the problem are simultaneously simple and mind-bogglingly complex. On one level, the city is a radically rebellious Sunni Triangle city—despite its repulsion of Islamic State rule, it is still the hometown of Baghdadi and of legions of al-Qaeda and Islamic State foot soldiers—and now grudgingly under control of Shia militias loyal to the central government.<sup>38</sup> On another level, it is a

complex experiment in layered identities and fluctuating loyalties, a place where Sunnis have historically relied on Shia religious pilgrims for their livelihood, and where the Shia militia now in charge is viewed by some Sunnis as a great unifying nationalist hope, rather than a sectarian occupier.

## Changing Minds

Over time, the Peace Brigades have established a consistent record. Concurrently, however, reports have emerged from other parts of Iraq, where militias under the umbrella of the Popular Mobilization Forces (the PMF) have developed a rough reputation for extortion, kidnapping, sex trafficking, and other predatory behavior. The PMF is a government body with legal status that functions like a parallel defense ministry in charge of the country's many nongovernmental militias.<sup>39</sup> The PMF purview extends to forces that opposed Saddam Hussein before 2003, militias that formed after the U.S. invasion, and a third wave that coalesced in response to the rise of the Islamic State. The comparison with some of the newer or more predatory groups has cast Sadr's Peace Brigades in a favorable light and has softened suspicions bred by the role of Sadrists during the 2006 sectarian civil war. One example of slowly shifting attitudes comes from the leadership of the Krayem. At a gathering of his relatives and tribal elders in February 2018, Ahmed Krayem, the tribe's leader, enumerated his grievances against the Peace Brigades: they didn't allow displaced Sunnis to return to the city, and they extracted bribes from merchants at their checkpoints. "People in the desert feel disconnected from the state and from the law," he said. "You cannot secure these areas if you don't use the sons of these areas. Who can fight corruption? The Sadrists won't fight corruption. . . . The militias exist on the ground. I have to deal with them. What else can I do? We will work with whomever is in charge."<sup>40</sup>

Ahmed's older brother Shalaan Krayem, a member of parliament until May 2018, echoed the same criticisms against the Sadrists in the legislature in Baghdad. In an interview in March 2018, before the elections in which he lost his seat, Shalaan Krayem accused the Peace Brigades of exaggerating security threats in Samarra. "There is no threat against the shrine, but they want to justify their

presence and the money they can make,” he said.<sup>41</sup> Despite their complaints, the Krayem tribe was by 2018 already cooperating closely, and effectively, with the Sadrists. The Krayem has a militia of its own, consisting of approximately a thousand Sunni tribesmen, which is registered with the PMF, the same authority that governs the Peace Brigades (in law if not in practice). Its commander, Dulaf Krayem (another brother of Ahmed) said he enjoyed excellent intelligence sharing and operational coordination with the Sadrists.<sup>42</sup> The slow shift of the Krayem’s rhetoric is revealing. Even as Ahmed Krayem led a public relations fusillade against the Sadrists from his position as council chair of the governorate, he was seeking their help to start private business ventures in the city of Samarra.

The Sadrist bloc came in first in the national parliamentary elections held in May 2018, on the strength of Sadr’s reform platform, nationalist rhetoric, and alliance with secularists and Communists. In Samarra, the partnership between the Peace Brigades and local Sunnis deepened. Shalaan Krayem lost his seat in parliament and modulated his criticism of the Sadrists. The Peace Brigades, the politician said, had kept their promises to help release Sunni prisoners; of the five thousand men detained in his governorate, he said, only eight hundred were still being held in January 2019. “Now their way of dealing with people is better than before,” he said. He had turned his ire toward the shrine authority, which he said was making it impossible for Sunni property owners in the old city to do profitable business. “The shrine wants to be the landlord of all the property, to make all the money,” Krayem said. “They don’t want local landlords to make money.”<sup>43</sup>

Top-down nationalism plays out through shifting bottom-up local relationships, like that between Shalaan Krayem and the Peace Brigades. In an interview almost a year after he made public attacks against the Sadrists, he now had a more positive assessment. “The policy followed by Sayed Moqtada has changed dramatically over recent years,” he said. “He has pretensions to be the sole leader [‘za’im’] of all Iraqis, so he has to listen to all parties. He wants to have good relations with the Sunni sect especially. The whole partnership will be to the benefit of the people of Samarra.”<sup>44</sup>

One example of the Sadrists’ national role came in January 2019, when it intervened to help Samarra’s Sunni merchants raise their concerns with the senior Shia clergy. As explained above, and as with most governance and security issues in Iraq, the question of Samarra’s old city has financial implications. Sadrists used their sway within their national political coalition, *Islah*, to secure an audience for a delegation of Sunnis from Samarra with the coalition’s most senior establishment cleric, Sayed Ammar al-Hakim, in January 2019. Hakim received the delegation in Baghdad, and heard detailed concerns about property disputes and shrine administration, and, according to several participants, agreed to relay the concerns of the Samarra residents to the ultimate Shia clerical authorities in Najaf.

## A Time of Political Experiments

Iraqi politics have entered a new period of constructive alliance and identity building. The newly elected Iraqi president, Barham Salih, has credibility as a Kurdish leader and also as a national politician, with an exemplary record of service in Baghdad. The Islamic State has been defeated as a state-like actor: it continues to pose a significant threat as an ideological force and as an armed insurgency capable of organizing terrorist attacks, but it can no longer aspire to compete with the Iraqi state. Meanwhile, Shia-dominated politics has decisively shifted emphasis, away from asserting power for Shia Iraqis and toward the pursuit of power across communal lines, rallying support through alliances, patronage networks, and, to a limited extent, actual political programs. (Part of this shift is due to the fact that the relative position of power of Iraqi Shia is now all but taken for granted; fortifying the sect’s interests is no longer a top priority.)

In Iraq’s new mosaic of authority, a wide spectrum of ad hoc governance experiments is underway. The most important combine different identity groups and test the prospects for coexistence, reconciliation, and the construction of new and unifying political identities and movements. And more than ever in recent memory, “sect” is an inadequate prism through which to understand these experiments.

The ideological underpinnings of the Samarra experiment are playing out on a nationwide and regional level. Concepts of reform, secularism, and civic governance are reemerging in political debate across the Arab world. In Iraq, Sadr's alliance actively touts a secular, unifying, nationalist identity, but has yet to face any significant challenge. For now, the rhetoric remains untested and largely abstract. That said, Sadr meets regularly with his coalition partners in the Iraqi Communist Party, and has given them government ministries and far more influence than warranted by the numbers of their supporters, who are in the thousands, compared to Sadr's millions. Sadr's central motive for this coordination appears practical rather than ideological; no previous approach by his political lieutenants or those of any other movement has succeeded at service provision, governance, or wealth creation. With Iraq's population growing and its services faltering, it is no longer sufficient for any politician to secure a slice of government patronage for distribution to followers. Sadr's embrace of independent technocrats marks a reversal of his own previous approach, which was to install loyalists in patronage-rich posts such as the upper ranks of the health ministry. He has now turned to allies who he apparently believes might be more successful at addressing core concerns of governance and administration.

"Our alliance is civil and nationalist," explained Raid Jahid Fahmi, head of the Communist Party, in February 2018—a time when the new partnership was fresh and many Iraqis doubted its sincerity and staying power.<sup>45</sup> He uses the word "madani," or "civil," and avoids the term "almani," meaning "secular," although the latter is favored by many rank-and-file Communist Party members. "This is a very important cultural shift, a courageous step toward getting over differences. We are looking to reunite people."

Not everyone involved in the Communist–Sadrist alliance feels completely comfortable with it. At a protest organized by Sadrists and Communists in 2018, veteran Communist organizer Ayssar Charchafchi cast a jaundiced eye on the partnership with Sadr. "I don't believe in Islamic politicians," Charchafchi said. "I am secular, I cannot stand for religious leaders to control the country."<sup>46</sup> Nevertheless, Charchafchi

had, that day, marched side by side with followers of a religious movement, in pursuit of a common project.

One should be careful not to exaggerate the reach and depth of nationalist sentiment. But it is, undeniably, a bulwark of the emerging political order. There is no single dominant authority or institution in Iraq today. The sectarian phase of political reorganization that peaked between 2003 and 2008 has subsided. Sectarian identity plays only a secondary role in the new alliances taking shape.<sup>47</sup> Top-down forces propagate nationalist rhetoric and ideas. The prime minister, president, and head of the armed forces all deploy resolutely nationalist, nonsectarian rhetoric. Sistani has also embraced ideas of national unity.

At the same time, new practices of coexistence and cooperation have emerged from below, at the grassroots level.<sup>48</sup> As we have noted, poor Shia volunteers, fresh from the fight against the Islamic State, protest against misrule and corruption by Shia political parties and militias. Poor Sunnis who suffered some of the worst excesses of the Islamic State have functioned as a first line of defense against those who sympathize with the group. These Sunnis have rejected some of their most corrupt and sectarian leaders. The battle against the Islamic State foregrounded Iraq's deep tradition of mixed and multilayered identity—people who define themselves by no single sect, who heed religious references but practice secular lifestyles, who are willing to trust politicians and neighbors of different ethnic or religious backgrounds.

## A New Political Order Is Emerging

Asadi, the senior Sadr adviser, argued that the May 2018 elections, and the grinding negotiations to form a new government (which were not resolved at the time of this writing in April 2019) marked a turning point in Iraqi politics.<sup>49</sup> "Political parties have agreed to have a government that is not religious," he said in January. "It is the first time that religious parties on the Shia side have all sought Kurdish and non-Shia alliances."<sup>50</sup> Sunni tribal leaders who exerted influence from exile bases abroad are being supplanted by local leaders who have ongoing relationships with Iraqis from

a wide range of backgrounds and political affiliations. The ground rules of alliance building in Iraqi politics have shifted, with the national sphere dominated by two alliances led by Shia parties and inclusive of all Iraqi identity groups. The leading political blocs must now define themselves by policy or political differences rather than by sectarian or identity markers. (One shorthand formulation defines the major militia-dominated bloc by its closeness to Iran, and the other bloc, which includes the Sadrists and former prime minister Abadi, by its closeness to the United States.)

It is easy to overstate the transformation. All the major blocs are dominated by parties whose power rests on personal loyalty and the coercive power of militias, rather than by policy proposals. And the more reformist of the two blocs, Islah, which includes the Sadrist alliance, chose as its leader Hakim, the cleric; a Sadrist official said the choice was based purely on religious pedigree. “He is a sayed, a descendant of the Prophet,” this official said. “We could not select anyone else.”<sup>51</sup> Hakim, like Sadr, inherited his leadership position from his family. Also like Sadr, his following is based on religious sentiment and cult of personality in addition to a perceived reform agenda. (Internally, Sadr rules his own movement by fiat and with absolute top-down authority; there is no semblance of internal democracy or discussion within his movement.)

Personality-driven clientelism imbues almost all Iraqi politicians and their movements, raising a significant reservation about the nationalist experiment. Sadr has dramatically changed his views and alliances in the past. There is thus no reason to assume that his most recent transformation is permanent. More importantly, alliances increasingly driven by nationalism and policy agendas rather than personalities will threaten status quo interests—including the interests of the very movements that Sadr and other like-minded leaders have galvanized in the service of the nationalist project. Iraqi politicians have developed the “muhasasa” system, which uses quotas (usually allocated to sectarian political parties) to form governments. Parties negotiate a share of power, usually seeking control of a ministry or multiple ministries, in exchange for supporting the ruling coalition. Sadr campaigned against this system

in 2018 and promised to go into opposition if he couldn’t form a government of his own, but he ultimately agreed to take part in yet another big-tent Iraqi government that includes virtually every party that won seats in parliament. “This is the worst outcome,” said Sami al-Askari, a politician who opposes the Sadrists and supports the dominant bloc in the current government. “Everybody has a share, but nobody has responsibility.”<sup>52</sup> This accountability gap might be just as detrimental to Iraqi stability in the coming period as sectarian and ethnic identity politics were during the years from 2003 to 2018.

Still, the results in Samarra suggest the possibilities of local, ad hoc solutions. In this iteration of the experiment with collaborative rule and trans-sectarian community building, a militia with Shia roots and an authoritarian style has embraced principles of secular and nationalist governance. Samarra’s history creates a particularly compelling logic for the presence of a Shia militia in a Sunni city, and Sadr’s singular authority over his followers means his militia has an especially strong chain of command. But similar conditions pertain in other parts of Iraq that have religious, cultural, or strategic importance. Other militias also have strong leaders and chains of command, and many of the government forces and militias loyal to Sistani have begun to adopt a rhetorical commitment to governance, reform, unity, and a civil state. If Sadr’s approach succeeds in Samarra, Iraqis will attempt to replicate its practices elsewhere: a joint partnership in which Shia militias have the senior role in providing security, with support from Sunni militias in a junior position; crucially, the Shia militants avoid predatory and abusive behavior, and allow Sunni civilians to reap the economic benefits of security.

One measure of the significance of Sadr’s experiment is that other important constituencies have adopted the same core principles. Other militias with more sectarian track records and ties to Iran have nonetheless forged partnerships with Sunni militias and leaders. Sistani has also intensified his public support for reform and nonreligious governance. In an interview in Karbala, his aide Afdhal al-Shami expressed the top cleric’s desire to see Iraq turn away from religious politics:



We hope we can find some politicians who are nationalist. We don't care which side they come from. We sacrificed our blood for Iraq. It is time to discard the quota system and turn to the constitution. We need a strong nationalist leader, interested in the unity of the Iraqis, willing to sacrifice themselves for Iraq in the fight against corruption. Iraq is a civil state, not a religious state. Other governments should stop fearing that Iraq is going to be a religious state. We won't go to the Iranian system, or the Saudi System. We are a civil state.<sup>53</sup>

The wider reform project in Iraq—one of the most corrupt and poorly governed countries in the world, despite its great wealth in natural resources and human capital—remains a far-off prospect. On a national level, the muhassasa system imperils any serious reform effort. “The quota system is responsible for the crisis of the government. The quota system is not capable of producing solutions,” said Fahmi, the Communist Party leader, during the most recent efforts to finalize the government formation, nearly a year after the election.<sup>54</sup> “Our alliance is the first step toward creating the basis for a national interest, an Iraqi identity.”

Sadr's gamble in Samarra is that it is possible to create new facts on the ground and new loyalties. Reformist and nationalist Iraqis, in turn, argue that the Sadrist experiment can create a blueprint for Iraq to move forward, regardless of whether that is Sadr's true intention. Paralysis and consensus dominate national negotiations. On a local level, however, powerful figures are freer to act. In Samarra, a new authority has shaped a new local order, pushing aside some individuals and tribes that were accustomed to greater power, and investing in new alliances that are committed to cooling sectarian allegiances and forging new ideological and economic networks. As several Iraqis noted in interviews, corruption and violence aren't problems for Sunnis, Shia, or Kurds: they are problems for all Iraqis. A mess of militia fiefdoms and political infighting—pushed to the breaking point by a generational crisis of politics, security, and the economy—has produced a raft

of experiments in collaborative rule. New partnerships are forging new communities and identities, continuous with existing blocs and identities but diverging in significant ways. The nationalist and other trans-sectarian formations under development are precarious and deeply flawed; none are likely to transform Iraq. They do, however, suggest the shape of models for reversing the fragmentation and sectarian mobilization that began in 2003, and build a more inclusive and malleable political community of interests, rather than of identities.

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