

ETHNO-RELIGIOUS PARTITION IN IRAQ AND SYRIA

Could the political stability in Iraq and Syria be improved by reshaping their borders along ethno-religious lines?

Ruben Vermeer



From left to right, top to bottom: Sunni tribal leaders in Iraq (AFP, 2015), President Rohani (Iran), Putin (Russia) and Erdogan (Turkey) at Syria peace conference (EPA, 2017) US and Kurdish YPG commander (AFP, 2017), Bashar al-Assad (Reuters, 2016), Christian Iraqi Special Forces soldier (Reuters, 2016), Druze men (Awidat, 2016), Shia militia-member (al-Rubaye, 2016), Fighter jet of Anti-IS coalition (Iraqi News, 2017), Female Kurdish fighter (Souleiman, 2015), and IS-fighter (Alamy, 2017).

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Executive summary

Iraq and Syria are countries with a strong ethno-religious diversity that rank among the least politically stable countries in the world. Over the last decade both countries have been destabilized by conflict, in which the ethno-religious tensions increased. The purpose of this report was to determine whether reshaping Iraq and Syria along ethno-religious lines would improve their political stability.

A literature review showed that ethno-religious partition seldom contributes to political stability and should therefore only be considered in well-studied exceptions. Soft partition along ethno-religious lines is a less far-reaching alternative. However, soft partition could backfire if there is a security dilemma. This dilemma exists when communal groups are distrustful of each other and take defensive actions, which are at the same time viewed as hostile to other groups. Soft partition would increase a group's capacity and therefore its propensity for conflict.

An examination of the past and present of Iraq and Syria shows that the ethno-religious identities are powerful, because both countries are young and have therefore not yet developed a strong national identity. In the recent past the ethno-religious tensions between communal groups have increased, fuelled and exacerbated by radicals and outside powers, notably Iran and Saudi Arabia. As a consequence, there is now an active security dilemma in Iraq and Syria. Secondly, in both countries there is a significant Kurdish population with a distinct national identity, who have frequently rebelled against the central rule. Even though the ethno-religious division is vital, there are other factors that are of relevance to the political stability in Iraq and Syria. These are i.a. minorities, tribal structures, classes, international actors and socioeconomic factors.

The results show that the hard partition of the Kurdish region could likely increase the political stability in Iraq. On the other hand, the Sunnis and Shias are too intermixed and have a security dilemma. Therefore, federalism or hard partition of the Shia and Sunnis would not yet benefit the political stability. However, continued violence and repressive government are likely, and therefore the possibility of partition should not be excluded in the future. According to the results, the soft partition of the Kurdish-dominated Rojava would increase the political stability in Syria. This is not the case for the partition of other ethno-religious communities. However, these conclusions are limited, since countless variables can influence the outcome. Especially the power struggle between Iran and Saudi Arabia is a prime variable that could impact the future political stability and ethno-religious tension within Iraq and Syria.



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1. Preface

Before you lies the dissertation 'Ethno-religious partition in Iraq and Syria', which is based on extensive desk research and a personal interview. Early on in the European Studies programme at The Hague University, I became interested in the MENA-region, specifically the Levant. This ancient area was the cradle of society and the birthplace of major religions. I was fascinated by the dynamics between the ancient diverse ethno-religious groups. It is a region full of natural, historic and cultural beauty. However, it is also a region affected by conflict and instability for as long as I can remember. In my first year, in 2013, I conducted a speculative research on the future of Syria in case of a defeat for the Syrian regime. In my second year, a more extensive research concerned question whether the anti-IS coalition would be able to destroy IS. These two studies indefinitely triggered my interest for the region.

Therefore, choosing the subject for this dissertation was easy. My aim was to build on the knowledge acquired in the previous two research assignments, in order to create a comprehensive study as pinnacle of my bachelor. I knew that the subject was extremely complex and challenging, yet I was still overwhelmed by its complexity. I have studied a vast amount of sources of which only a part was eventually used in this dissertation. In the end, I have to confess that this topic was too vast and complex for a perfect dissertation. In fact, it could have been easily divided into a thousand sub-dissertations. Therefore, its quantity may have negatively affected its quality. Nevertheless, hopefully I have succeeded in making a complicated topic accessible to a broader public.

I hope you enjoy your reading.

Ruben Vermeer

The Hague, January 5, 2018



2. Introduction

Syria and Iraq have been in the centre of the world's attention over the last decade. Both countries are devastated by civil conflicts and rank among the most politically instable countries in the world (The World Bank, 2015). In Iraq, there were at least 268,000 violent deaths between 2003 and 2017, with currently 4.3 million internally displaced persons (IDPs) and approximately 260,000 refugees abroad (UNHCR, 2017; Iraq Body Count, 2017). In Syria, estimates for the number of casualties of its civil war amount to 470,000, with 6,1 million IDPs and 4,8 million refugees abroad (HRW, 2016). Moreover, the Iraqi and Syrian conflicts aided the emergence of the radical Islamic State (IS) that shocked the world with its terror and cruelty. IS abolished the borders between Iraq and Syria, and established a caliphate that attracted Islamists radicals from all over the world (Stanford University, 2017).

The recent devastation and instability within Iraq and Syria, which appears to be linked to the division between ethno-religious communities, has raised calls to partition the countries. However, these calls are mainly commentaries or opinions in newspaper without a thorough analysis whether the conflicts are actually caused by the ethno-religious division, or if partition would actually contribute to the political stability in Iraq and Syria. Moreover, there are numerous academic publications on the effects of ethno-religious partition in general, which will be discussed in this dissertation. However, there are only a few publications with a limited scope that apply the theory on the situation in Iraq and Syria. These publications are mostly out-dated due to major changes that occurred in recent years. Moreover, there are no studies that have combined the reshape of both Iraq and Syria. One might argue that the situations of Iraq and Syria differ and cannot be combined. However, ISIS has changed this situation by breaking up the border between them and creating a Sunni caliphate in its midst.

Therefore, the purpose of this dissertation is to answer the following question: Could the political stability in Iraq and Syria be improved by reshaping their borders along ethno-religious lines? The aim is to provide a relatively concise study that determines if, why and how ethno-religious partition in Iraq and Syria would improve the political stability. Since the topic is extremely broad, a complete overview of all related factors would be too extensive. Therefore, the scope of this thesis will be limited to a manageable overview of the chief elements, in order to make a complex subject accessible to a broad public.



In order to answer the research question, several subquestions ought to be answered. At first there will be a literature review to establish the theoretical framework for the thesis by determining whether ethno-religious partition increases political stability. Secondly, there will be an overview of the current situation in Iraq and Syria, in order to explain the ethno-religious division and lack of political stability. In the third section, it will be analysed what historic elements caused this division and instability. In the fourth section, an overview will be provided of the main elements that have to be regarded to determine if and how Iraq and Syria can be reshaped. Lastly, the fifth subquestion discusses the actual possibilities to reshape Iraq and Syria along ethno-religious lines.

Political stability is a factor that can be defined in many different fashions. In this study, the definition is rather broad, and focuses on the reduction of conflict, death toll and displaced persons (The World Bank, n.d.). Currently, Iraq and Syria rank 189th (Iraq) and 194th (Syria) out of 194 on the most recent political stability index of the World Bank (The World Bank, 2015). This dissertation focuses on the main methods of reshaping Iraq and Syria along ethno-religious lines, namely: soft- and hard partition, either interstate or intrastate.

The definition ethno-religious is the umbrella term for all communal groups in Iraq and Syria. In other publications, the term ethno-sectarian is used frequently. However, 'sectarian' refers mainly to the different sects within Islam, notably Sunnism and Shi'ism. It therefore does not include e.g. Christians and Gnostics. Moreover, it is limiting to merely characterize distinct minorities such as the Alawis and Druze as sects of the Islam. In fact, many of these sects are only partially linked to Islam. These groups have a long distinct tradition in which there was limited intermixing with other sects. Therefore, one could state that these groups are practically unique ethno-religious groups. Hence, the term 'ethno-religious' is the preferred definition throughout most of this report. In certain instances, sources will merely use the term ethnic or ethno-sectarian, especially in the literature review. Moreover, 'sectarian' is the preferred term for the division between the Sunnis and Shia in Iraq. However, in general the specific terminology is irrelevant for the implications of the theory: what matters is that the term defines a specific identity, which makes them part of a distinct communal group.

As for the terminology, there are countless possibilities for the different sects. As an example, followers of the Shia branch are called among others: Shia, Shias, Shiite, Shiites, Shi'a and Shi'ites. There is not a uniform term for most of these sects. Based on an evaluation of several online



discussions on the terminology, the preferred terms in this report are Shia (singular and plural), Sunni (singular), Sunnis (plural), Alawi (singular) and Alawis (plural).

This dissertation has an exploratory character, due to the nature of the subject. Therefore, some sections of this report will include some speculation. However, the topic is extremely relevant and it is very likely that intelligence agencies of several Western governments are currently researching the same subject. Since this is an extensive topic, not all details or elements can or will be addressed in this dissertation.



3. Methods

This section describes the methods used for this dissertation. In the first place a literature review was conducted to establish the theoretical framework of the report. According to Nicholas Walliman, the literature reviews is an important introduction to a dissertation and highlights the relevance of the research (Walliman, 2011, p. 56). As Walliman states: *“It therefore forms a distinctly recognizable section near the beginning and leads on to the more specific and practical description of the research activities”* (Walliman, 2011, p. 56). Without determining if partition in ethno-religious conflicts could actually contribute to political stability, the remainder of the dissertation would be futile. The literature review introduced the main concepts on ethno-religious partition, e.g. the security dilemma. The literature was gathered from articles in academic journals and books by prominent scholars in this area of expertise, through search engines as EBSCO Host and Google Scholar.

The methods used for the results were desk research and a personal interview. As mentioned before, the objective of this thesis is to provide a broad public an overview with an exploratory character of the situation and possibilities with regard to the ethno-religious tensions in Iraq and Syria. In fact, this study makes a complex subject relatively comprehensible for a broad public. There is already a vast sea of knowledge and data available on this subject. Therefore, the main method used was desk research in order to collect and analyse a vast amount of knowledge, and to condense it to a relatively concise and manageable report.

Several types of desk research sources were consulted for this report. For data on the current situation, mainly online sources were used, such as news sites, magazines and databases. Only qualitative news sites and magazines were used, such as The Guardian and The Economist. As for semi-qualitative news sources, such as Al Monitor, BBC, Reuters and News Deeply; the nature and value of the information was carefully measured with regard to the possible colouring of the source. In case of doubt towards the validity or quality of the source, the information was not used or retrieved elsewhere. The main databases used for this dissertation were the CIA World Factbook, The Gulf/2000 Project and the infographics of the Council on Foreign Relations. These databanks were checked for possible bias and appear to deliver accurate and objective data. Furthermore, the maps of Live Map were a valuable asset. These maps are based on a critical review of countless news sources on a specific conflict.



In the historic section, the main sources were renowned books by scholars with expertise of the countries. For Syria, the main source was the book *Among the Ruins: Syria Past and Present* by Christian Sahner, published by Oxford University Press. For Iraq, the chief source was the book *The Future of Iraq: Dictatorship, Democracy or Division?* by Liam Anderson and Gareth Stansfield, published by Palgrave MacMillan. Moreover, several other books were consulted for additional knowledge. For the subquestion *'What are the historical elements that contributed to the current political situation and ethno-religious division in Iraq and Syria?'* the main sources were articles from academic journals. These articles provided the core of the in-depth knowledge of this report, and were also interwoven in the other subquestions. As for the possibilities of partition, several commentaries in journals and newspapers were consulted.

The purpose of the personal interview was to provide direction to the thesis and fill possible 'knowledge gaps'. The definition of a personal interview is provided by C.R. Kothari:

"The investigator follows a rigid procedure and seeks answers to a set of pre-conceived questions through personal interviews. This method of collecting data is usually carried out in a structured way where output depends upon the ability of the interviewer to a large extent".

According to Kothari the advantages of a personal interview include *"More information and that too in greater depth can be obtained"* and to consult interested parties and individuals *"to secure greater insight into the practical aspects of the problem."* (Kothari, C.R., 2004).

Since the subject of the thesis is complex, it was difficult to find suitable interviewees that could substantially contribute knowledge that could not be acquired through desk research. Peter Wijninga, a strategic analyst at The Hague Centre for Strategic Studies, had significantly contributed to a previous research on the Islamic State. However, when he was approached for a personal interview for this dissertation, he stressed that the topic was too advanced for him and he could therefore not contribute. Moreover, numerous prominent experts on the Middle East that were contacted for an interview for this study did not respond or were unavailable. An example is the prominent expert Reinoud Leenders of King's College London, who replied that he was currently conducting field research in the Middle East, and could therefore not find the time to cooperate. Hence, it was a boon that Ad Melkert was willing to be interviewed. Ad Melkert was i.a. the leader of the Dutch labour party (PVDA) and, more importantly, the Special Representative of the Secretary-General of the United Nations in Iraq from 2009 till 2011. As

Special Representative, he cooperated with all prominent politicians within Iraq and the Kurdish autonomous region. Moreover, he supervised the 2009-elections in Iraq, which were a milestone for the country. The interview took place on July 4th at the Dutch Council of State in The Hague. The interview with Ad Melkert was valuable and filled some knowledge gaps.

Lastly, research ethics was a vital condition for this dissertation. This is especially the case in an era full of falsified reporting and 'fake news'. As Nicholas Walliman states, research ethics implies: "*The individual values of the researcher relating to honesty and frankness and personal integrity*" and "*The researcher's treatment of other people involved in the research, relating to informed consent, confidentiality, anonymity and courtesy*" (Walliman, 2011, p. 43). When writing a dissertation there is a struggle of making valuable and meaningful conclusion, without fable reasoning or the use of ambiguous sources. This is especially the case for a thesis with an exploratory character. Therefore, every source in this research was critically measured on its credibility and neutrality, e.g. by checking the donors or political colouring of an institute or a writer. As a consequence, several sources that provided interesting insights were excluded from the dissertation, since their credibility was questionable. Moreover, in the personal interview with Ad Melkert, consent was asked to record the interview. Since Ad Melkert did not prefer it, the interview was not recorded. The notes from the interview were translated to English and subsequently sent to the interviewee for feedback and consent. Lastly, throughout the research, the numerous citations and sources were carefully referenced in APA-style to avert plagiarism.



4. Does ethno-religious partition increase political stability?

4.1. Ethno-religious partition

The first section is a literature review on ethno-religious partition that will provide the theoretical basis for the remainder of the dissertation. Much has been written on ethno-religious conflict and partition. A prominent scholar on ethnic partition is Donald Horowitz, who argued in his book *Ethnic groups in conflict* that: “If it is impossible for groups to live together in a heterogeneous state, perhaps it is better for them to live apart in more than one homogeneous state, even if this necessitates population transfers” (1985, p. 588). The political scientist Arend Lijphart elaborates in his book *Democracy in plural societies* that there are three ways to solve the political issues of a divided society without destroying democracy: Assimilation, a consociational democracy, or, if the first two methods do not work properly, partition (1980). He adds that partition is not necessarily a bad solution, since it is sometimes the only method to avert bloodshed (Lijphart, 1980). In fact, Nicholas Sambanis and Daniel Byman show that there were numerous partitions in the last century, such as in India, Korea, Czechoslovakia, Yugoslavia and the Soviet Union (Byman, 2007, p. 26; Sambanis, *Partition as a Solution to Ethnic War: An Empirical Critique of the Theoretical Literature*, 2000, p. 464).

Chaim Kaufmann explains in his article *A Security Dilemma: Ethnic Partitioning in Iraq* in the Harvard International Review that before the conflict in Bosnia and its partition in the 1990’s, the conventional wisdom was that states that had been torn apart by war ought to be put together through power-sharing between communities or electoral reform (2007, p. 44). He elaborates that the reasoning behind this idea was that these initiatives would compel politicians to appeal to all communities and third-party aid, instead of merely their own community (p. 44). Daniel Byman adds in his article *Divided they stand lessons about partition from Iraq and Lebanon* in Security Studies, that in general, the international community ignores the option of partition (2007, p. 3). In a personal interview, Ad Melkert elaborates on this claim, stating that borders have become the standard of separating areas since the 18th century. He states that it is difficult to adjust borders, although they are not completely static (‘Could the political stability in Iraq and Syria be improved by reshaping their borders along ethno-religious lines?, 2017).

Scholars have made several arguments over the years, either supporting or opposing ethno-religious partitioning after a conflict. In the first-place supporters of ethnic partitioning state that



the memory of conflict leaves communal groups highly sensitive to their security and therefore they will more likely pick-up their arms again (Byman, 2007, p. 2). Secondly, they argue that regimes often mistreat the defeated party in communal conflicts (p. 2). Subsequently, this mistreatment, combined with the memory of violence, keeps communal groups mistrustful of each other and limits communal cooperation (p. 2). Moreover, proponents of partition argue that when winners and losers of communal conflicts remain together in one state, both repressive government and continued violence are common (p. 2).

There are overwhelming objections to partition after a communal conflict as well. Arend Lijphart points out the complication that people are usually not neatly divided into two distinct regions (Democracy in plural societies, 1980). In fact, Byman and Horowitz state that secession and partition are unlikely to produce perfectly homogenous states with a lower ethnic conflict level (Byman, 2007, p. 23; Horowitz, 1985, p. 589). Byman adds that the partitioned state will also face the issues of communal mistrust and lack of cooperation: "*Only the names of the oppressor and the oppressed will change*" (p. 23). Amitai Etzioni states in *The Evils of Self-Determination in Foreign Policy* that partitions will simply create new minorities who are often subject to discrimination or violence, at the same level that justified the partition in the first place (1992, pp. 21-35). This claim is acknowledged by proponents of partition, who therefore argue that a population transfer is preferable to the burden of protecting minorities in the new state (Byman, 2007, p. 25; Kaufmann C. , *Possible and Impossible Solutions to Ethnic Civil Wars*, 1996, p. 161). Opponents in their turn state that these forced population movements cause tremendous human suffering and violate human rights (Sambanis, *Partition as a Solution to Ethnic War: An Empirical Critique of the Theoretical Literature*, 2000, p. 440). Whereas proponents of partition state that in an ethnic conflict much of the population has already been displaced, and returning refugees to their homes is expected to be more dangerous than ensuring their safety in their existing location (Kaufmann C. , *A Security Dilemma: Ethnic Partitioning in Iraq*, 2007, pp. 45-46). Moreover, opponents of partition stress that the international community should not necessarily reward groups that use violence, which is often the case in partition; this could prompt people elsewhere to pick up arms and demand their own state (Byman, 2007, p. 23; Etzioni, 1992, pp. 21-35). However, analyses of the 'international spread of ethnic conflict' seem to indicate that cross-country contagion effects of ethnic partition movements are rare, according to analyses by Lake and Rothchild in *The International Spread of Ethnic Conflicts* (1998). Furthermore, Daniel Byman conveys that partition may only result in the transformation of a conflict from a civil war to an international war, possibly between the predecessor and successor states (Byman, 2007, p. 3).



This has been the case in e.g. India and Korea. Lastly, Nicholas Sambanis states that the most significant objection to partition is that it may be a too limiting solution (Partition as a Solution to Ethnic War: An Empirical Critique of the Theoretical Literature, 2000, p. 440). He adds that ethnic cooperation may be possible even after a civil war, as was the case in Lebanon (p. 440).

4.2. Security dilemma

The discussion of ethno-religious partition is strongly linked to the so-called 'security dilemma' theory. Robert Jervis explains this theory in his publication *Cooperation under the security dilemma* (1978). He stresses that the security dilemma exists when communal groups are distrustful of each other and take defensive actions, which are at the same time viewed as hostile to other groups (pp. 169-170). Barry Posen adds that a security dilemma occurs when a government's weakness fosters an anarchic-like environment (The Security Dilemma and Ethnic Conflict, 1993, pp. 27-29). As a result, communal groups fall back on their own resources for security (Posen, 1993, pp. 27-29; Byman, 2007, p. 10). If there is any reason for distrust towards other groups, they will likely organize their own protection and mobilize members of their group (Byman, 2007, p. 10). The division and mobilization of communal groups often occurs along ethno-religious lines, according to Kaufmann (Kaufmann C. , A Security Dilemma: Ethnic Partitioning in Iraq, 2007, p. 47). He stresses that a community-divided state in effect becomes a miniature international system, and behaves as such (p. 44). The communal mobilization often takes the form of arming and training in preparation for a conflict and can therefore alarm rival groups who respond by mobilizing as well (Jervis, 1978, pp. 169-170; Posen, 1993, pp. 27-29). In this state of mobilization, groups that fear an attack of a rival group can be tempted to engage in a pre-emptive strike, before their rival becomes more powerful (Jervis, 1978, pp. 169-170; Posen, 1993, pp. 27-29).

Chaim Kaufmann elaborates that once war mobilizes ethnic groups, the conflict cannot end until the population is separated into defensible, mostly homogenous regions (Possible and Impossible Solutions to Ethnic Civil Wars, 1996, p. 150). Kaufmann elaborates that once large-scale violence has started the original reasons for conflict, such as real material interests, populist rhetoric, incitement by political elites or personal gain, no longer matter (A Security Dilemma: Ethnic Partitioning in Iraq, 2007, p. 44). Furthermore, he adds it is irrelevant who started the conflict as well, since "*each group's mobilization now poses a real security threat to the other groups*" (A Security Dilemma: Ethnic Partitioning in Iraq, 2007, p. 144). Only the restoration of an impartial strong state can reassure the communal groups and reinstate a power-sharing agreement, states



Byman (Divided they stand lessons about partition from Iraq and Lebanon, 2007, p. 10). Advocates for ethno-religious partition believe that the civil politics cannot be restored unless the warring groups are separated into defensible, ethnically-determined enclaves (Williams & Simpson, 2008, p. 195). Furthermore, Chaim Kaufmann argues that communal violence hardens identities. He provides the example of the Yugoslav Wars in the 1990's, stating:

"The fact that before the war, many Bosnians thought of themselves as Yugoslavs before Serbs or Muslims did not help curb the violence. For during an ethnic war, communal identity is not a matter of choice; it is enforced by armed members of the enemy community who do not stop to ask their victims about their moderate or cosmopolitan sympathies". (A Security Dilemma: Ethnic Partitioning in Iraq, 2007, p. 45)

Subsequently, he concludes based on the Yugoslav Wars that *"communal wars tend to separate populations"*. Moreover, Kaufmann stresses that wars generate memories of atrocities that cannot be erased, which provides ultranationalists within groups a political advantage after the war. This makes solutions that require some degree of trust, such as power-sharing agreements, practically impossible (Kaufmann C. , A Security Dilemma: Ethnic Partitioning in Iraq, 2007, p. 45). Byman adds however, that the nature of the killings during wars can make a large difference. He states that one-sided killings and the targeting of non-combatants are more likely to embitter a peace and create lasting hatred than 'fair and limited' killings (2007, p. 16). Kaufmann states that restoration of multi-ethnic politics is virtually impossible after a civil war, since these wars destroy confidence that the winner will respect minority rights or allow former rivals a voice in decision-making (Possible and Impossible Solutions to Ethnic Civil Wars, 1996, p. 156). Daniel Byman states that Kaufmann is too absolute in his claims and argues that just as states in the international system are able to manage long-term rivalries without war, so could communal groups learn to overcome their security fears and live in peace (2007, p. 11). Byman elaborates that communal cooperation after a civil war is difficult, yet not impossible (p. 14). He states cooperation built on a shared identity is virtually impossible after a civil war, yet communal bargaining is feasible *"if the communal identities are not nationalistic, if the civil war killings were not one-sided, and if the political system promotes power-sharing"* (p. 14).

The competition for resources can be a relevant dimension as well. According to Robert Bates, competition for resources can be an important element in ethnic conflict (Ethnic Competition and Modernization in Contemporary Africa, 1974). Therefore, the control of central government is a



major prize for the warring parties, since control of the state offers access to the resources of a country (Byman, 2007, pp. 13-14). Another element of the security dilemma is external influence. Strong outsiders can help solve a communal conflict, as Syria did in the Lebanon civil war, by disarming its militias and assist in the implementing of a power-sharing agreement (p. 14). However, outside powers can exacerbate a conflict as well, instead of solving it. Byman draws a comparison between Lebanon and Iraq in the 1990's. Whereas Lebanon's neighbouring powers preferred a stable Lebanon, Iraq's powerful neighbours prefer a weak Iraq. Lebanon is a small and harmless state, whereas a united Iraq poses a threat to its neighbours Iran, Turkey and the Gulf States. Therefore, instead of solving Iraq's civil strife, outside powers had an incentive to increase a communal conflict by supporting insurgencies (p. 19).

With regard to soft partition, Byman states that in theory federalism offers several of the benefits of partition, without many of the problems (p. 24). Federalism could among others satisfy the aspirations of a communal group, foster interethnic cooperation and decrease the incentive of violence, argue Alicia Levine and Donald Horowitz (Levine, 1996; Horowitz, 1985, pp. 613-621). Byman adds however, that federalism can also increase a group's capacity and therefore its propensity for conflict (p. 24). Therefore, if a country still experiences issues as a security dilemma, external meddling or rival nationalisms, federalism can backfire and exacerbate a conflict. Byman states: *"By giving groups control over institutions, they also gain control over taxation, administration, and manpower, all of which are essential for mobilizing for conflict."* (p. 24).

Byman argues that the options for either partition or preservation are available every time the US and the international community support weak governments in countries with a history of civil strife. He stresses that in order to make the right decision it is vital to know the prognosis for the recurrence of war (p. 1). The recurrence of war in partitioned states was studied by Nicholas Sambanis, who with the use of a model examined 125 civil wars, which produced 21 partitions. Sambanis concluded that partitions did not help prevent recurrence of ethnic wars: *"Although it may seem like a clean and easy solution, partition fares no better than other outcomes of ethnic civil war"* (Sambanis, Partition as a Solution to Ethnic War: An Empirical Critique of the Theoretical Literature, 2000, p. 439). Moreover, Sambanis points to partitions Yugoslavia, Ethiopia, India and Cyprus, in which the seceded state fought a war with the former state after the partition (p. 473). However, Byman argues that partition is an understudied phenomenon and accuses scholars of focusing on failed partitions, while overlooking peaceful partitions in e.g. Scandinavia and



Czechoslovakia (Byman, 2007, p. 27). Furthermore, he stresses that partitions in e.g. Korea, India and Israel are regarded as failures, while the counter-fact is ignored whether conflict would have occurred, if these states had remained united (p. 26). Sambanis concludes his study by stating that in general partition may be an impossible solution to ethnic war. However, he adds:

“Only in the most extreme cases may partition be necessary, indeed inevitable. Those cases must be handpicked on the basis of political analysis of regional and global constraints, the history of the preceding war, and the special traits of the society in question. More research on this topic will help pinpoint the benefits and the dangers of partition under different conditions” (p. 482).

In a more recent publication, Nicholas Sambanis and Jonah Schulhofer-Wohl stress: *“Most studies of partition, especially those in favour of it, use illustrative evidence from selective case studies and do not directly confront large empirical results.”* (What’s in a Line? Is Partition a Solution to Civil War?, 2009, p. 86). Daniel Byman points out that the preservation of states should not be an iron-rule for the international community and partition should at least be an option (Divided they stand lessons about partition from Iraq and Lebanon, 2007, pp. 26-29). He stresses that if civil wars can be resolved and communal cooperation can be restored, preservation is the right solution. However, if civil wars cannot be resolved, or only through an unending brutal repression, the international community should support partition (pp. 3,27). He elaborates that state borders should not be permanently fixed if their continuation will merely foster hatred, oppression and violence. On the other hand, it is equally foolish to abandon existing borders at the slightest hint (p. 28). Byman points out that there is a “tremendous bias” for the continuation of borders; he argues that even if the world does not embrace partition, it should not blindly support preservation at all costs (p. 29). Byman concludes: *“Neither partition nor preservation is a panacea for communal conflict. When choosing between partition and preservation, the true question is not ‘which’ but ‘when’.”* (p. 3).

To summarize, the arguments in favour of partition in ethno-religious conflicts are the memory of conflict among communal groups and therefore the likeliness of picking up their arms again, the mistreatment of a defeated party by the regime, and subsequently limited communal cooperation. As Byman summarizes: When winners and losers of communal conflicts remain together in one state, both repressive government and continued violence are common (Byman, 2007, p. 2). Arguments against partition are among others the fact that it will not create homogenous states, and consequently new minorities might be oppressed. Therefore, population



transfers are required, although these will lead to human suffering. Secondly, allowing partition could embolden partition-movements in other countries, although this has rarely happened. Thirdly, partition could evolve a civil war into an international war. Lastly, partition might simply be a too limiting solution, since ethno-religious cooperation may be possible even after a civil war. Partition does not necessarily prevent the recurrence of ethno-religious wars, and therefore partition surely is not a formula for ethno-religious conflicts. However, it seems that in well-studied and handpicked cases, partition might be the right solution to avert further bloodshed or brutal repression. Federalism could be a convenient alternative to hard partition, since it offers much of the advantages, without the complications of partition. However, federalism could backfire in a country when there is an active security dilemma.

In the following subquestions, the theory on ethno-religious partition will be applied to the situation in Iraq and Syria.



5. What is the current situation in Iraq and Syria with regard to the ethno-religious division and political stability?

5.1. Iraq

5.1.1. Political stability

Since the invasion by the 'coalition of the willing' led by the United States of America (US) in 2003, Iraq has been in a constant state of turmoil (CIA, 2017). Following the abolition of Saddam Hussein's *Baath* regime, a new constitution was adopted and elections were held (CIA, 2017). The Shia Nouri Maliki became Iraq's new Prime Minister of an inclusive government with Shia Arabs, Sunni Arabs and Kurds (CIA, 2017). However, Maliki quickly began to carry out sectarian politics by supporting Shia militias and removing Sunni politicians, as Harith Hasan Al-Qarawee writes for Carnegie Middle East Center (Iraq's Sectarian Crisis: A Legacy of Exclusion, 2014, p. 3). The discrimination of Sunnis by Maliki and the omnipresent threat and violence of Shia militias led to resentment among Sunnis (Al-Qarawee, 2014, p. 6). Moreover, Al-Qarawee writes that the sectarian tensions was aggravated by populists on both sides: *"Sectarianism has become an instrument used by political entrepreneurs, with mutual suspicions and communal mobilization influencing the behaviour of a political elite looking to create constituencies and rally popular support"* (p. 3). As a response, Sunni extremist groups emerged, notably Al Qaida in Iraq (AQI) who exerted violence on the Shia population, writes Ivan Gospodinov (The Sunni Tribes of Iraq, 2015, pp. 23-26). The Sunni-Shia tensions soared and resulted in a civil war between 2006-2007 (Al-Qarawee, 2014, p. 9). Eventually even most Sunnis were repelled by AQI's violence and with the help of the US they minimalized the extremist group (Gospodinov, 2015, pp. 27-51). The conflict scaled down, but the resentment of Maliki's government and its unwillingness to integrate Sunnis remained, according to a report of the Finnish Immigration Service (Security Situation in Baghdad: The Shia Militias, 2015, p. 2). Therefore, history repeated itself when Maliki's government violently dissolved mostly peaceful anti-government protests by Sunnis between 2011 and 2013 (Al-Qarawee, 2014, pp. 10-11). Michael Totten writes that through these actions Maliki once again drove many Sunnis in the hands of extremists, notably Islamic State (IS) (Totten, 2015, pp. 21-22). The situation was illustrated by the leader of Iraq's largest Sunni tribe, who stated in The Telegraph that he would support IS until Maliki would resign, since he regarded Maliki as a greater threat than IS (Suleimani, 2014).



As a result, IS advanced on Iraqi territory, aided by dissatisfied Sunni tribes and former Baath officials (Al-Qarawee, 2014, p. 11). The group humiliated the Iraqi army and captured the megacity of Mosul in June 2014 (Finnish Immigration Service, 2015, p. 2). Mansour and Jabar write for the Carnegie Middle East Center that the collapse of the Iraqi armed forces resulted in an explosive growth of Shia militias in order to fill the security vacuum (The Popular Mobilization Forces and Iraq's Future, 2017). Aided by the powerful Shia militias, the Iraqi government started a campaign against IS (Mansour & Jabar, 2017). Al-Qarawee writes that the struggle of the Shia militias and Shia-dominated Iraqi army against the Sunni Arab insurgency has sharpened the sectarian tensions between the two branches of Islam (2014, pp. 8-11). In 2014 IS controlled almost 50% of the Iraqi territory, ever since then the caliphate of the Islamic State has been steadily reduced, according to Stanford University (The Islamic State, 2017). Most of IS' strongholds in Iraq have been reclaimed; especially the liberation of the major city Mosul in June 2017 was an important victory (Washington Post, 2017). On December 9th 2017, the Iraqi Prime Minister Haider al-Abadi declared the final victory over Islamic State in Iraq (Reuters, 2017). However, it is estimated that there are still small pockets of IS fighter in the Iraqi desert that are capable of waging a guerrilla war (Reuters, 2017).

The situation of Iraq since 2003 shows the memory of conflict and violence described by Daniel Byman (Divided they stand lessons about partition from Iraq and Lebanon, 2007, p. 2). The new Shia government mistreated the Sunnis, which resulted in the rise of Sunni insurgents and subsequently a low-level sectarian war described above. The Sunnis were sensitive to their security at the hands of the new Shia government. Maliki's government mistreated the 'defeated' Sunnis, who lost their long-time domination of the central rule in Iraq (Byman, 2007, p. 2). The insurgency of Sunni Islamists and former Baathists triggered the fears of the Shia, of whom many had long-standing grievances under the Sunni-dominated Baath rule, which will be elaborated on in the historic section. As a consequence, many Shia began mobilizing in preparation for a conflict, which started a chain reaction that led to the sectarian civil war between the Sunnis and Shia in 2006-2007. The situation reflects the security dilemma as described by i.a. Posen, Jervis and Kaufmann (Jervis, 1978, pp. 169-170; Posen, 1993, pp. 27-29; Kaufmann C. , A Security Dilemma: Ethnic Partitioning in Iraq, 2007, p. 47). This cycle was repeated when Maliki's government once again discriminated and mistreated Sunnis between 2011 and 2013, which reignited the Sunni insurgency. It seems that the Sunni support for IS, was in the first place political, namely a sign of protest against the sectarian government. The Iraqi army was humiliated by Islamic State, communal groups mobilized to fill the security vacuum, and



consequently sectarian violence increased. This vicious cycle shows that the communal groups in Iraq are highly sensitive to their security and are therefore likely to pick-up their arms again (Byman, 2007, p. 2). It shows that the mistreatment and memory of violence, for both Shia and Sunnis, keeps the groups mistrustful of each other and limits communal cooperation (Byman, 2007, p. 2). Thus far, Byman’s statement seems to fit the situation in Iraq since 2003: “when winners and losers of communal conflicts remain together in one state, both repressive government and continued violence are common” (Byman, 2007, p. 2).

5.1.2. Ethno-religious division

Iraq has a population of approximately 38 million people and houses many different ethnicities, religions and sects, according to the CIA World Factbook (The World Factbook: Iraq, 2017).

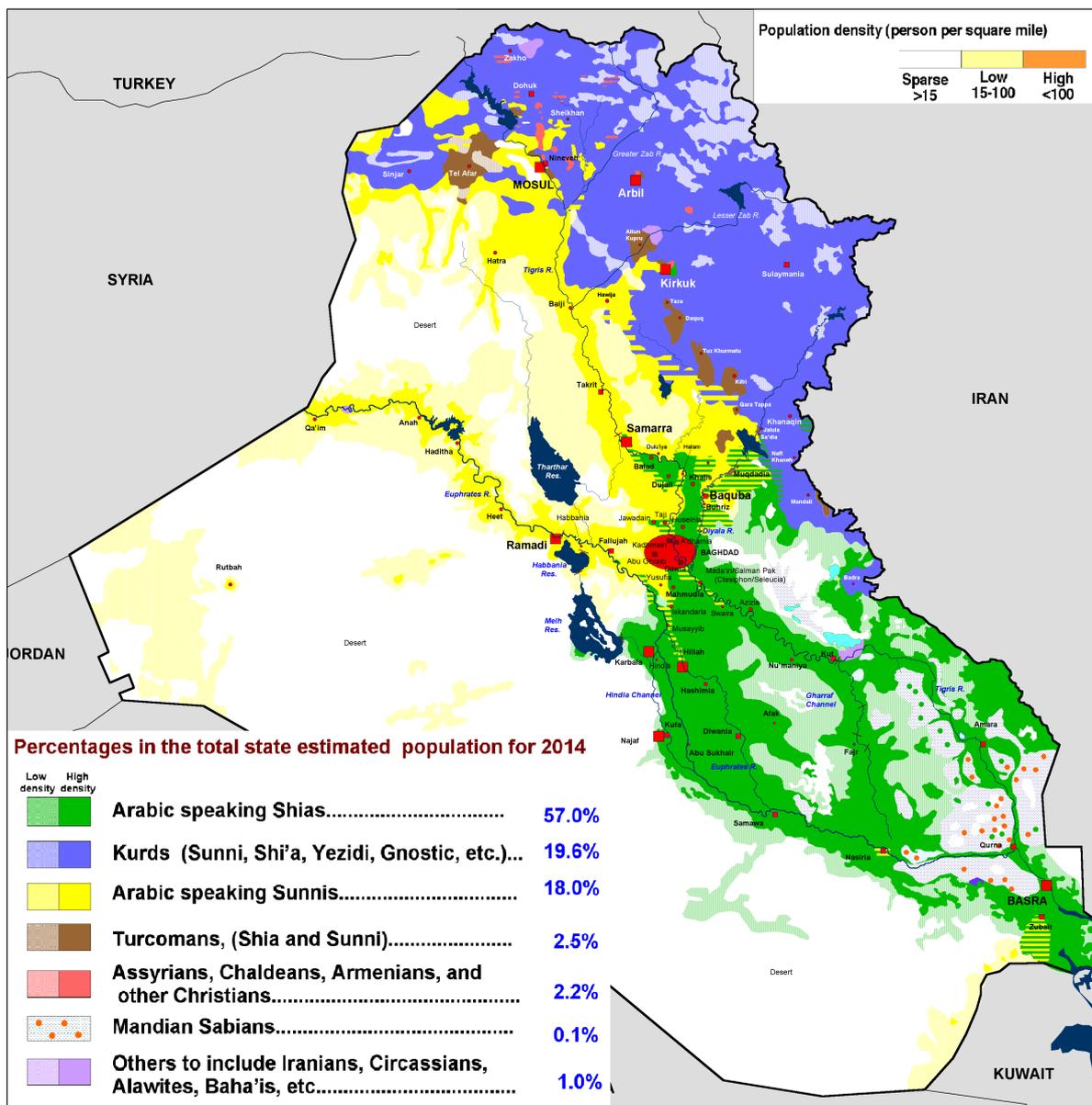


Figure 1: Ethno-religious composition of Iraq in 2014 (Izady M. , 2017)



75 to 80% of its population are ethnically Arab, 15-20% are Kurd, and the remaining 5% are Turkmen, Assyrian and others (CIA, 2017). 99% of the Iraqis are Muslim and 1% are mainly Christians and Gnostic sects (CIA, 2017). Of the 99% Muslims, 55-60% belong to the Shia-sect, whereas 40% are Sunni (CIA, 2017). The ethno-religious complexities of Iraq are displayed in Figure 1 above by Mehrdad Izady for the Gulf/2000 project of i.a. Columbia University and The Middle East Institute (2017). The map clearly shows that Iraq is a giant melting pot of different ethnicities, religions and sects. The largest ethno-religious groups are the Kurds in the north (blue), the Sunni Arabs in the centre (yellow) and the Shia Arabs in the south (green). Additionally, there are numerous enclaves of religious and ethnic minorities scattered all over Iraq (Izady M. , 2017).

An important factor of Iraq is the division of the Sunni and Shia sect. The split between the two largest sects in Islam occurred in the 7th century, according to The Economist (Sunnis and Shias: Does it have to be war?, 2006). The Economist conveys that there are few ideological differences between the Sunni and Shia sect, in fact the split has more to do with politics than with doctrine (2006). Whenever conflict arose between Sunnis and Shia, it was usually due to the fact that religion and politics were brought together (The Economist, 2006). The Sunni stronghold in the Middle East is Saudi Arabia (SA), along with other Gulf States and Turkey, whereas the Shia-stronghold is Iran (The Economist, 2006). The Iraqi Kurds are Sunni as well, yet they have a distinct ethnic- and national identity that differentiates them from the Sunni Arabs, state Anderson and Stansfield in *The Future of Iraq: Dictatorship, Democracy or Division?* (2004, p. 26). Throughout most of the last fourteen centuries, the Sunnis and Shia lived together peacefully, according to experts of the Council on Foreign Relations (The Sunni-Shia Divide, 2016).

Along ethnic lines, the division between the Kurds and Arabs is an essential element. Experts of the Council on Foreign Relations state that approximately 8 million Kurds live in the Northern provinces of Iraq, led by the Kurdish Regional Government (KRG) (The Time of the Kurds, 2017). The so-called Iraqi Kurdistan is a *de facto* autonomous state since October 1991 (Council on Foreign Relations, 2017). The Iraqi Kurds have a strong national identity with a desire for independence, which emerged in the 20th century (Council on Foreign Relations, 2017). Throughout the fight against IS the Kurdish armed forces, the Peshmerga, have been an important partner to the anti-IS coalition, writes Thomas Gibbons-Neff for the Washington Post (Inside the Kurdish fighting forces: the U.S.'s proxy ground troops in the war against ISIS, 2016). The Kurdish desire for independence has always been opposed by Iraq's central government in



Baghdad: especially the determination of exact borders and control over disputed areas are sensitive issues (Council on Foreign Relations, 2017). In addition to the Sunni-Shia and Arab-Kurd divide, there are numerous ethno-religious minorities in Iraq. Most minorities are persecuted, according to Human Rights Watch (HRW) (At a Crossroads, 2011). In early 2011, HRW reported attacks on Christians, Yazidis and Shabak by armed groups (At a Crossroads, 2011). These minorities enjoyed relative protection under the predominantly secular rule of Saddam Hussein's Baath party (HRW, 2011). However, HRW argues that the attacks on Christians and other minorities are not just driven by ethno-religious motives: "*Organized criminals sometimes faked a jihadist identity to mask a real motive of extortion and thievery.*" (2011).

5.1.3. Militias

An apparent display of Iraq's current ethno-religious division is its militias. Mansour and Jabar convey for the Carnegie Middle East Center that the militias have strongly emerged following the US-led invasion in 2003 and acquired a prominent role after the collapse of the Iraqi army against the militants of IS in 2014 (The Popular Mobilization Forces and Iraq's Future, 2017). In a response to the threat of IS, the Popular Mobilization Force (PMF) was formed in order to fill the security vacuum left by the Iraqi army (Mansour & Jabar, 2017). The majority of the PMF fighters are Shia, loyal to Iraqi or Iranian Shia leaders, whereas a smaller margin of the PMF consists of Sunni, Assyrian, Yazidi and Turkmen factions (Mansour & Jabar, 2017). The identity of Shia militias is built on Shia religious symbolism, the narrative of victimhood under the Sunni-dominated Baath regime and the present threat of the Sunni extremists as IS, according to Ranj Alaaldin (How to resolve Iraq's Shiite militia problem, 2016).

The militias are both praised for their fight against IS, as well as criticized for their lawlessness and lack of accountability (Mansour & Jabar, 2017). In fact, there are accounts of possible war crimes committed by militias of the PMF, particularly by Shia factions against Sunni Arabs, according to HRW (Iraq: Possible War Crimes by Shia Militia, 2016). According to the report '*Absolute impunity: Militia rule in Iraq*' by Amnesty International, the Shia militias are kidnapping, extorting, torturing and executing Sunni Iraqis (2014). Amnesty concludes: "*The existence of these sectarian, unregulated and unaccountable militias is both a cause and a result of the country's growing insecurity and instability*" (2014). The PMF has played an important role in fighting IS and protecting mainly the Shia-majority areas of Iraq (Mansour & Jabar, 2017). However, now the fight against IS is reaching an end, it is uncertain what the future role of the PMF will be (Mansour & Jabar, 2017). The rise of militias shows the existence of the security dilemma, which



occurred when the weakness of the Iraqi government fostered an anarchic-like environment (Posen, 1993, pp. 27-29). As a result, the Shia and Sunni Arabs, as well as small minorities, fell back on their own resources for security (Posen, 1993, pp. 27-29; Byman, 2007, p. 10).

Many militias and their linked political movements existed long before the US-led invasion, but were forbidden and repressed by the Baath regime, according to Anderson and Stansfield (The future of Iraq: dictatorship, democracy, or division, 2004, pp. 124-137). However, with the fall of the Baath regime in 2003, these groups re-emerged as influential actors and sharpened the sectarian tensions (Anderson & Stansfield, 2004, pp. 124-137). Especially certain Shia militias initiated an ethnic cleansing of Baghdadi neighbourhoods between 2006 and 2007, according to Hagan et al. (Neighborhood Sectarian Displacement and the Battle for Baghdad., 2015). Within a short time-span, more than ten Baghdadi neighbourhoods that used to be mixed were turned into homogenous Shia areas (Hagan et al., 2015, pp. 10-11). This evolution of segregation is strikingly visible in Figure 2 by Michael Izady for the Gulf/2000 project below (2017).

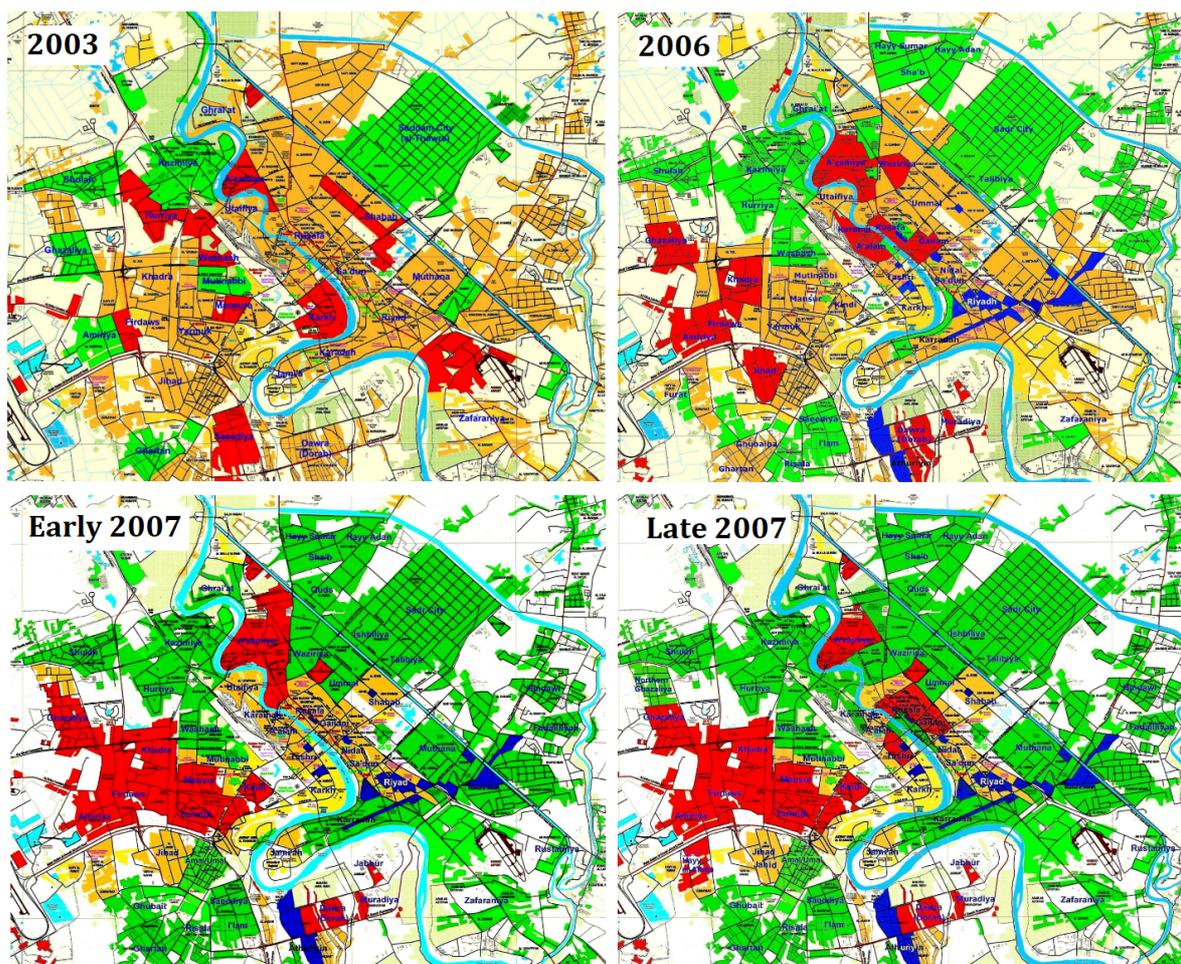


Figure 2: Ethno-religious composition of Baghdad 2003-2007 (Izady M. , 2017)

In the map, the colour green stands for neighbourhoods with a Shia majority, red for a Sunni majority, orange for mixed areas and blue for Christian communities. As a result of the actions of the Shia militias, Baghdad is now a predominantly Shia city (80-85%) (Finnish Immigration Service, 2015, p. 2). The segregation of Baghdad corresponds with aspects of the security dilemma. Chaim Kaufmann wrote that once war mobilized groups, the conflict would not cease until the population was divided into defensible, mostly homogenous regions. (Possible and Impossible Solutions to Ethnic Civil Wars, 1996, p. 150). In Baghdad, it appears that the communal Shia, Sunni or Christian identity was not a matter of choice; it was enforced by armed members of the enemy communities (Kaufmann C. , A Security Dilemma: Ethnic Partitioning in Iraq, 2007, p. 45).

5.2. Syria

5.2.1. Stability

Syria has been in the grip of a vicious civil war since 2011 (The World Factbook: Syria, CIA, 2017). As part of the Arab Spring that swept the Middle East and North Africa, there were anti-government protests as of March 2011 (CIA, 2017). These protests were violently repressed by the government of Bashar al-Assad, which eventually resulted in the start of the Syrian Civil War (CIA, 2017). The influx of external actors and the fragmentation of the opposition have made the war increasingly complex (BBC, 2016).

The opposition against the Syrian regime consists of numerous, predominantly Sunni Arab, opposition groups, according to experts of the Council on Foreign Relations (Who's Who in Syria's Civil War, 2017). At the start of the Syrian Civil War, the moderate Free Syrian Army (FSA) was the most influential group, according to Aron Lund (Syrian Jihadism, 2012, pp. 17-21). In the course of the Syrian Civil War, the Islamist groups became stronger and absorbed many FSA factions (Stanford University, 2017; Lund, Syrian Jihadism, 2012, pp. 44-45). Lund explains that Islamism is politicized Islam; meaning that Islamists want to establish a religious state based on the orthodox Islamic Sharia law (Syrian Jihadism, 2012, p. 4). The emergence of the Islamist rebels was enabled through extensive funding by donors from mainly Saudi Arabia, Qatar and Turkey, and secondly by an influx of foreign fighters (Lund, Syrian Jihadism, 2012, pp. 18, 21). However, Lund elaborates that Islamism does not particularly drive the rebellion against the Syrian regime; Islamism is simply an "*important common denominator*" among the predominantly conservative Sunni Arab rebels (2012, p. 10). In the course of the Syrian Civil War, the Islamic State became the most prominent actor due to their military success (Stanford University, 2017). However, since 2015 IS has been effectively decimated by several actors in both Syria and Iraq, with support of



the international anti-IS coalition (BBC, 2016). According to Mattisan Rowan of the Wilson Center, the Al Qaida-linked organization Hay'at Tahrir al-Sham (HTS) is now the strongest opposition force and operates mainly in the Idlib region in Northwest Syria (Rowan, 2017).

On the side of the Syrian regime the most important force is the government's Syrian Arab Army (SAA) (Council on Foreign Relations, 2017). Secondly, the regime is supported by countless domestic and foreign groups, according to Aron Lund in the article 'Who are the Pro-Assad Militias?' for the Carnegie Middle East Center (2015). Among these domestic groups there are i.a. Alawi, Christian, Palestinian and Druze militias, as well as factions of certain Sunni Arab tribes (Lund, Who Are the Pro-Assad Militias?, 2015). Additionally, there are several foreign Shia militias from mainly Iraq, Iran, Afghanistan and Lebanon (*Hezbollah*) fighting for Assad (Lund, Who Are the Pro-Assad Militias?, 2015). Furthermore, Assad's regime receives vast financial and military support from its allies Russia and Iran (Council on Foreign Relations, 2017).

The Kurds of Northern Syria are a third party within the Syrian Civil War. They have always had a troubled relation with the Syrian regime (Council on Foreign Relations, 2017). Glenn E. Robinson argues in his article *Syria's Long Civil War* in *Current History* that the ruling Baath party of the Assad's has a pan-Arab nationalist ideology, which could not count on the support of the ethnic Kurds (2012, p. 333). However, the Kurds realized that an Islamist regime would not likely support their Kurdish rights either (Robinson, 2012, p. 333). Therefore, at the start of the Syrian War, they negotiated the peaceful withdrawal of the SAA from Kurdish areas and have practically established an autonomous homeland in North-Syria (Robinson, 2012, p. 333). Barak Barfi writes for the Baker Institute that the Syrian Kurds have become an important ally of the US in the fight against IS (An Uncertain Future for Syria's Kurds, 2017). Aron Lund elaborates in *News Deeply* that the US is arming and supporting the Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF), which is an umbrella organization consisting of Arab, Assyrian and predominantly Kurdish fighters (Origins of the Syrian Democratic Forces: A Primer, 2016). The dominant force among the Syrian Kurds is the Syrian Kurdish Democratic Union Party (PYD) (Barfi, 2017). The relationship between the Syrian regime and the Kurds is ambiguous. Fehim Tastekin states for *Al Monitor* that there have been minor clashes, as well as cooperation between the Syrian army and the SDF (What's brewing between the Kurds, Syrian regime?, 2016).



5.2.2. Ethno-religious division

Syria houses numerous ethnicities, sects and religions, which is clearly visible in Figure 3 of Michael Izady for the Gulf/2000 project below (2017). The demographic composition of Syria is complex, since ethnic, sectarian and religious structures are strongly mingled (The Gulf/2000 Project, 2017). It has to be taken into account that data on Syria's demographics vary immensely and is somewhat out-dated due to the war.

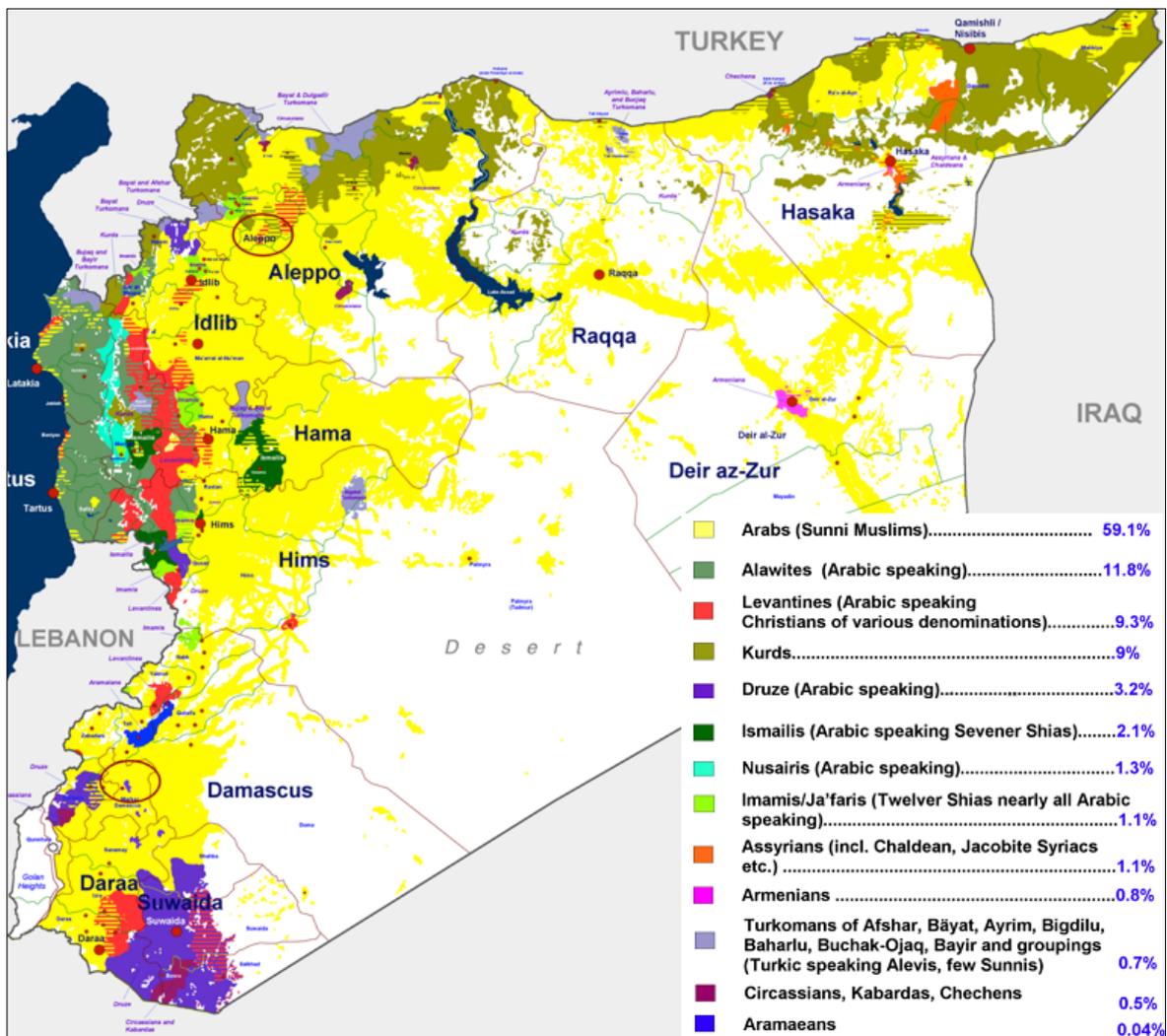


Figure 3: Ethno-religious composition of Syria in 2010 (Izady M. , 2017)

The majority of Syrians (59%) are Sunni Muslim Arabs who live predominantly in the east, centre and major cities of Syria (The Gulf/2000 Project, 2017). The Sunni Arabs were the rulers of Syria throughout most of its history (Talhamy, 2009). The second group are the Arab-speaking Alawis (12%) situated in the coastal area, as well as in certain neighbourhoods of large cities (The Gulf/2000 Project, 2017). The Syrian regime has been dominated by Alawis since the 1960s (Sahner, 2014, pp. 104-109). Christian Sahner stresses in his book *Among the ruins: Syria past and present* that Alawism is a small rather secular branch of Shi'ism that includes elements of

Christianity and Gnosticism, and is regarded heretical by many Sunni Muslims (2014, pp. 34, 86-87). Yvette Talhamy writes that the successive Sunni rulers in Syria therefore maltreated the Alawis (Talhamy, 2009, pp. 563-564). Thirdly, there are the Arab-speaking Christians, who make up roughly 10% of the Syrian population (The Gulf/2000 Project, 2017). In addition to the Arab-speaking Christians, there are ethnic Armenians (0,8%) and Assyrians (1,1%), who are Christians as well (The Gulf/2000 Project, 2017; CIA, 2017). Syrian Christians tend to congregate in certain cities and rural areas, mainly in West-Syria (Sahner, 2014, p. 82). The fourth group are the ethnic Kurds (9%) who are Sunni Muslim and live predominantly in North-Syria (The Gulf/2000 Project, 2017). The fifth ethno-religious group are the Druze (3-4%) who are concentrated in South-Syria (The Gulf/2000 Project, 2017). According to Mordechai Nisan in his book *Minorities in the Middle East*, the core of the Druze religion is not centred on Islamic theology, but on Gnostic belief (2002, pp. 81-82). Lastly, there are several other ethno-religious groups, e.g. the Circassians, Turkmen, Aramaeans and Ismailis, scattered over Syria in small enclaves (The Gulf/2000 Project, 2017).

5.2.3. Origins Syrian Civil War

According to Sahner and Lund the Syrian Civil War is a complex conflict that originates from socio-economic, regional, political, external and ethno-religious elements (Sahner, 2014, p. 139; Lund, *Syrian Jihadism*, 2012, p. 7). It is even argued that water shortages, in combination with an extreme drought aggravated by climate change, affected the build-up to the conflict (Gleick, 2014). Aron Lund explains that in the 2000s the Alawi-dominated regime moved away from this original base among the rural and working-class milieus and shifted its focus to the professional middle class and business groups (Lund, *Divided they stand*, 2012, p. 20). The rural and working-class population experienced Bashar al-Assad's rule mainly through a period of globalization and market reform, which pressured them and alienated them from the regime (p. 20). These elements became visible at the start of the Syrian Civil War in 2011. The protests against the regime were concentrated in rural Sunni Arab areas, and the suburbs of cities where poor rural immigrants lived (p. 31). Approximately, 1,5 million Syrians, mostly rural Sunni Arabs, had been driven to the outskirts of main cities due to the water- and climate related elements mentioned before (Gleick, 2014, p. 334). Peter Gleick therefore argues that the influx of these dissatisfied rural classes has indirectly contributed to the start of the Syrian civil war (Gleick, 2014). On the other hand, areas with a majority of ethno-religious minorities rallied behind the government, fearing an Islamist take-over (Lund, *Divided they stand*, 2012, p. 31).



Though sectarianism was not the root cause of the conflict, the sectarian tone did become stronger in the course of the war, according to Christian Sahner (2014, p. 163). Nir Rosen, a journalist who spent eight months among Syrian rebels, points out that a majority of the opposition are Sunni Muslims from conservative areas (Rosen, 2012). Even though many of them are not necessarily fighting for an Islamic theocracy, the role of Islam increased in the course of the war, and thus its sectarian character (Rosen, 2012). As Sahner states:

“What had begun as a struggle between the regime and the economically disenfranchised quickly transformed into a darker conflict between ‘Alawis, Sunnis, and their respective regional allies” (2014, p. 163).

Nevertheless, there are still Sunni Arabs that support Assad’s regime (Lund, Syrian Jihadism, 2012, p. 9). According to Lund, these are especially Sunnis from the *“urban middle class, wealthy business circles, Baath Party members, military families, favoured rural tribes, and other beneficiaries of regime patronage”* (p. 9). Thanassis Cambanis writes for Foreign Policy that the regime still relies on Sunnis to fill its army’s ranks (Assad’s Sunni Foot Soldiers, 2015). Moreover, the interference of external actors aggravated the Syrian War. To a large degree the conflict has become a Sunni-Shia proxy war between predominantly Iran and SA, as well as a power struggle between the US and Russia (Lund, Syrian Jihadism, 2012, p. 7).

Based on Barry Posen’s theory it seems that there is a security dilemma in Syria, since the regime’s weakness fostered an anarchic-like environment with countless militias. What stands out is that these militias are mostly organized along communal identities. These are mainly ethno-religious identities, although the exceptions are tribal factions or militias from a certain neighbourhood or village. Moreover, the opposition is virtually exclusively Sunni Arab. This corresponds with Chaim Kaufmann’s statement that the division and mobilization of communal groups often occurs along ethno-religious lines (Kaufmann C. , 2007, p. 47). However, the militias of these communal groups do not necessarily function as a ‘miniature international system’ as Kaufmann argues. In fact, the militias are either with or against the Syrian government, with the exception of Rojava’s militias united under the SDF-umbrella. Moreover, the regime’s Alawi-dominated Syrian Arab Army still includes Sunnis, as well as elements from other ethno-religious groups.



6. What are the historical elements that contributed to the current political situation and ethno-religious division in Iraq and Syria?

6.1. Syria

Present-day Syria has longstanding history and has seen many varying rulers that have turned it into a highly diverse country (Among the Ruins: Syria past and present, Sahner, 2014, p. 6). Sahner writes that Syrian society was, and is, divided by linguistic, regional and sectarian differences, resulting in tensions (2014, p. 11). He states: *“These tensions created a stunning array of “micro-climates” in Syria, but they also made it a difficult place to rule”* (p 11). Iraq and Syria were both part of the Ottoman Empire, although they were divided into several *vilayets* (provinces) (Visser, 2008, pp. 97-99; Sahner, 2014, p. 88). When the Ottoman Empire collapsed after World War I, Great Britain and France signed the Sykes-Picot Agreement in which France would attain control over Greater Lebanon and Syria (Anderson & Stansfield, 2004, p. 14). Throughout most of Syria’s history the greatest marker of identity was religion (McHugo, 2015, p. 5). However, in the 19th and 20th century, Arab nationalism became an important element in Syria and other Arab countries (Sahner, 2014, p. 97). In 1934, the Arab Baath Movement was founded, with the goal of facilitating the creation of a pan-Arab state and to promote the Arab culture without distinction between Sunnis, Shia, Christians or Jews (pp. 102-103). Islam had an important position in the Baath ideology because of its connection with the Arab culture, yet overall the ideology had an openly secular worldview (p. 103).

In 1946 Syria became independent of France, yet the first decade of its independence was marked with instability and coups, writes Gordon Torrey (The Role of the Military in Syria, 1963, p. 115). In this period, the Syrian Army and the Baath party both grew stronger and they became interconnected, according to Amos Perlmutter (From Obscurity To Rule: the Syrian Army and the Ba'th Party, 1969, p. 834). The Alawis, Druze and other minorities already had a long military history; which was a legacy of France’s creation of the Syrian national army that gave these sidelined minorities an opportunity for social advancement, writes Gordon Torrey (The Role of the Military in Syria, 1963, p. 54). As a consequence, the Druze and especially the Alawis had a proportionally high representation in the army’s officer corps (Perlmutter, 1969, p. 834). This trend continued, and in the course of the 1960’s the Alawis dominated the high command of the Baath-connected Syrian army (Perlmutter, 1969, p. 834). As a result, the coup of 1970 propelled the Alawi Hafez al-Assad to become the first Alawi ruler in the history of Syria (Sahner, 2014, p.



136). Many Sunnis feared the rule of the heretic Alawi as the champion of the practically atheistic Baath ideology (pp. 135-136). Sahner writes that Hafez tried to calm the fears of Sunnis with public gestures and the construction of alliances with prominent Sunnis (pp. 135-136). However, the objections of Sunni Islamists did not abate and eventually they fought a violent civil war with the regime in the 1980s (pp. 135-136). Through carefully orchestrated political moves, Hafez managed to incorporate Alawism as part of the Shia branch, despite their theological differences (p. 137). Eventually the regime even gained support of several credible Sunni religious leaders (pp. 137-138). However, the regime was never able to overcome the negative perception of Sunni Islamists and Syria's poorer classes, who had suffered from the government's flawed economic and political reforms (p. 139).

When Hafez died in 2000, he was succeeded by his son Bashar al-Assad (Sahner, 2014, p. 124). Sahner writes that despite Bashar's liberal allure, he continued the autocratic rule of his father (p. 124). Nevertheless, there were hopes in the West that Bashar would be milder than his father, and some politicians even labelled him a reformer (pp. 126, 127). However, this all changed in 2011 when the Syrian regime violently cracked down on anti-government protests throughout the country (pp. 127, 128). According to Christian Sahner, the Alawi-dominated regime had always *"cultivated the support of other minorities"* to neutralize the strength of the Sunni majority (p. 61). As a consequence of this minority politics, the Christians, Ismailis, Druze and Shia experienced privileges unlike their counterparts elsewhere in the Middle East (p. 61). Sahner stresses that the Assad regime needed the minorities to maintain its grip on power, while the minorities needed the regime for the protection of their freedom and privileges (p. 61). However, Sahner writes that the mutual beneficial relationship waned in the course of the Syrian Civil War, in which *"the fighting has become polarized over the issue of sect"* (p. 109). The regime's opposition has become harsher than ever and is dominated by Sunni Islamist groups, funded by foreign Sunni donors (p. 109). At the same time, the Syrian regime has become more reliant on its Alawi base and its militias, supported by Shia allies (p. 109). Therefore, Christian Sahner conveys: *"As a result of all this, among the great tragedies of the Syrian uprising has been the disappearance of a notionally inclusive nationalist ideology"* (p. 109). He concludes that the conflict has not created, but exposed the most fundamental sectarian divide between the Sunni majority and the ruling Alawi (p. 109). Nevertheless, as mentioned before, most minorities still somewhat support the regime out of fear of an Islamist take-over (Lund, *Divided they stand*, 2012, p. 31).



6.2. Iraq

In the Sykes-Picot agreement, Britain acquired a mandate over the former vilayets of Baghdad, Basra and Mosul, creating the state of Iraq (Anderson & Stansfield, 2004, p. 6). Though the British established the borders of present-day Iraq, the historian Reidar Visser points out that it was not an artificial creation, since Iraq had existed roughly as an entity for centuries (Historical Myths of a Divided Iraq, 2008, pp. 95,100). In 20th century Iraq, the Basra region was predominantly inhabited by Shia Arabs, the Baghdad region mainly by Sunni Arabs and the Mosul area mainly by Kurds (Anderson & Stansfield, 2004, p. 6). Visser argues that throughout Iraq's history there was seldom ethno-sectarian conflict or political division (2008, pp. 102-103). He elaborates: *"The various subunits that emerged in Iraqi administrative history were consistently non-sectarian and non-ethnic in character"* (p. 100). The only exception was the rise of Kurdish nationalism in the 20th century (p. 103).

The British installed the Iraqi Monarchy under the rule of the Sunni Arab King Faisal Hussein (Anderson & Stansfield, 2004, p. 15). Iraq had all the official characteristics of a modern state, but behind the scenes the country was controlled by a system of British advisors who ensured Britain's interests (p. 16). Moreover, the power of the British military was necessary to guarantee security within Iraq (p. 16). In 1932 Iraq gained formal independence, yet there was still a far-reaching influence of the British (Anderson & Stansfield, 2004, p. 17). According to Anderson and Stansfield, an important characteristic of the 38 years-lasting Hashemite Kingdom was the disproportional dominance of Sunni Arabs, even though Sunni Arabs comprised only 20% of Iraq's total population (pp. 19-20). Moreover, the British actively used the country's tribal structure for political purposes (pp. 20-21). Most importantly they managed to drive a wedge between the Shia tribal leaders and the Shia religious leaders in the South, thereby effectively preventing the emergence of a unified Shia majority (p. 21). Anderson and Stansfield state that one of the key characteristics of the Hashemite Monarchy was the British use of violence against the revolting Shia and Kurds, to maintain order (p. 24). The Kurds were not willing to participate in the new Iraqi state and fought the central rule (p. 26). As Stansfield and Anderson state: *"The Kurds have a distinct historical, cultural, and linguistic identity that resolutely refuses to be assimilated into something broader"* (p. 26).

According to Anderson and Stansfield, the death of King Faisal in 1933 resulted in the dwindling of Iraq's political fabric; there were many coups and *"violent transfers of power became the rule rather than the exception"* (2004, p. 18). Eventually, in 1958, the rule of the Hashemite Kingdom



under British supervision was violently terminated through a coup (pp. 18,25). The turbulent period that followed (1958-1968) was marked with violence (p. 47). During this period, the Kurdish struggle for independence evolved into a serious military conflict (p. 44). Neither violence nor negotiation seemed to resolve the 'Kurdish issue' (p. 45). Within the 1958-1968 period, the real power was in the hands of the Iraqi army, although the secular Arab-nationalist Baath Party was effective in infiltrating this institute (p. 37). Eventually, the Baath party took control of Iraq in 1968 (p. 40). Although there were exceptions, the Sunni Arabs dominated the Baath government and its most prominent leader was Saddam Hussein (pp. 51,58,63,66). Through good governance the Baath Party created a well-educated population and Iraq became the most developed country in the Arab world (p. 81). Anderson and Stansfield state that the achievements of the Baath regime were unprecedented, since it for the first time managed to integrate the majority of the Shia Arabs (p. 79). Throughout his rule, Saddam Hussein increasingly used Iraq's tribal structures to govern the country; a technique he had borrowed from the British (p. 107). Through this practice Saddam created a network of small 'fiefdoms' with their tribal chief as leader, largely legitimated by the central government (p. 112). As for the Kurds, Saddam Hussein negotiated a peace agreement in 1970. However, this agreement was never implemented (p. 52). Saddam started 'Arabizing' the oil-rich Kurdish city of Kirkuk by offering financial benefits to Arabs that moved there, in an attempt to change the ethnic-makeup of the valuable city (p. 53). Eventually the tensions evolved into a full-scale war in 1974 (p. 56). With regard to the Shia, Anderson and Stansfield convey that Saddam used a tactic of 'terror and enticement' (p. 54). He enticed the masses of ordinary Shia through a more equal spread of wealth and power, whereas he reserved terror for the radical Shia religious leaders who had the potential to influence the Shia masses (pp. 53-54). The Shia party *al-Da'wa* organized a violent struggle against the ruling secular Baath regime, aiming to impose an Islamic state (p. 53). Moreover, the Iranian leader Khomeini increased tensions by financing radical Shia Islamist groups in Iraq (p. 73). After several attacks by Al-Da'wa, the infuriated Saddam executed or imprisoned and executed numerous Shia leaders and deported approximately 40,000 Shia with a suspected link to Iran (p. 73).

The Islamic revolution in Iran of 1979 triggered enmities between Iraq and Iran (Anderson & Stansfield, 2004, p. 60). After a chain reaction of hostilities, a full-scale war erupted between the two countries, which lasted from 1980 till 1988 (pp. 60-61). The war devastated Iraq, resulting in over 200,000 deaths and a tremendous financial burden (pp. 61-62). However, the war did display a remarkable unity between the Shia and Sunni Arabs against the Shia 'Persian' enemy (p. 80). Anderson and Stansfield write that it was not necessarily a proof of the Shia Arab's loyalty to the



Baath regime. It simply showed that either ethnic bonds were stronger than sectarian identities or that the Iraqis had developed some sense of Iraqi nationalism (p. 80). On the other hand, the Iraq-Iran War displayed that the Kurds were willing to side with any external party to fight for their independence, since they used the opportunity to rebel against the Iraqi government with the help of i.a. Israel and the US (p. 80). Saddam responded viciously to the Kurdish betrayal by initiating the infamous al-Anfal Campaign (p. 72). In the Anfal Campaign (1987-1989) estimates are that 4000 Kurdish villages were destroyed, half a million Kurds were forced to relocate and 50,000 to 180,000 Kurds were killed (Anderson & Stansfield, 2004, p. 72; Associated Press, 2006).

In 1990, Saddam invaded the wealthy Kuwait, mainly as a *“response to his country’s dire economic situation”* due to the devastating Iraq-Iran War (Anderson & Stansfield, 2004, p. 83). Kuwait fell within a day; however, it was liberated several months later in 1991 by a US-led coalition force that crushed the Iraqi army in the so-called ‘Gulf War’ (pp. 87-88). The Iraqi defeat in the Gulf War instigated Shia uprisings in South-Iraq, which were suppressed by predominantly Sunni security forces (pp. 100, 109-110). Anderson and Stansfield write that the Shia uprising showed that the sense of unity among Sunnis and Shia was fragile (pp. 109-110). However, the writers emphasize that the main conflicts between the Iraqi Shia and Sunni were not doctrinal, but historical and political (p. 110). They state that the Shia were always subordinate to the Sunni Arab rulers, and in times of war the Sunni commanded and the Shia were cannon fodder (p. 110). As for the Kurds, they tried to exploit the weakness of Iraqi regime after the Gulf War and once again rebelled against the central rule (p. 7). However, this revolt was once brutally crushed by Iraqi troops, until the US and Britain intervened by establishing a no-fly zone in North-Iraq (p. 7). Anderson and Stansfield write that with the protection of the no-fly zone and an income from their oilfields, the Kurds were effectively no longer participants in the Iraqi state (pp. 7, 101).

The Gulf War was followed with twelve years of UN sanctions that devastated Iraq’s civilian population (Anderson & Stansfield, 2004, pp. 98-99). The last 20 years of Baath rule were disastrous for Iraq, as Sandra Mackey stresses: *“Two decades of war, deprivation, and the indifference of the world have destroyed the social fabric. Now everyone thinks of himself.”* (Mackey, 2003, p. 260). Anderson and Stansfield write that when in 2003 an US-led coalition invaded Iraq on basis of the alleged production of Weapons of Mass Destruction, Iraq had already become a failed state that could not cater the basic needs of its population (pp. 84,98-99). Nevertheless, the writers conclude that throughout most of his rule, Saddam was genuinely popular among most ordinary Iraqis (p. 81). Although this excluded the Kurds, who were cruelly



suppressed in especially the Anfal Campaign, which might have indefinitely alienated them from the Iraqi state (p. 81). The political, social and economic successes of Saddam and the Baath party were eradicated in the latter years of the Baath rule (pp. 114-115). Anderson and Stansfield argue that the ethnic Arab-Kurdish divide became unbridgeable and the influence of Shia religious leaders increased, sharpening sectarian tensions (pp. 114-115). The writers conclude that the inheritance of Saddam and the Baath Party was a *“highly traumatized and divided society”, “riddled with booby-traps for any organization attempting to promote a sustainable cohesive Iraqi state governed by democratic institutions”* (pp. 114-115).

To summarize, both Iraq and Syria have had a turbulent history as subjects of ancient empires and rulers who formed the identity of the countries, creating immensely diverse cultures and societies. It stands out that Iraq and Syria have only been fully independent for several decades and did therefore not yet develop a strong national identity. In both countries, the secular pan-Arabist Baath party infiltrated the army and subsequently rose to power. In Syria, the Alawi minority dominated the Baath government, whereas in Iraq the Sunni Arab minority was the dominant force. The Baath rulers managed to establish relatively stable and successful states, fending off coups and foreign influence. In order to achieve this, the rulers were ruthless and authoritarian. Both regimes were fairly secular and therefore minorities experienced freedom unlike their counterparts in most other countries in the Middle East. Syria and Iraq were consistently challenged by radical Islamic elements from within that detested the secular rule by a numerical minority. However, for decades the Baath regimes were able to resist the Shia and Sunni Islamists, at times with brutal violence. In both Iraq and Syria, the fall of the Baath regimes cleared the way for a chaotic period of civil war, an increased politicization and influence of religion, and increased sectarianism. Both countries had to deal with a Kurdish minority, which marginally participated. The Kurdish drive for independence that emerged in the 20th century caused them to revolt against their rulers in Syria and especially Iraq. The Syrian and Iraqi government on their turn discriminated the troublesome Kurds. It stands out that several sources argue that the Shia-Sunni division is not in the first place a product of ideological or doctrinal differences, and instead is the result of economic and political grievances. Although the Baath regime appeased the Shia masses with economic development, it were the same Shia that functioned as cannon fodder in the Iraq-Iran War. In Syria, the Alawis dominated the government and the Sunni Arab majority was subordinate.



7. What elements have to be regarded in reshaping Iraq and Syria along ethno-religious lines?

In this section, the chief elements will be discussed that have to be taken in account when reshaping Iraq and Syria along ethno-religious lines. These are the current situation, militias, Sunni-Shia divide, the Kurds, tribal structures, minorities and external influence.

7.1. Current situation

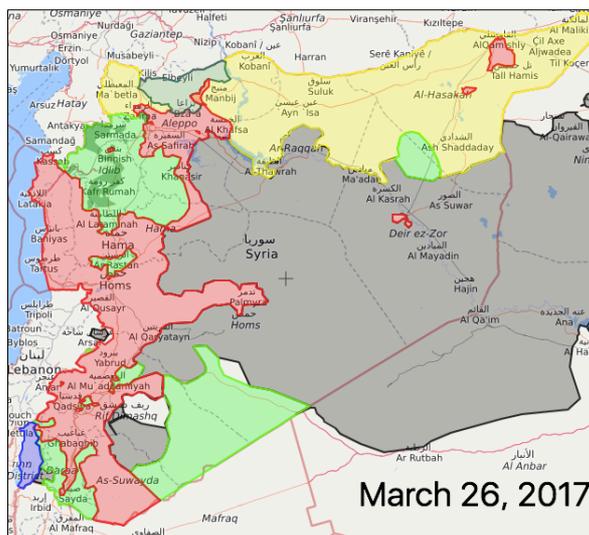


Figure 4: Live map of Syrian War on March 26, 2017 (Live Map, 2017)

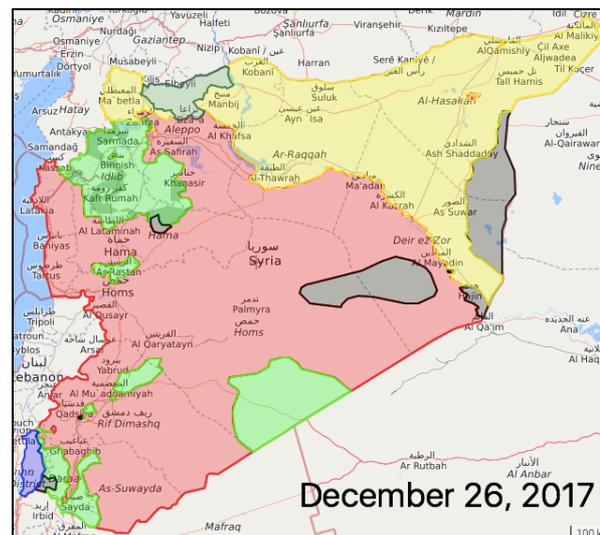


Figure 5: Live map of Syrian War on December 26, 2017 (Live Map, 2017)

Figures 4 and 5 above of *Syria Live Map*, display the territory of the different actors in the Syrian war of March 26th and December 26th this year (Live Map, 2017). The maps clearly show the immense progress made by the Syrian Regime (red), as well as the collapse of IS' territory (black) over the last nine months. The territory of the Kurdish-dominated SDF (yellow) has significantly increased as well. Moreover, the areas held by non-IS opposition groups (green), have decreased slightly (Live Map, 2017). The maps show that IS will soon be defeated militarily (Live Map, 2017). With the support of its powerful allies, Iran and Russia, the Syrian regime could likely reclaim much of the Syrian territory. However, Middle East correspondent Lorenzo Trombetta points out that IS' defeat will not eradicate the political support among the Sunni tribes in this area, that paved the way for IS' emergence in the first place (Analysis: Euphrates Fight May Beat ISIS Militarily, But Not Ideologically, 2017). Peter Wijninga, a strategic analyst at The Hague Centre for Strategic Studies, affirms this in an interview (Will the Anti-IS coalition be able to defeat IS?, 2014). Wijninga argues that the eradication of IS' public support in Syria and Iraq could easily take

two decades (2014). He compares the situation with Bosnia, stating: *“after more than twenty years there are still peacekeeping forces in Bosnia after a conflict that was regarded ‘less-complicated’ as the conflict [in Iraq and Syria]”* (2014). The rural Sunni Arab communities in East-Syria and West- and Central-Iraq are generally conservative Muslims and have an anti-Western and anti-Shia communal belief, states Trombetta (Analysis: Euphrates Fight May Beat ISIS Militarily, But Not Ideologically, 2017). Therefore, they are prone to the influence of radical Islamists (2017). According to Trombetta, the extremist insurgency will remain among the rural Sunni Arabs in Syria and Iraq, as long as their long-term political and socioeconomic grievances are not addressed (2017).

7.2. Competition for resources

Figures 4 and 5 also show a ‘race to the East’ between the SDF, supported by the US, and the Syrian regime and its allies. Both parties are advancing on IS’ territory on both sides of the river Euphrates towards the Iraqi border. Naturally, both the regime and the SDF desire to vanquish IS, although this is not necessarily the main objective (Reuters, 2017). East-Syria is the most resource-rich area of the country, harbouring numerous oilfields. This is displayed in Figure 6 below by the Financial Times that shows the oil reserves (black spots) along the Euphrates (white line) that runs from the Northwest to the Southeast on the map (Financial Times, 2016).



Figure 6: Oil reserves of East-Syria (Financial Times, 2016)

Therefore, this area is of great value to both sides. Syrian officials have specifically stated that the regime needs the oil revenues to rebuild its war-torn territory (Reuters, 2017). Robert Bates wrote that the competition for resources could be an important element in ethnic conflict (Bates,

1974). Therefore, the competition for resources between the Syrian regime and the Kurdish-dominated SDF could trigger future conflict (Reuters, 2017). However, if the two sides can agree on terms, a conflict could be averted (Reuters, 2017).

7.2. Militias

As outlined before, militias have acquired an important role in both Syria and Iraq. The militias have countless varying ethno-religious backgrounds and loyalties, which create a complex situation for future Iraq and Syria (Lund, Who Are the Pro-Assad Militias?, 2015; Mansour & Jabar, 2017). Omar Sattar states for Al Monitor that the Iraqi government intends to incorporate a significant number of the militias in the Iraqi armed forces (Why Iraq's Sunnis fear new PMU law, 2016). However, the Sunni opposition fears these will be predominantly Shia fighters; creating a Shia sectarian army, which could sharpen the sectarian tensions (Sattar, 2016). It is likely that similar issues will arise in Syria, once the civil war scales down. A Syrian official told Time magazine in 2013:

"After this crisis, there will be a 1,000 more crises—the militia leaders. Two years ago, they went from nobody to somebody with guns and power. How can we tell these shabiha (militias) to go back to being a nobody again?" (Carnegie Middle East Center, 2015).

According to Kaufmann's theory on the security dilemma, the community-divided Syria could become a miniature international system, and behave as such (Kaufmann C. , A Security Dilemma: Ethnic Partitioning in Iraq, 2007, p. 44). However, this does not necessarily result in conflict, as Byman argues that just as states in the international system are able to manage long-term rivalries without war, so could communal groups learn to overcome their security fears and live in peace (Byman, 2007, p. 11). In fact, the 'stunning array of microclimates' that Syria hosts, have been able to live rather peacefully together throughout most of its history (Sahner, 2014, p. 11). Moreover, Lund writes that the Assad government supports militia fighters and their families, and involves them in the state apparatus (Lund, Who Are the Pro-Assad Militias?, 2015). Lund argues that this policy diminishes the chances of future reintegration of opposition forces (2015). This prediction fits the theory of Daniel Byman, who states that regimes often mistreat the defeated party in communal conflicts (Byman, 2007, p. 2). Byman elaborated: *"this mistreatment, combined with the memory of violence, keeps communal groups mistrustful of each other and limits communal cooperation"* (Byman, 2007, p. 2). If Assad's benefits for pro-government militias are an indication of his post-war policy, it seems that the post-war prospects for communal



cooperation between particularly the Sunni opposition and the Syrian regime are grim. As Byman argues, repressive government and continued violence are common when winners and losers of communal conflicts remain together in one state (Byman, 2007, p. 2).

7.3. Sunni-Shia divide

Another significant element is the Sunni-Shia divide. In the first place, this is a socio-demographic element, implying the tensions between the two sects within Iraq and Syria. In Iraq, the Sunnis and Shia were not sworn enemies ideologically, but centuries of Sunni dominance have created grievances and fear among the Shia population (Anderson & Stansfield, 2004, p. 110). In Syria a similar tension exists, with the ruling Alawi, as Shia branch, pitted against a Sunni majority (Lund, *Syrian Jihadism*, 2012, pp. 7-8). However, the contrast is even greater since the rather secular Alawi have been regarded as heretics by Sunnis throughout most of Syria's history and were discriminated by Sunni rulers (Lund, *Syrian Jihadism*, 2012, p. 12).

In addition to the sectarian division on a socio-demographic level, there is also a division between the sects on a geopolitical level, convey experts for the Council on Foreign Relations (*The Sunni-Shia Divide*, 2016). This is the struggle between mainly the Shia Iran and Sunni Saudi Arabia (SA) for the leadership of Islam and power in the region (Council on Foreign Relations, 2016). This centuries-old struggle started with the rivalry between the Shia *Safavid Dynasty* in Persia and the Sunni *Ottoman Empire* in the 16th century: Their conflict settled roughly the current geographical distribution of Islam's sects in the 17th century (Council on Foreign Relations, 2016). With the Iranian Islamic Revolution in 1979, the Shia Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini reignited a politicized version of Shia Islam that is opposed by Sunnis (Council on Foreign Relations, 2016). Khomeini intended to inspire a further Islamic revival by supporting groups in countries with a sizeable Shia population, such as Iraq, Lebanon and Afghanistan. In response to Iran's transformation into a Shia power, SA started propagating the puritanical Sunni brand 'Salafism' or 'Wahhabism', which is hostile to Shia Islam (Council on Foreign Relations, 2016). Effectively, an ancient rivalry was revived (Council on Foreign Relations, 2016).

Though sectarianism definitely plays a role within the Shia-Sunni struggle, it is not always prevalent, as was displayed in the Iran-Iraq War (Council on Foreign Relations, 2016). However, wherever sectarian violence abided, confessional identity has increased (Council on Foreign Relations, 2016). This is especially the case in Iraq, where the actions of radicals on both sides resulted in a full-scale sectarian conflict (Council on Foreign Relations, 2016). Most of the recent



conflicts in the Middle East can be originated to the Saudi-Iranian power struggle (Council on Foreign Relations, 2016). In the Syrian Civil War, both Iran and SA are heavily involved through military, material or financial support (Council on Foreign Relations, 2016). Ad Melkert also places the current conflicts in Syria and Iraq in the perspective of the struggle between Iran and SA (Melkert, 2017). He stresses that the fall of Saddam Hussein paved the way for Shia dominance and subsequently Iranian influence (Melkert, 2017). Though Iraq is not a marionette of Iran, the Iranians do have extensive influence and Iraq would struggle or fall without its support (Melkert, 2017). As a consequence, Iran had established a “*corridor from Tehran to Beirut*”, which resulted in distressed relations between major powers as Iran, SA and the other Gulf States, and Turkey (Melkert, 2017). In fact, the UN Independent International Commission of Inquiry on The Syrian Arab Republic states: “*A regional war in the Middle East draws ever closer*” (Council on Foreign Relations, 2016). Therefore, it is clear that the Saudi-Iranian struggle will have a great impact on the future of Syria and Iraq.

7.4. The Kurds

The position of the Kurds is a vital element in the ethno-religious division of both Syria and Iraq (Council on Foreign Relations, 2017). The Treaty of Sevres of 1920 dissolved the Ottoman Empire and proposed the creation of a Kurdish state (Council on Foreign Relations, 2017). However, the new Turkish government opposed the treaty and in the Treaty of Lausanne in 1923 excluded the mention of a Kurdish state (Council on Foreign Relations, 2017). The Kurds were dispersed across the new-drawn borders and became citizens of Turkey, Syria, Iraq and Iran (Council on Foreign Relations, 2017). In all these countries, the Kurds rebelled against the central government. The outline of Iraq’s history showed that the Kurdish resistance against the central rule was continuous; ever since the creation of Iraq the Kurds rejected a national Iraqi identity (Anderson & Stansfield, 2004, p. 26). The Kurdish uprisings were met with cruel repercussions by the Iraqi government, especially during the al-Anfal campaign (Associated Press, 2006). Since 1991 the so-called Iraqi Kurdistan (KRG) is de facto an autonomous state (Council on Foreign Relations, 2017). The attitude of the Iraqi Kurds is strikingly illustrated by Michael Ignatieff, as he journeyed through Iraqi Kurdistan in the 1990s. Ignatieff refers to Halabja, which was a Kurdish city that Saddam Hussein bombed with chemical weapons during the Anfal Campaign, killing over 5,000 civilians (Anderson & Stansfield, 2004, p. 170):

“Genocide and nationalism have an entwined history. It was genocide that convinced the Jews and even convinced the Gentile world that they were a people who would never be safe until they



had a nation-state of their own. As with the Jews, so with the Kurds. To see Halabja, to sit by those faceless graves, is to know that the chemical attack marked them apart forever...For Halabja happened, and for a people who have known genocide, there is only one thing that will do: a nation-state of their own. (Ignatieff, 1995, p. 199).

Daniel Byman pointed out that the nature of the killings during wars could have a major impact on communal cooperation (Divided they stand: lessons about partition from Iraq and Lebanon, Byman, 2007, p. 16). With regard to the Anfal campaign, the one-sided killing, the targeting of non-combatants and the use of chemical weapons could likely have embittered the peace and created lasting mistrust (Byman, 2007, p. 16). Chaim Kaufmann adds that wars generate ineradicable memories of atrocities, which makes solutions that require trust, such as power-sharing agreements, virtually impossible (A Security Dilemma: Ethnic Partitioning in Iraq, Kaufmann C. , 2007, p. 144). On a regional level, Iran, Syria and especially Turkey are concerned that an independent Iraqi Kurdistan might inspire Kurds to rebel in their countries as well (Council on Foreign Relations, 2017). This refers to the theory of 'secession-contagion', described by Byman and Etzioni (Byman, 2007, p. 23; Etzioni, 1992, pp. 21-35). Lake and Rothchild have pointed out that the cross-country contagion effect is rare (Lake & Rothchild, The International Spread of Ethnic Conflicts, 1998). However, the effect should not be ruled out for the Kurds, since they are one people and have all fought armed conflicts with the central government in their 'host countries' (Council on Foreign Relations, 2017). Therefore, Turkey has stated it will not support the KRG's independence before it has resolved its own Kurdish conflict (Council on Foreign Relations, 2017). An independent Iraqi Kurdistan would be dependent on international and regional support, since it is landlocked by Iran, Turkey and Syria (Council on Foreign Relations, 2017).

On September the 25th, the population of the KRG overwhelmingly voted in favour of independence in a referendum that was opposed by the Iraqi government (Council on Foreign Relations, 2017). In response, Iraqi armed forces attacked positions held by the KRG in October 2017, capturing strategic positions such as the oil-rich city of Kirkuk (The Guardian, 2017). The theory of Bates on the role of competition for resources in ethnic conflicts is clearly visible in the clash between the KRG and Iraqi government (Bates, 1974). The originally Kurdish-majority Kirkuk-region hosts a giant oil field, which was the major reason that Saddam Hussein started arabizing the region in the 1980's (Izady M. , 2015; Anderson & Stansfield, 2004, p. 53). Since, the



Kirkuk-region is an ethnically mixed area, mostly due to the arabization policy in the past, the Iraqi government can now refute claims by the Kurds for the territory.

In Syria, the persecution of the Kurds did not reach the levels of Iraq. The Syrian regime did however strip 120,000 Kurds of their Syrian citizenship in 1962, and in 1973 Hafez al-Assad started arabizing resource-rich areas by displacing Kurds (Council on Foreign Relations, 2017). In general, the Kurds in Syria were marginalized, save a few exceptions (Tejel, 2009, pp. 51,65). Since 2013, the Syrian Kurds have an autonomous zone: Rojava ruled by the PYD (Council on Foreign Relations, 2017). Rojava has been extensively expanded ever since and has integrated many non-Kurdish areas as well (Lund, *Origins of the Syrian Democratic Forces: A Primer*, 2016). However, the Syrian regime has not acknowledged the unilateral declaration of autonomy by the Syrian Kurds (Tastekin, 2016). Moreover, even though the US has become an important ally of the Syrian Kurds, it has expressed that it does not support Rojava's bid for independence (The Guardian, 2017; Sly, 2017). Kyle Orton writes for the think-tank the Moshe Dayan Center that Rojava has a tense relationship with Turkey, especially since Turkey invaded North-Syria in 2016 to prohibit the link-up of the two parts of Rojava (Turkey's Role in Syria, 2017). Turkey regards the PYD as a major threat, since it is affiliated with its adversary the PKK (Orton, 2017).

Commentators argue that Rojava and the KRG differ greatly. Till Paasche writes for the Middle East Policy Council that the Syrian PYD and the Iraqi KRG have ideological disagreements and even had conflicts with each other (Syrian and Iraqi Kurds: Conflict and Cooperation, 2015). However, in times of need, such as the siege of the Syrian Kurdish city of Kobane by IS, the KRG Peshmerga forces came to the aid of their Kurdish brothers (Paasche, 2015; Council on Foreign Relations, 2017). Loqman Radpey writes in an article on the Syrian and Iraqi Kurds for the *Japanese Journal of Political Science*, that the KRG is far more experienced in governing a state, since it has been a de facto autonomous region since 1991 (Radpey, 2017). Rojava has only experienced a few years of limited autonomy and lacks international relations (Radpey, 2017). Furthermore, the KRG wants to secede from Iraq, whereas Rojava strives for autonomy within the Syrian state (Radpey, 2017). It is unclear how both regions will develop once there is no longer a common enemy to unite them (Radpey, 2017). The Syrian regime and the PYD have so far evaded direct conflict with each other, save a few skirmishes (Radpey, 2017). However, Fabrice Balanche of The Washington Institute stresses that it is unclear what will happen to this relationship once IS is defeated and the PYD is still controlling large parts of non-Kurdish territory (Syria's Kurds Are



Contemplating an Aleppo Alliance with Assad and Russia, 2015). It is unlikely that the PYD will submit to the Syrian regime without an agreement on extensive autonomy for Rojava.

7.5. Tribal structures

As outlined before, tribal structures play an important role in both Iraq and Syria as well (Sahner, 2014, p. 82; Anderson & Stansfield, 2004, p. 51). Ad Melkert affirms this, stating that in both Syria and Iraq, especially in al-Anbar, tribal structures are vital, although they are complex as well (2017). According to Ivan Gospodinov, tribal ties existed long before Islam became a dominant force in the region (2015, pp. 52-53). Due to progress and development the tribal ties disintegrated, especially in urban areas (Gospodinov, 2015, p. 52). However, these ties stayed strong in rural areas, or in the case of Iraq, were revived by Britain and Saddam Hussein (Sahner, 2014, pp. 82,113; Gospodinov, 2015, p. 52). Several tribes consist of both Shia and Sunni branches, and can therefore cross the sectarian divide (Anderson & Stansfield, 2004, p. 112). However, at the same time the tribes often have well-armed militias and their own agenda and can therefore contribute to political fragmentation (Anderson & Stansfield, 2004, p. 112). The tribal element shows that the communal division of Iraq and Syria is more complex than just the ethno-religious division.

7.6. Minorities

Moreover, minorities are a relevant element in both Iraq and Syria. In Iraq, the minorities were somewhat protected under the secular rule of the Baath party (HRW, 2011). However, with the emergence of political Islam, the position of especially non-Islamic minorities is threatened (Open Doors, 2017). In Syria, the minorities make up a larger share of the population and therefore play a more important role. The regime is dominated by the Alawi-minority and is supported by i.a. the Christian and Druze minorities, which are protected by the secular government and fear an Islamic rule (Sahner, 2014, p. 61). This fear is not unfounded, since i.a. Christians are being discriminated or persecuted in most Islamic countries (The Economist, 2016). Furthermore, deviating sects as the Alawi and Druze have a long history of discrimination and persecution at the hands of Sunni rulers as well (Lund, Syrian Jihadism, 2012, p. 12). Therefore, minorities are prone to the security dilemma, which is already displayed by the emergence of e.g. Christian, Assyrian and Druze militias.



7.7. External influence

The last important element that will be discussed in this subquestion is external influence. Ad Melkert argues that leaders as Saddam Hussein and Assad were in the past able to fend off external influence in Iraq and Syria (2017). However, due to the conflicts that erupted within both countries, this is no longer the case (Melkert, 2017). As became clear before, Iran and Saudi Arabia are two regional powers that heavily influence the conflict in Iraq and especially Syria (Council on Foreign Relations, 2016). Additionally, notably the US, Russia, Turkey play a substantial role. Syria is Iran's only Arab ally, which it has been since 1980 (Robinson, 2012, p. 334). In addition to financial and arms support, it is estimated that now thousands of Iranian soldiers are fighting in Syria as well (Robinson, 2012, p. 334). Furthermore, as mentioned before, Iran has gained an important foothold in Iraq with the toppling of the Sunni Baath regime in 2003 (Melkert, 2017). Another important ally of the Syrian regime is Russia, states Hamilton who served as the Russia policy advisor in the U.S. delegation to the International Syria Support Group (What Russia Wants in Syria, 2017). The Russians have supported the regime throughout the conflict, notably with air support and equipment (Hamilton, 2017). Syria is of great importance to Russia, since it sees its alliance with Syria and Iran as a counterweight to the US-aligned Sunni regimes in the region (Hamilton, 2017) Moreover, Syria hosts Russian naval and air bases that enable Russia's presence in the region and provide access to the Mediterranean, which are of significant strategic importance (Hamilton, 2017).

SA and the other Gulf States desire the overthrow of Assad's government and to curb or even eliminate Iran's influence in the region, writes Hussein Ibish for The Gulf States Institute in Washington (What's at Stake for the Gulf Arab States in Syria?, 2016, p. 1). Therefore, SA and Qatar, along with Turkey, have been the main sponsors of a wide range of rebel groups (Hussein, 2016, p. 2). The US has also supported numerous Sunni opposition groups in their fight against Assad throughout the Syrian war, (BBC, 2015). Currently, the US is allied with the Kurdish-dominated Syrian Democratic Forces (Sly, 2017). Furthermore, the US is the initiator of the anti-IS coalition, which is an alliance of numerous Western and Arab countries that fight IS in Syria and Iraq, mostly through air support and the provision of equipment (U.S. Department of State, n.d.). Turkey plays a substantial role in Iraq and especially Syria as well. In Syria, it has supported proxy rebel groups who were fighting Assad, and it has invaded Syria in order to drive a wedge between the two parts of the Kurdish Rojava (Orton, 2017).



In addition to all these actors and their personal interests, Fabrice Balanche of *The Washington Institute* explains that there is a larger conflict at stake within Iraq and Syria. The Syrian regime and its allies, notably Russia and Iran, attempt to establish an east-to-west ‘Shiite axis’ from Iran to Lebanon, whereas the US and its allies strive to strengthen their north-to-south ‘Sunni axis’ from the Gulf States and Jordan to Turkey (Growing Risk of International Confrontation in the Syrian Desert, 2017). The Shiite axis corresponds with the ‘Beirut to Tehran corridor’ mentioned by Ad Melkert (Melkert, 2017). The centre of this strategic struggle is the mostly desert area between Syria, Iraq and Jordan, write O’Connor and Balanche (O’Connor, 2017; Balanche, Growing Risk of International Confrontation in the Syrian Desert, 2017). In *The Guardian*, Martin Chulov argues that all involved parties are plotting scenarios for the near post-IS future of Syria and Iraq (Chulov, 2017). He states: “*At stake, for all sides, is the future make-up of the region and a chance to shape it in their likeness*” (Chulov, 2017). To conclude, it is undisputable that external parties play a large role within Syria and Iraq, and will have to be regarded when reshaping the countries. With regard to the literature, Daniel Byman wrote that strong outsiders could either help solve a communal conflict or exacerbate it (Byman, 2007, p. 14). In the case of Syria and Iraq, the outside powers seem to have caused the latter. The main actors involved in Syria and Iraq attempt to keep or draw the countries, or a part of them, into their sphere of interest. In contrast to Syria’s intervention in the Lebanese Civil War, the outsiders in Syria in Iraq do not appear to aim at solving the conflicts and stabilizing the countries (Byman, 2007, p. 10).



8. How could Iraq and Syria be reshaped along ethno-religious lines?

In this subquestion there will be an attempt to establish the most discussed methods of reshaping Iraq and Syria along ethno-religious lines. Several options will be discussed, along with their feasibility. Over the last two decades numerous plans to reshape Iraq and/or Syria along ethno-religious lines have been suggested. In this section, the most notable methods and plans will be briefly discussed and assessed on the basis of the chief elements outlined in the previous section. These plans involve either soft or hard partition along ethno-religious lines. A hard partition implies the break-up of a country's territorial integrity and establishing new sovereign states. The hard partition could involve one country (interstate) or more than one country (intrastate). Soft partition or federalism, is the creation of areas with a certain degree of self-determination within the existing borders of a country.

8.1. Intrastate partition

The first method that will be assessed is the most far-reaching: An intrastate hard partition of Iraq and Syria. Barak Mendelsohn, a senior fellow of the *Foreign Policy Research Institute*, argues in *Foreign Affairs* that the borders between Syria and Iraq “no longer make sense” (Divide and Conquer in Syria and Iraq, 2015). Mendelsohn pleads for an independent Sunni state between Syria and Iraq (2015). This so-called *Sunnistan* would neutralize much of the support for extremist groups as IS and could prompt an increased support of Sunni states in the region for this new entity, writes Mendelsohn (2015). Moreover, ever since the Treaty of Sevres in 1920 there have been calls for a united Kurdish state (Council on Foreign Relations, 2017). This was proposed by the scholar Bernard Lewis in an article named *Rethinking the Middle East*, in *Foreign Affairs* (1992). In fact, with the de facto autonomy of the Kurds in Syria and Iraq, the possibility of an intrastate Kurdistan in the two countries looms. Till F. Paasche states: “Along with the KRG, Rojava could help create a stable democratic region stretching from the Iranian border above Baghdad to the north of Aleppo” (Syrian and Iraqi Kurds: Conflict and Cooperation, 2015). However, for the time being, a merger between the Syrian PYD and Iraqi KRG is unlikely due to their ideological differences and the gap in development of both regions, as mentioned by Paasche and Radpey (Radpey, 2017; Paasche, 2015). Moreover, the creation of an intrastate Kurdistan would be heavily opposed by regional powers as Turkey and Iran, and is therefore unlikely to be established in the near future (Council on Foreign Relations, 2017). In addition to the hypothetical Sunnistan and Kurdistan, there could be a Shia state in Iraq and a mixed ethno-religious state in West-Syria.



8.2. Interstate partition

The second method involves a hard partition within the existing border of Iraq and Syria. Gary Gambill discusses in an e-note for the Foreign Policy Research Institute the possibilities of partitioning Syria along ethno-religious lines (Partitioning Syria, 2013). He states:

“It appears that most Alawites, nearly all Kurds, and many Christians and Druze would prefer some form of secession or extreme decentralization over the uncertain outcome of majoritarian (and almost certainly Islamist) rule, particularly if it means an earlier end to the fighting” (Gambill, 2013).

Gambill speculates on a Druze state that could forge ties with Jordan and Israel, since these states have a Druze population as well. Secondly, an Alawi-dominated state that could align with Iran and Russia. Thirdly, a Kurdish zone that could partner with their fellow-Kurds in Iraq, and lastly a Sunni Arab rump-state possibly aligned with the Gulf States (Gambill, 2013). Gambill acknowledges that there are many complications to this proposal, such as major cities that are confessionally-mixed (2013). However, he adds that in the course of the conflict the Syrian territories are becoming more homogenous (2013). Nevertheless, as several academics state, people are usually not neatly divided into two distinct regions, and secession and partition are therefore unlikely to produce perfectly homogenous states with a lower ethnic conflict level (Byman, 2007, p. 23; Horowitz, 1985, p. 589; Lijphart, 1980). This is especially the case for Syria, since it houses countless pockets of minorities, which are especially intermingled in cities.

The interstate partition of Iraq is also proposed by commentators, such as John M. Owen IV in *The National Interest* and Michael J. Totten in *World Affairs*. As early as 2006 Owen proposed a three-state solution in order to maintain a balance between Iran and Sunni actors (How Bad Would a Partition Be). In this model, a Shia Arab state would align with Iran, a Sunni Arab state with SA and Jordan, and a Kurdish state could possibly tilt towards the US (Owen IV, 2006). Owen elaborates that these states would be rather homogenous; therefore, they would not dissolve into civil wars and entice their neighbours to intervene. However, he also points out the difficulties with mixed ethno-religious areas and the oil deposits on ethno-sectarian borders; therefore, outsiders must be involved to facilitate the partition. Owen concludes that the partition of Iraq is full of risks; though continuing the current status quo is even riskier (2006). Michael J. Totten argued for the same three-state partition in 2015 (Let Iraq Die: A Case for



Partition, 2015). Totten states that Iraq has never been a coherent nation-state: *“If Iraq somehow manages to survive its current conflict in one piece, another will almost certainly follow. Its instability is both devastating and chronic”* (2015, p. 18). He describes the mistrust and trauma between Sunni and Shia Arabs, which was strikingly reflected by the fact that many Sunnis preferred IS over Maliki’s Shia-dominated government (2015, p. 22). Totten states:

“If [the Sunnis] believe today that their Shiite countrymen are even more despicable than US occupation forces or ISIS, it’s unlikely that they will ever be able to live together in peace without a tyrant enforcing another cold and brutal peace of a military dictatorship” (2015, p. 22).

By separating the Shia and Sunni Arabs behind international borders, the Shia no longer have to fear for Sunni extremists such as IS or remnants of Saddam’s Baath regime, whereas Sunnis would have no incentive to support extremists as IS to protect themselves against an authoritarian Baghdad (Totten, 2015, pp. 22-23). However, Totten concludes that the US should not “go in there and redraw the borders”; instead the Iraqis should do it themselves, starting with the inevitable partition of Iraqi Kurdistan (2015, pp. 22-23).

8.3. Soft partition in Syria

Soft partition implies the creation of a federal system with autonomous zones under a central government. Numerous commentators have argued for the creation of a federal system in Syria, such as James Stavridis in *Foreign Policy* and Jihad Yazigi for the *European Council on Foreign Relations*. James Stavridis states that Syria is not a long-standing civilization like Persia, Turkey or Greece, and one of the reasons it is falling apart are its ethno-religious divisions (It's time to seriously consider partitioning Syria, 2016). Jihad Yazigi, a visiting fellow at the European Council on Foreign Relations, elaborates:

“European actors should recognise the reality on the ground and shift their focus away from achieving a centralised power-sharing agreement and towards negotiations based on a devolved politics. A decentralised model will be difficult to implement, but ironically may offer one of the few means of holding the country together” (No going back: why decentralisation is the future for Syria, 2016).

Jihad Yazigi argues that in the federalist Syria, there should be a proportional reallocation of oil revenues, a political representation of ethno-religious communities at the central level, a special



status for the Kurdish regions, and education for all communities in their mother tongue (2016). He adds that European and other actors should support and assist a decentralized structure, though in the end the Syrians would have to decide themselves how the future of their country should be shaped (2016).

In response to the commentators proposing a federal system, numerous commentators point out the obstacles and difficulties of both a soft and hard partition. Nick Crawford, an analyst for the *Armed Conflict Database* of the *International Institute of Strategic Studies*, points out that the ethno-religious groups in Syria are not neatly arranged, even after displacements of the civil war (Fears of Federalism in Syria, 2016). Crawford elaborates:

“Syria is a complicated patchwork in which Kurdish villages surround Sunni Arab-majority cities; Sunni Arab villages surround Kurdish-majority cities; Sunni towns exist in Alawite and Shiite-majority provinces; and Shiite towns exist in Sunni-majority provinces” (2016).

Additionally, there are numerous far smaller ethnic groups that will never have a cognate government and can only hope for a permissive and non-sectarian government, states Crawford (2016). Moreover, he argues that the economic and natural resources of Syria are not equally spread across its regions, such as the oil- and gas-reserves that are located in East-Syria (2016). It will be a major challenge to distribute these resources and could likely lead to winners and losers, resulting in grievances and further ethno-religious tensions (Crawford, 2016). With regard to theory, opponents of hard partition argue that it could simply transform a conflict from a civil war into an international war, between the predecessor and successor state (Byman, 2007, p. 3). This risk certainly looms for the hypothetical seceded states of Iraq and Syria, since outsiders such as particularly Iran and SA will not stop meddling in the internal affairs of these statelets.

8.4. Soft partition in Iraq

With regard to the soft-partition of Iraq there have been several proposals over the last two decades. In 2006 the then President of the Council on Foreign Relations Leslie Gelb and the former Vice-President of the US Joseph Biden presented the plan *Iraq: A Way Forward*. They proposed an Iraq with three largely autonomous regions and one limited central government in Baghdad (Biden & Gelb, 2006, p. 2). The three regional governments, Kurdish, Sunni and Shia, would be responsible for administering their own regions and the central government would be in charge of border defence, foreign policy, oil production and revenues (Biden & Gelb, 2006, p.



2). Gelb and Biden i.a. argued for a proportionate distribution of Iraq's oil revenues and a mechanism to protect minorities (2006, p. 2). The academics Edward P. Joseph and Michael O'Hanlon of the Brookings Institution offered a more comprehensive plan named *The Case for Soft Partition in Iraq*, published in 2007. The writers acknowledge the difficulties of partition and therefore label their proposal 'a Plan B' for Iraq, in case there is no better alternative (pp. ix, 13). O'Hanlon and Joseph argue i.a. for oil-revenue sharing system among the regions, the creation of secure boundaries between federal zones, the safe and voluntary relocation of minorities and programs for housing-swaps (p. x). Whereas O'Hanlon and Joseph acknowledge the fact that the Shia and Sunni sect are strongly intermixed, e.g. through marriages, they state: "*Iraqi realities are beginning to trump theory*" (p. 1). As proof, they point to ethnic killings and cleansing, along with the fact that Iraqis vote along ethno-sectarian lines (p. 1). O'Hanlon and Joseph argue that Iraq's sectarian violence has "*accelerated the emergence of largely homogenous ethno-sectarian regions*", since displaced Iraqis usually fled to a zone dominated by their own sect (p. 5). This is especially visible in the segregation of Baghdad.

However, the plans in favour of the soft partition of Iraq meet resistance as well. In 2008, the academics Paul R. Williams and Matthew T. Simpson published the article *Rethinking the Political Future: An Alternative to the Ethno-Sectarian Division of Iraq*. They point out that the "*Iraqi identity is rooted in a complex history, and not simply upon ethno-sectarian identities*" (Williams & Simpson, 2008, p. 201). Williams and Simpson attribute much of the ethno-sectarian violence to the chaotic aftermath of the collapse of Saddam's Baath regime (p. 206). They claim that much of the sectarian violence in 2006-2007 originated from criminal profiteers that masqueraded as sectarian fighters (pp. 209-211). This claim is partly supported by the earlier mentioned report of the HRW on violence against Christian (HRW, 2011). However, it seems as an inadequate explanation for the ethnic cleansing of Sunnis by Shia militias, which resulted in the segregation of Baghdad (Hagan, Kaise, Hanson, & Parker, 2015). Although both arguments fit the theory of Chaim Kaufmann, who states that once large-scale violence has started, the original reason for conflict, e.g. material interests and personal gain, no longer matter (A Security Dilemma: Ethnic Partitioning in Iraq, 2007, p. 44).

Williams and Simpson also point to the division among the different ethno-sectarian groups. They stress that the Shia are not unified, since there are at times violent struggles between different factions, such as moderates, radicals or pro-Iran groups (p. 209) Moreover, the writers point to the division among the Iraqi Kurds, who are split between the Kurdish Democratic Party (KDP)



and the Patriotic Union of Kurdistan (PUK), that fought a civil war in the 1990's (2008, pp. 210-211). However, Williams and Simpson acknowledge that the two factions signed a power sharing agreement in 2006 and have established a greater unity in the KRG ever since (2008, p. 211). With regard to the population movement as discussed by O'Hanlon and Joseph, the writers state that nearly 40% of the Iraqis live in the multi-ethnic cities of Baghdad and Mosul, and dividing these cities may well be impossible (Williams & Simpson, p. 207). Academic also point to the tremendous human suffering and violation of human rights that come with population movements (Sambanis, Partition as a Solution to Ethnic War: An Empirical Critique of the Theoretical Literature, 2000, p. 440). As for the Iraqis themselves, a 2006 survey by the International Republican Institute (IRI) showed that a large majority of the respondents rejected federalism and states the government should have all political power and authority (Survey of Iraqi, p. 38). However, in a survey by the IRI in 2012, 47% of the respondents somewhat or strongly supported the formation of autonomous regions of their provinces similar to the Kurdish Regional Government, whereas an equal percentage somewhat or strongly opposed it (National Survey of Public Opinion in Iraq). These statistics show that an increasing number of Iraqis supports federalism, although the population is still divided on the issue.

In general, soft partition could provide communal groups in Syria and Iraq with a certain degree of self-determination, while they are at the same time still cooperating at a federal level. As academic state, it could satisfy the aspirations of a communal group, foster interethnic cooperation and decrease the incentive of violence (Levine, 1996; Horowitz, 1985, pp. 613-621). Therefore, as Byman states: "*federalism offers several of the benefits of partition, without many of the problems*" (Byman, 2007, p. 24). However, federalism would not necessarily abolish the security dilemma, while it at the same time increases a group's capacity and therefore its propensity to wage war (Byman, 2007, p. 24). Therefore, although soft partition offers many advantages, it could backfire if the security dilemma is still active in Syria and Iraq.



9. Analysis

What stands out is that both Syria and Iraq are not longstanding civilizations with a distinct culture as e.g. Turkey and Iran. Moreover, the countries are independent nation states for less than a century. Therefore, the countries did not have the opportunity to develop a strong national identity. At the same time, the different ethno-religious groups and tribes have existed for many centuries in the area of present-day Iraq and Syria. Even though there has been some intermixing between the different communal groups, the identity of these groups has remained distinct. This distinction was enforced by different rulers in both countries, who mainly benefitted their own communal group. Other communal groups were often discriminated or even oppressed. The ethno-religious tensions in the countries were therefore in the first place caused by political and historic elements. In general, only conservatives and Islamists were concerned with doctrinal differences. Nevertheless, in the course of the conflicts in both countries, ethno-religious identities have become more important due to Islamists and external influences. The political paradigm shift in Iran and the response of Saudi Arabia have had a major impact on countries with a mixed Shia-Sunni population, such as Yemen, Iraq and Syria. The strong and autocratic leaders, Saddam Hussein and the Assad's, were able to withstand the influence of the regional powers. Their demise has opened the door for external meddling, directly or through the support for radical militias or movements. Byman argues that an intervention of an impartial strong state could either stabilize a conflicting country or exacerbate the conflict. In Syria and Iraq it is clear that outside powers were eager to use the countries' instability to meddle in their affairs for their self-interest, and have exacerbated the conflicts. In fact, Iraq and Syria appear to be the chessboard of the geopolitical struggle between a Sunni-axis aligned with the US, and a Shia-axis aligned with Russia. The conflicts are slightly more complicated than that, since all involved powers have divergent views and interests. Nevertheless, in general this power struggle helps to understand the current conflicts and division in both Syria and Iraq.

The Sunni-Shia geopolitical struggle has not created the ethno-religious tensions and division within Iraq and Syria; it has revealed and exacerbated them. However, without the socioeconomic and political grievances of subordinate ethno-religious communal groups in both countries, a large-scale conflict might have been averted or at least reduced. Nevertheless, despite the immense complicated origins of the conflicts in Iraq and Syria, the ethno-religious division is a reality. This is visible through e.g. the segregation of Baghdad and the division of militias along ethno-religious lines. As Kaufmann argues, the original reason for a conflict no longer matters once large-scale violence has started among communal groups. The hardliners



prevail over the moderates within communal groups, e.g. IS among Sunnis and radical militias among the Shia.

The arguments in support of partition seem to fit to the situation in Iraq. The memory of conflict has indeed left Iraq's communal groups highly sensitive to their security and therefore they were more likely to pick-up their arms again. Moreover, the different regimes mistreated the defeated party after a communal conflict. Thirdly, just as Byman stated, this mistreatment and the memory of violence, keeps the Iraqi communal groups mistrustful of each other and limits communal cooperation. In fact, throughout Iraq's history the country has never seen a representative democracy: the different communal groups were always subordinate to the other. In Iraq, repressive government and violence seem the only constant factor since it was established in the 1920's, and there is no indication this will change in the time to come. Moreover, the results show that there is an active security dilemma in Iraq. Since the government was unable to protect its citizens, communal groups resorted to their own resources for security. This resulted in the rise of countless militias along ethno-religious lines that will have a major impact on Iraq's political stability in the years to come. Without a proper handling of the militias and the disenfranchised Sunnis, Iraq could stay in a vicious cycle of continued violence and repressive government.

However, this does not necessarily mean that partition is the solution. There are many mixed cities, as well as mixed marriages and tribes. Therefore, new minorities would be created within the seceded states, who could be persecuted. Although Iraq is rather neatly divided, still millions of Iraqis would have to be moved in order to create homogenous states. Moreover, the seceded states could experience communal mistrust and lack of cooperation as well. In fact, the results show that there is much disunity among the Shia and Sunni tribes, as well as differentiating loyalties. Lastly opponents argue that partition could lead to future wars between partitioned states; transforming a conflict from a civil war into an international war. This possibility should not be underestimated, especially with regard to the geopolitical struggle between Iran and SA. However, a counter-argument can be made that international borders are of great significance in the 21st century and cannot be easily breached. Iraq has experienced this when it invaded Kuwait in 1990 and was driven back by an international coalition. However, if international conflicts do erupt between two countries and the international community does not intervene, the human suffering and devastation is colossal, such as in the Iran-Iraq War.



The Kurds in Iraq have experienced memories of atrocities, which make power-sharing agreements with the central government difficult due to a lack of trust. Byman names three conditions which could make communal cooperation possible after a civil war, namely: *“if the communal identities are not nationalistic, if the civil war killings were not one-sided, and if the political system promotes power-sharing”* (Byman, 2007, p. 14). Based on these criteria, communal cooperation between the KRG and Baghdad seems unlikely. It will take long before the Kurds will forget the atrocities of the last century, notably the Anfal Campaign. Moreover, the Kurds have a strong nationalist agenda, which has been the major source of their rebellious behaviour ever since the foundation of modern-day Iraq. Besides, the KRG is de facto an independent state. The current tensions between the KRG and Baghdad are mainly caused by disputes over territory and resources. Therefore, an agreement on these territories is vital for a politically stable relationship between the two sides. Such an agreement would be a next step towards full independence for the KRG, although obstacles as international acceptance and consent of regional powers remain. The Sunni and Shia Arabs in Iraq do not have a nationalistic identity as the Kurds. However, they do have memories of atrocities, although these were not one-sided. Thirdly, there are few indications of communal cooperation between the sects. The Shia are content with being the dominant political force within Iraq after centuries of Sunni rule, whereas many Sunnis do not want to conform to the Shia and prefer once again reclaim their dominant position.

Syria has been rather politically stable throughout its independence, save e.g. several coups and violent struggles with Islamists. Therefore, Ad Melkert stated that the dismemberment of Syria in its civil war is worse than that of Iraq (Melkert, 2017). Its civil war has created much trauma and mistrust that will make future communal cooperation difficult. It appears that the Syrian regime is on its way to a military victory over the predominantly Sunni opposition. Moreover, the civil war has already made communal groups more sensitive to their security and minorities have drawn closer to the regime. The militias of the various communal groups in Syria do not necessarily function as a ‘miniature international system’ as Kaufmann argues. In fact, the militias are either with or against the Syrian government, with the exception of SDF-umbrella. However, it is questionable to what degree Assad controls the militias that are loyal to him. The Syrian war has revived and hardened ethno-religious and tribal identities and provided communal groups with arms and influence. Therefore, it is unpredictable how these militias will relate to each other and to the regime, once the opposition is defeated. The militias could be a significant source of political instability in the near future. Moreover, there are indications that Assad will benefit the



communal groups that were loyal to him, which enlarges the gap with the defeated Sunni opposition. Therefore, both a repressive Syrian regime and continued violence seem a plausible outcome of the conflict.

The interstate partition of Syria is unlikely. Even though communal groups as e.g. the Alawis, Druze and Assyrians have distinct identities, they are too small to be viable as a state. The creation of an intrastate Sunnistan is virtually impossible as well. The Sunni Arabs in East-Syria and Central Iraq have many similarities: they are conservative, live in rural areas, value tribal identities and are both prone to the Islamist ideology. In fact, it was only a century ago that these people were 'separated' by international borders. However, the Syrian war has revealed the differences between the rural conservative Sunnis that fuelled the mainly Islamist rebellion, and the urban developed Sunnis that were much more divided within the war. Despite the fact that the creation of an intrastate Salafist-oriented Sunnistan is practically impossible and does not match the realities on the ground, it would be a too limiting solution as well.

This is also the case for an interstate Sunni state within Syria; beside the fact that it is virtually impossible to separate Syria's immensely mixed major cities. As stated numerous times, the conflict in Syria has revealed and aggravated the ethno-religious division. However, this division was not the main source of the conflict. In fact, before the paradigm shift of the Syrian regime in the 2000s, it had a strong base among rural, working class Sunni Arabs. With a more inclusive policy, that includes equal revenue sharing of resources, the Syrian regime could over time gain support of many Sunnis. It is unlikely that the Salafists and Islamists will ever accept a 'heretical' Alawi as ruler. However, these radicals only make up all small portion of Syria's population. If the Syrian regime fails to address the grievances of the former Sunni-opposition, unrest will remain and the 'next IS' could rise up in the near future. Iraq has displayed that this could be a matter of years. Federalism could be a possibility in both Syria, although it would backfire if there is still an active security dilemma, which is the case for most Syrian communities, except for the Kurds. Besides, the reality is that Assad will be able to achieve military victory in most of Syria, save Rojava, and therefore he will have little incentive to reward the revolting Sunni Arabs with autonomy. The most significant argument against partition in Syria is that it might be a too limiting solution and that ethno-religious cooperation could be possible even after its civil war. However, if they are able, the ruling Alawi and the other minorities will resist a constitutional democracy. Since it would imply that the numerical majority of Sunni Arabs would become the dominant force. Therefore, a continued repressive, yet stable, government is more likely.



The Kurds in Syria have found unity in their struggle against notably IS and used the opportunity of the war by establishing an autonomous zone. The Kurds hold vast non-Kurdish territories, as well as resource-rich areas in East-Syria. Sooner or later, the Kurds and the Syrian regime will either have to make an agreement or confront each other militarily. Unlike the Kurds, the Syrian regime has powerful allies that will likely be able to defeat the Kurds militarily. However, the Kurds have tasted autonomy and will give heavy resistance to the regime, now and in the future. It is questionable whether the Syrian army and its allies have the energy to confront the Kurds, once IS and the other Islamist opposition are defeated. Therefore, it would be in the interest of both parties to make an agreement that includes vast territorial concessions on Kurdish side, and the recognition of Rojava as a federal zone of Syria. The US and Russia could facilitate this agreement, since they are allies of both sides. However, US' ally Turkey would be fiercely opposed to the creation of a Kurdish autonomous zone at its border.

Alternatively, Syria and its allies could partner to challenge the Syrian Kurds together. In that case the chances of Rojava's survival as federal zone are slim. Since the Syrian regime and the SDF have so far evaded direct conflict, there does not seem to be a security dilemma between them. Therefore, federalism for Rojava appears to be a feasible possibility. On the other hand, the hard partition of Rojava would surely not be accepted by regional powers, neither is the region experienced enough to become a sovereign state. The same goes for an intrastate Kurdistan of Syria and Iraq, beside the fact that the Syrian and Iraqi Kurds have a troubled relationship. The future of Rojava will be of major importance to the political stability of Syria.



10. Conclusion

The aim of this study was to determine whether the political stability in Iraq and Syria could be improved by reshaping their borders along ethno-religious lines. The theory on ethno-religious partition shows that it is seldom advisable. It would bring great practical complications and does not necessarily reduce the risk of recurring conflict. However, if the alternative is continued violence and bloodshed, partition ought to be considered in rare well-studied cases. Federalism could be an ideal alternative, although it could backfire if there is an active security dilemma, since it would increase the propensity of communal conflict. Communal cooperation is still possible after communal wars, unless the killings were one-sided, the communal identity is nationalistic or the political system does not promote power-sharing.

Iraq and Syria are political instable countries with a strong ethno-religious division. In the devastating Syrian Civil War, the regime has now almost defeated the mainly Sunni opposition. Furthermore, there is an active security dilemma with countless militias of different communal groups. Syria's future political stability and ethno-religious division are dependent on three chief factors: 1) the understanding between the regime and Rojava, 2) how the Syrian regime will handle the defeated Sunni opposition and the militias that were loyal to the regime, and 3) the post-war interests and influence of mainly Iran, SA, Turkey, Russia and the US. In Iraq, the second sectarian civil war within a decade is reaching an end. Both civil wars were fuelled by Shia and Sunni radicals. The wars were caused by a discriminative government, by grievous Sunnis from the former Baath regime, and by fear among both the Sunni and Shia population. There is an active security dilemma in Iraq, which is mainly visible through the omnipresent militias.

Syria's and Iraq's ethno-religious groups have strong identities that remained intact despite limited intermixing. Both countries are young and have not yet developed strong national identities. They have experienced many conflicts, coups and authoritarian rule in their short existence, especially Iraq. Authoritarian leaders held the countries together, and the demise of these rulers has opened the door for meddling by outside powers. These powers have further destabilized the countries and have strengthened the ethno-religious identities of communal groups, and therefore increased the ethno-religious tensions. Moreover, in Iraq, the inclusion of the Kurds was a capital mistake, since they have been a constant destabilizing factor. Numerous conflicts, notably the genocide of the Anfal Campaign, have created grievances and mistrust that make voluntarily Kurdish submission to Baghdad virtually impossible.



The Sunni-Shia power struggle between notably Iran and SA has and will have a major impact on the political stability in Iraq and Syria. Even though the ethno-religious tensions are mainly caused by political, socioeconomic and historical grievances, they have become increasingly doctrinal through the influence of Iran and SA. Moreover, despite the origin, the ethno-religious division has become a reality, as is particularly displayed by militias. Therefore, continued violence and a repressive government are likely, unless there are major policy changes that result in a more inclusive government and a more equal socioeconomic development. Furthermore, the Iraqi and Syrian Kurds have a strong national identity that will remain a source of instability. The establishment of an intrastate Kurdistan and Sunnistan is practically impossible. When it comes to partition, the most feasible methods would be the interstate partition of Iraq, either soft or hard, creating a Kurdish, Sunni and Shia territory. As for Syria, the most feasible method is the soft partition of Rojava and the Sunni-dominated east.

Could the political stability in Iraq and Syria be improved by reshaping them along ethno-religious lines? In Syria, this is currently not the case, with the exception of increased self-determination for Rojava. This could be realized if an agreement can be facilitated and supervised by e.g. Russia and the US. However, if the regime and Rojava cannot reach an agreement, or if Turkey blocks it, future conflict and political destabilization looms. Syria has better prospects for communal cooperation than Iraq, since it is more diverse and has been more politically stable in the past. However, if the defeated Sunni opposition is mistreated, future conflict is likely. Increased self-determination for the Sunnis in the east is not realistic and could backfire due to an active security dilemma. In Iraq, the political stability will certainly be improved once an agreement is reached on the secession of the Kurds. Communal cooperation between the Iraqi government and the de facto independent KRG is virtually impossible. Therefore, the Kurdish secession is imminent, although an internationally facilitated agreement on disputed areas is vital for future political stability. Despite certain segregation, Iraq's Shia and Sunnis are still strongly intermixed and communal cooperation remains an option. Therefore, hard partition is not yet advisable. However, continued violence and repressive government are likely, unless Baghdad is able to curb Iranian influence, control the militias and establish a truly inclusive government. Soft partition would backfire, since there is an active security dilemma. If continued conflict segregates the Shia and Sunnis further, partition could become a more viable possibility. However, in both Iraq and Syria, the political stability will heavily depend on the progress and outcome of the Saudi-Iranian power struggle.



11. Recommendation

In addition to the conclusion, this section will elaborate on recommendations with regard to ethno-religious partitioning in Iraq and Syria. When it comes to partition, the population of a country should always decide for themselves. If they favour it, it is advisable that the international community assists in the process. In most cases partition concerns fragile states that are unable to set-up agreements and make arrangements for partition. Moreover, it is recommended to support a partition with peacekeeping units of e.g. the UN, especially if there is an active security dilemma. The interference of international actors in Syria and Iraq is controversial. This is especially the case for countries as the US, Britain, France and Russia, since their meddling in the past century has been rarely beneficial or altruistic. However, in many cases the interference of an international actors could be valuable, e.g. to facilitate power-sharing or secession agreements between Baghdad and the KRG, or between the Syrian regime and Rojava. Therefore, it is advisable that a relatively untainted and influential actor takes this role. In fact, the European Union would be a suitable actor. In this way, the EU could contribute to the political stability in the Middle East, which at the same time benefits Europe itself, regarding the refugee crisis. Moreover, international actors should take a special interest in protecting small minorities Iraq and Syria, especially the non-Islamic groups. These minorities often do not have the means to protect themselves and are often victims in communal wars. Recent examples are the genocide of Yazidis in Iraq and the systematic persecution of Christians by Islamists.

Another recommendation for the international community and especially the West is to be less opposed to authoritarian rulers in the Middle East. Several countries in the West contributed to the demise of Bashar al-Assad in Syria, and actively removed Saddam Hussein in Iraq, without fully realizing the consequences. There is no doubt that Assad and especially Saddam were harsh rulers that did not shun violence against their own population. However, the weakening of Assad and the removal of Saddam have completely destabilized the countries, resulting in conflict. Therefore, it should be understood that a representative democracy should not necessarily be the standard for other countries. In fact, in many cases political stability under authoritarian rule might be the least bad option. Therefore, the formula for regime-change and ethno-religious partition is the same: It should not be ruled out entirely, but only be an option in extraordinary well-studied and well-considered cases. At the same time, the international community should strive to curb the destabilizing influence of Iran and SA. Their geopolitical struggle has already contributed to conflicts in Syria, Iraq and Yemen. Without interference of other actors, they might destabilize other mixed Sunni-Shia countries in the region, such as Lebanon and Bahrain.



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