



# Fight or Flight: The Desperate Plight of Iraq's "Generation 2000"

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## *Executive Summary*

Beset by political dysfunction, endemic corruption and a jihadist threat, Iraq is squandering its greatest asset: its youth. By failing to provide a vision and concrete prospects for the future, it is pressing young men into the straitjacket of jobs-through-patronage, pushing them into combat with either the Islamic State (IS) or Shiite militias or inducing them to emigrate. Arguably, the government faces more pressing challenges: pushing IS out, ensuring that subsequent governance does not further alienate the local population, instituting overdue reforms and tackling corruption. Yet, it will not succeed if it does not at the same time develop a strategy for creating a meaningful place in politics and society for the young. They are the country's most important resource; abandoning them could turn them into the most important threat to national and regional security.

The leadership's inability to forge a future for "Generation 2000", which grew up after Saddam Hussein's fall, has turned it into easy quarry for predators, be they IS, Shiite militias or populists preaching Iraqi nationalism. The potential for mobilising large numbers of young men at loose ends as pawns in violent conflicts has enabled both IS and Shiite militias to gain recruits. In the process, it has compounded sectarian polarisation and widened the divide between street and elites. Fed by fresh pools of fighting-age men, local tensions and conflicts proliferate and escalate, destabilising the country and the surrounding region. The most powerful Shiite militias receive training and advice from the Iranian Revolutionary Guards, have an ideological orientation consistent with Tehran's and can be deployed as proxies outside Iraq as well.

The familiar expression "youth radicalisation" distorts the reality that an entire generation is adrift, in need of a dramatically new state-led approach. Young Iraqis whose formative years were in the post-2003 turmoil have much more in common than they suspect, whatever side of local conflicts they are on, but they have been increasingly socialised within communal confines and left to the mercy of radical groups that promote dehumanised, even demonised perceptions of one another.

Before violence engulfed Iraq again, with the rise of IS, youth had attempted to peacefully hold the political class accountable for years of dismal governance. Sunni Arabs staged sit-ins in several towns in 2013, questioning national leaders, including senior Sunnis. They met with repression, leaving scores dead, many more in prison. These events paved the way for IS, which seized Falluja, the Sunni town nearest Baghdad, Mosul and other majority-Sunni towns in June 2014.

The collapse of the Iraqi army triggered a Shiite call to arms. Militia commanders quickly tapped into youthful disappointment with the Shiite political establishment, turning it into sectarian mobilisation against IS. By summer 2015, IS's battlefield fortunes had turned, even as it continued to control territory and population. The absence of services, especially electricity shortages in the searing summer, stimulated a popular movement in Baghdad and other majority-Shiite areas reflecting a general sense of frustration with the political establishment.

Youths flocking to either side of the sectarian divide faulted ruling elites on the same grounds but ended up fighting each other. The political class' response has been to protect its interests by divide and rule, redirecting anger into fratricidal tensions.

Iraq's external supporters compound the problem by boxing a rudderless generation into distinct categories – fighters, protesters or emigrants – and taking a different approach with each: a military campaign to defeat IS, pressure on the government to institute reforms to undercut demands and an effort to strengthen border controls to keep out migrants. Putting the emphasis on fighting IS, in particular, translates into tolerance of the Shiite militias, whose rise has contributed to sectarian polarisation and empowered a militia culture that compels young professionals to emigrate while boosting commanders' political ambitions.

The government's reform capacity may be limited, yet it must address its youth crisis as its top priority if it is to hold Iraq together. It will need the help of its sponsors, Iran included, which appear more concerned with the fight against IS. It should start by devising a youth policy, presented as a multiyear plan premised on the notion that young people need avenues for participation and advancement outside the political parties' discredited co-option via patronage.

A first step would be to acknowledge that, isolated within the Green Zone, it has limited tools to harness youths' energies, but also to recognise that it has advantages over non-state actors, including ability to legislate. Rather than create new structures and methods, it should embrace those used by the militias and IS and absorb youths into the state's legal framework, security forces or civilian agencies, including as volunteers in public works. It should convert the volunteer combat groups set up in 2014 (*hashd al-shaabi*) into a civilian mobilisation directed to rebuilding communities within the framework of local administrations. It should likewise recruit Sunni youths in areas IS vacates and engage them in local reconstruction projects. Paying a new cohort of state employees salaries and benefits is a challenge, when reduced oil income forces significant belt-tightening, but the government should build a fund for this purpose and at least give written guarantees of a steady income, a pension and other benefits. It should also organise any further military recruitment strictly under the army.

The International Monetary Fund (IMF), World Bank and UN agencies must ask if their policies actually help the government in such an approach. External aid that reaches youths solely through local intermediaries risks further isolating the government in the Green Zone and reinforcing young people's isolation in their communities, while driving them toward more dependence on local patrons and militia commanders. Unless such support gives the government a central role, it will contribute to the state's erosion and encourage local struggles over power and resources without an effective national arbiter. Just as a country's progress can be measured by the extent to which it engages its youth, so its demise as a viable entity can be predicted by the absence of a forward-looking youth policy and the drift of a generation into self-destructive combat or desperate flight. Iraq's youth and the country deserve better.

**Baghdad/Brussels, 8 August 2016**

# Fight or Flight: The Desperate Plight of Iraq's "Generation 2000"

## I. Introduction

Two years after the Islamic State (IS) captured major Sunni population centres, Iraqi government forces struggle to regain them in a multi-front war, supported by a U.S.-led coalition and Iranian military advice. As they make halting progress, a largely youth-led protest, which erupted in August 2015, forced Prime Minister Haider al-Abadi to announce an ambitious reform program to replace his party-dominated government with a technocratic cabinet and tackle corruption.<sup>1</sup> In February 2016, the protests surged again, led by Moqtada al-Sadr, an activist cleric able to claim distance from the establishment and with unique appeal to Baghdad's Shiite slums. The crisis climaxed on 30 April. Sadr's followers scaled the walls of the Green Zone, the Baghdad area where government institutions are located, and stormed parliament to press Abadi on his promises. Tensions abated only as Abadi announced an offensive in Falluja, under IS control since 2014. Young men recruited into Shiite militias fought an enemy there drawn from the same pool of Iraq's young, but Sunni. Others fled domestic turmoil for Europe.

These seemingly separate events are different faces of the same phenomenon. A pervasive aimlessness and lack of prospects among youths has fuelled recruitment to IS and Shiite militias, brought protesters into the streets and convinced others to emigrate. Iraqis between fifteen and 24 are nearly 20 per cent of the population.<sup>2</sup> They grew up in the wake of the 2003 U.S. invasion in a deeply dysfunctional state, dependent on local patrons or Baghdad politicians who offered access to jobs, resources and careers. Economically and communally diverse, what unites these youths is a profound sense of hopelessness, disempowerment and lack of direction. A local NGO leader in Baghdad stated bitterly:

I call them the "wearied" generation (*al-jil al-taabaan*) or the generation of chaos (*jil al-fawda*). The state has unravelled, the family structure is crumbling, and these young people cannot find work. They have come into a world that offers them no points of reference.<sup>3</sup>

This report, which is based on research, including extensive interviews, conducted in Baghdad and the provinces, retraces the phases of this young generation's emergence over the past fifteen years (outside the Kurdish region, where different forms of these dynamics are at play). While it refers at times to the situation of women, its primary focus is on young men, who are the ones to join fighting groups and the first

<sup>1</sup> See, International Crisis Group, "Iraq: Conflict Alert", 24 August 2015.

<sup>2</sup> See "Demographic Indicators", Central Statistics Organisation, <http://cosit.gov.iq/en/rtl-support>. A 2014 Index Mundi database reports that the fifteen to 24 age group has been steadily increasing in the last 30 years and is now some 6.5 million out of 32 million. See, [www.indexmundi.com/iraq/demographics\\_profile.html](http://www.indexmundi.com/iraq/demographics_profile.html).

<sup>3</sup> Crisis Group interview, director, Organisation for Women's Freedom in Iraq (OWFI), Baghdad, 23 July 2015.

in their families to go abroad in search of better opportunities. Women are active in some street protests and join settled husbands abroad; while they do not become fighters, they may give important succour to their male relatives who do. It should be clear, however, that the same failing youth policies that have produced a lost generation of young men are also reducing opportunities for young women, whose potential for Iraq's development – and their own – is thus tragically forfeited.

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## II. The Degeneration of Iraq's Youth

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### A. Pre-2003

The millennial generation's plight flows from the cumulative impact of decades of state decline and decay. Despite much political turmoil during the first two decades after the monarchy was overthrown in 1958, the military leaders enabled considerable social mobility via land reforms that broke up a semi-feudal system, prompting rapid demographic expansion and urbanisation. Oil money helped address a growing urban population's needs, including by giving students scholarships, social benefits and prospects for public-sector careers.<sup>4</sup> The Baath party regime that seized power in 1968 implemented socio-economic policies that aimed to enable careers to which youths could aspire. It also provided housing and access to consumer goods, essential ingredients for starting a family, while keeping prospects for social advancement and political association under tight control.<sup>5</sup>

Since the Iran-Iraq war in the 1980s, however, youths have had neither normalcy nor a sense of progress. That war compelled the regime to shift from redistributive policies to military mobilisation and massive arms expenditures. Iraq lost hundreds of thousands of its young men while being saddled with a large financial debt and the burdens of a million-strong army. Cutting benefits and services, the regime fell back on paternalistic measures favouring only loyalists.<sup>6</sup> Within two years, it invaded Kuwait, an attempted takeover of a wartime creditor that ended in defeat and was followed by brutally suppressed uprisings.

In the next decade, as state institutions crumbled and living conditions deteriorated under UN sanctions, young people, regardless of education or qualifications, had to get by on meagre government salaries or devise other means to survive in a ruined country that offered few prospects of return to the prosperity of the 1970s. Saddam Hussein's regime stayed afloat by naked repression and recruiting young men from destitute areas into its security apparatus, including new militias such as

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<sup>4</sup> Between 1958 and 1977 state employees rose from 20,000 to nearly a million, including soldiers and pensioners. After 1991, nearly 40 per cent of households lived on government salaries. Isam al-Khafaji, "War as a Vehicle for the Rise and Demise of a State-Controlled Society: the Case of Ba'athist Iraq", in Steven Heydemann (ed.), *War, Institutions, and Social Change in the Middle East* (Berkeley, 2000). The regime benefited from the formula its predecessor negotiated with international oil companies in 1952, which gave it a 50-per-cent profit share of operations, and other agreements that yielded larger sales revenues. Abbas Alnasrawi, *The Economy of Iraq: Oil, Wars, Destruction of Development and Prospects, 1950-2010* (London, 2010), pp. 2-3. On modernisation, Isam al-Khafaji, "The Myth of Iraqi Exceptionalism", *Middle East Policy* (2000).

<sup>5</sup> In Saddam Hussein's words, "if you catch the youth, you catch the future". Quoted in Eric Davis, *Memories of the State: Politics, History, and Collective Identity in Modern Iraq* (Berkeley, 2005), p. 1. During the 1970s, the youth ministry promoted youth associations and sports clubs. During the Iraq-Iran war, the Baath party launched a literary journal, *al-Talia al-Adabia*, (*The Literary Vanguard*), dedicated to young writers praising the war effort. See *ibid.*

<sup>6</sup> In an example of the economic breakdown the war precipitated, university libraries stopped buying new books in 1986, beginning a twenty-year hiatus in education. Meanwhile, soldiers who had killed more than twenty Iranian soldiers were rewarded with 5,000 Iraqi dinars (ID) (nearly \$15,000) or more. See Zaid al-Zaidi, *Al-Bina'a al-ma'nawi li al-quwwat al-musallaha al'Iraqiyya* (Beirut, 1995), pp. 324-325. (Before the UN imposed sanctions on Iraq in 1990, a dinar was worth about \$3. After sanctions, the dinar plummeted and at times fluctuated significantly. Today, the U.S. dollar is worth about ID 1,200. Dinar-dollar equivalents cited in the report attempt to reflect the rate at the time of the event or period discussed.)

Saddam's Fighters (Fedayeen Saddam), and giving them status, uniforms, guns and a basic salary in return for blind loyalty.<sup>7</sup> By 2003, society had been degraded materially, psychologically and organisationally.

### B. *The U.S. Occupation*

Post-invasion blunders, combined with the UN embargo's devastating legacy, burdened the U.S. struggle to control, rule and rebuild. The invasion and subsequent attempt to remake Iraq reshuffled the ruling elite, empowering regime opponents back from exile with little connection to the population, governing skills or experience.<sup>8</sup> The cadres trained (typically on scholarships abroad) and empowered in the earlier state-building process had reached retirement age, creating a gap filled by the returnees and those who benefited from the massive U.S. cash influx and resulting social mobility that disrupted hierarchies.

The new leaders inherited an oil-dependent country whose largest employer remained the state. Rather than diversifying the economy, they sought to control ministries to appropriate resources and build a popular base by offering supporters jobs in return for loyalty. The political system the U.S. created with the elected 2005 Transitional Government encouraged political-party appropriation of state institutions. Ostensibly designed to ensure equitable representation of ethnic and religious communities (the *muhāsasa*, "allotment" principle), it encouraged the spread of party-based patronage networks throughout the public sector. Majeeda al-Timimi, a parliamentary finance committee member, explained:

Before 2003, the planning ministry was tasked with posting vacancies for each ministry and following up recruitment. After 2005, in order to respect the principle of *muhāsasa*, we decided that each minister should be in charge of employment in his ministry. But each minister represented a political party and would recruit only from within his party.<sup>9</sup>

The public sector remained almost the sole source of jobs, but Iraqis could access and rise in it only through affiliation with the newly empowered parties. This increased the gulf between politicians, ensconced within the capital's heavily fortified Green Zone, and ordinary citizens. Unable or disinclined to play the party-patronage game, some joined either a budding insurgency organised by ex-regime elements and Islamist radicals – initially mixed but ultimately mostly Sunni – or the Mahdi

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<sup>7</sup> See Pierre Darle, *Saddam Hussein, maître des mots: du langage de la tyrannie à la tyrannie du langage* (Paris, 2003). Created in 1994, Fedayeen Saddam was a militia that recruited uneducated men in their twenties. Paramilitary youth organisations subsequently expanded, drawing ever-younger recruits. Founded in 1998, Saddam's Lion Cubs (Ashbal Saddam) prepared teenagers to become good Fedayeen. Saddam's Jihaz al-Himaya al-Khaas security guard recruited youths in their mid-twenties from poor areas, most of whom had not finished studies, and trained them in techniques like assassination and recruiting informants. Isam al-Khafaji, "State Terror and the Degradation of Politics in Iraq", *Middle East Report*, no. 176 (1994), p. 18.

<sup>8</sup> See Crisis Group Middle East Report N°52, *The Next Iraqi War? Sectarianism and Civil Conflict*, 27 February 2006.

<sup>9</sup> Crisis Group interview, Baghdad, 27 July 2015. After 2005, applicants needed a recommendation letter (*tazkiya*) from a party to be hired, especially in the bureaucracy's upper ranks – directors-general (*mudir aam*) and their deputies (*naaib*). Crisis Group Middle East Report N°55, *Iraq's Moqtada al-Sadr: Spoiler or Stabiliser?*, 11 July 2006, p. 15.



army (Jaysh al-Mahdi), a militia led by Shiite cleric Moqtada al-Sadr, who recruited youths from impoverished urban areas and turned them into vigilantes. Beyond the prospect of earning an income, what mobilised these youths was a sense of empowerment and ability to confront a foreign occupation.<sup>10</sup>

Over time, these movements grew larger, more sectarian and more violent, engaging young members in a contest over ownership of the capital in particular. The Mahdi army expanded its reach over Baghdad, evolving into a gang-style militia even Sadr could not control.<sup>11</sup> Al-Qaeda and other insurgent groups proliferated and grew in Baghdad's outskirts and neighbouring Anbar governorate, where they found a deep pool of young recruits. Those who faced off in the growing sectarian war were each other's peers.

Starting in 2007, the U.S. "surge" pushed back these groups and suppressed their appeal, but by largely relying on patronage to co-opt their upper echelons, a resurgent government further strained links between the youths and their nominal leaders. The U.S. military gave large sums of money to Sunni tribal chiefs who organised their youths in tribally-based militias (Majalis al-Sahwa, Awakening Councils) to push al-Qaeda out of their areas. The government replicated this in the south with the Majalis al-Isnaad (Support Councils), heaping money on tribal leaders to undermine the Mahdi army's appeal among Shiite youth.<sup>12</sup>

This policy gave Sunni insurgents and Shiite militiamen salaries and prospects of jobs as police or soldiers, but it also funnelled enormous resources to tribal figures who often pocketed them. Access to public-sector jobs remained limited to those with connections to political party figures, thus keeping some militia commanders and ex-insurgents off the government payroll. It was a quick fix, perhaps needed at the time to roll back al-Qaeda, but one that reinforced patron-client relationships and failed to reintegrate fighters into civilian life.

### C. *The Maliki Years*

From 2009, the steady growth of oil production (based on new contracts with companies such as BP and Shell) gave Prime Minister Nouri al-Maliki (2006-2014) and his party sufficient money to buy social peace and project an illusion of stability.<sup>13</sup> However, Maliki's bold style concealed a fragile, dysfunctional state.

Maliki's Islamic Daawa party, an elitist group of middle-class professionals formerly in exile or underground, cleverly managed Green Zone politics but did little

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<sup>10</sup> Ex-Fedayeen Saddam were the most effective fighters against the U.S. in Basra in 2003 and Najaf in 2004 but soon split up into the Mahdi army and various insurgent groups. Sadr, youngest son of a prominent Shiite cleric murdered by the regime, portrayed himself as personifying poor, jobless youths unable to find a place in the new system. Peter Harling, "Iraq's Lost Generation", *Al-Quds al-Arabi*, 11 December 2007.

<sup>11</sup> See Crisis Group Middle East Report N°72, *Iraq's Civil War: the Sadrists and the Surge*, 7 February 2008, Section II.

<sup>12</sup> On the tribes' counter-insurgency role, see Crisis Group Middle East Reports N°74, *Iraq after the Surge I, The New Sunni Landscape*, 30 April 2008; and *Iraq's Civil War*, op. cit.

<sup>13</sup> From 2009, oil exports rose to above two million barrels per day at a time when the barrel price exceeded \$100. Some 90 per cent of Iraq's budget derives from oil exports, a sector that, in 2014, employed less than 2 per cent of the population. After 2009, state revenues doubled. "Iraq Budget 2013", Joint-Analysis Policy Unit, January 2014; and "Republic of Iraq, Public Expenditure Review", World Bank, August 2014, Chapters I-II.

more than dispense public-sector jobs and funds to its constituents. Oil-income redistribution was limited to the public sector, including substantial allocations for recruiting youths to the security forces.<sup>14</sup> Government youth initiatives merely perpetuated party dominance over local and national institutions. In 2006, Jasem Mohammed Jaafar, youth and sports minister and a member of the Turkmen Islamic Union, a Shiite Islamist party with close Daawa ties, established and funded youth local committees (*lijan shababiya*) and a Youth Parliament (Barlaman al-Shababi). Both were dominated by members handpicked by Daawa and allied parties. Recruitment favoured persons who shared family ties or a social profile with party leaders. Funds were thus redistributed to committees that essentially were a junior adaptation of the country's leadership.<sup>15</sup>

The revenue bonanza accelerated trends that had surfaced during the sanctions decade. Party leaders were the tip of the patronage pyramid, redistributing resources across state institutions and so perpetuating and exacerbating the favouritism and corruption long rife in public administration.<sup>16</sup> Parties' grip on state institutions and administrative corruption were mutually reinforcing. Lower-ranking members gave bribes for senior appointments, enabling them to take kickbacks from subordinates or clients in turn. This disproportionately benefited senior managers with party connections at the expense of mid-rank civil servants, whose salaries stagnated as costs rose, directly affecting the quality of services. Through party connections teachers tried to obtain posts that would give them the chance to demand bribes from students;

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<sup>14</sup> Since 2009, defence expenditures have steadily risen, reaching 20 per cent of the state budget in 2013. Joint-Analysis Policy Unit, op. cit. The interior and defence ministries had nearly 700,000 and 300,000 employees in 2012, respectively, matched only by the education ministry, with nearly 650,000. See "Republic of Iraq, Public Expenditure", op. cit., p. 115.

<sup>15</sup> A former Youth Parliament member explained the selection process: "The [youth and sports] ministry selected local youth committee members through an online selection process based on applicants' course work, educational degree and experience. A high-school diploma was a minimum requirement. In turn, youth committees elected representatives to the Youth Parliament from among their members. Political parties fully controlled the selection process. Most ... candidates ... had political parties supporting their application, while those competing for the parliament even had parties funding their campaigns". Crisis Group Skype interview, 12 March 2016. Following the change in government in 2014, the youth ministry had a minister from the Islamic Supreme Council in Iraq (ISCI), who removed Youth Parliament funding. Separately, in 2013, the Sadr-controlled planning ministry signed a four-year National Development Plan in coordination with the U.S. Agency for International Development, which identified youth among its targets. The plan had achieved little when a year later, a new minister from the Mouttahidoun bloc changed priorities and redirected funds to reconstruction in areas recovered from IS. Text of National Development Plan, at [www.mop.gov.iq/mop/resources/IT/pdf/123.pdf](http://www.mop.gov.iq/mop/resources/IT/pdf/123.pdf).

<sup>16</sup> Crisis Group Middle East Report N°113, *Failing Oversight: Iraq's Unchecked Government*, 26 September 2011. Politicians would sell managerial positions to the highest bidders among their supporters to extract kickbacks. A 30-year-old engineer said, "The position of engineering college dean is highly profitable. To get it, you need to pay some 150 million ID [nearly \$135,000]. Any companies that need their projects approved by the dean before submitting them to the government would have to pay him at least 25 million ID [nearly \$20,000] for each project; in this way you can earn back quite quickly what you spent for the position". Crisis Group interview, Baghdad, 29 July 2015. Also, Zaid al-Ali, *The Struggle for Iraq's Future: How Corruption, Incompetence and Sectarianism Have Undermined Democracy* (Yale, 2014).

party-connected officers received senior appointments that allowed them to take a portion of their subordinates' pay.<sup>17</sup>

Education exemplified the vicious circle that directly affected youths. Many teachers supplemented incomes by giving private instruction, thus assuming a workload that conflicted with their day jobs. Students whose families could not afford to pay for private instruction in some form were less equipped to pass exams required for the public-sector jobs they coveted.<sup>18</sup> A private-school director said:

Private-school students have a greater chance to do well in exams. Their teachers know which topics to prep .... If something goes wrong, their families come to me and say, "but we are paying you!", expecting their children to pass .... So teachers sell exam questions to students to make sure they succeed.<sup>19</sup>

As services deteriorated, many Iraqis felt entitled to loot the state.<sup>20</sup> Many also turned to state jobs, less from a public duty sense than to ensure a basic livelihood. The survival culture fashioned in the sanctions era became further entrenched, reaching the point of putting a price on inter-personal relationships, as tribal leaders who benefited from state patronage monetised ties with members, losing youths' respect and loyalty in the process. A tribal leader in Kirkuk complained:

After 2003, we had to connect with the stronger parties to get money and weapons to protect our land and satisfy our members. Then insurgent groups came and supplied our young with more money and more powerful weapons than we could. The ["surge"] temporarily resolved the problem, but as soon as it ended, I had nothing to offer my tribe. Before 2003, the tribal leader was the intermediary between tribe and state. If any problem arose, it was up to him to negotiate and settle it. He was a symbol (*ramz*). But today the young just want weapons and money. If they can't get them from us, they get them elsewhere. This has broken the line of allegiance between a tribe's leader and members.<sup>21</sup>

Even the nuclear family was weakened, to the point that, in some extreme cases, relatives began to abuse each other. Some fathers encouraged or even forced their daughters to marry and divorce repeatedly to collect a bride's price multiple times;

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<sup>17</sup> A teacher explained: "The education ministry decides where to post high-school teachers: in Baghdad or the provinces. Political parties influence the ... choice by appointing their supporters in the capital where students tend to be wealthier and can pay bribes to pass exams or see questions in advance. Parliament will never approve a law to regulate teachers' postings, because parties would lose their power over the process". Crisis Group interview, Baghdad, 28 July 2015.

<sup>18</sup> A sixteen-year-old girl from Baghdad's Sadr City neighbourhood said, "I have continued attending public school, because my family cannot afford a private teacher, who charges 50,000 ID (nearly \$45) per class. The boys in our family quit their studies after primary school in order to look for a job". Crisis Group interview, Baghdad, 28 July 2015.

<sup>19</sup> Crisis Group interview, Baghdad, 26 July 2015. The public health system suffers from similar dysfunctions. Only freshly graduated, inexperienced doctors are in public hospitals, working more than ten hours a day, six days a week. Older, more experienced doctors only work for money they earn by establishing private clinics. Crisis Group observation, Baghdad, July 2015.

<sup>20</sup> In one example, some hospitals are known to sell drugs to people with privileged access, who resell them at a personal profit. Crisis Group observations, Baghdad, July 2015.

<sup>21</sup> Crisis Group interview, Istanbul, 20 October 2015.

in other cases, parents turned a blind eye to sexual abuse of under-age children to extract compensation from the abuser's tribe.<sup>22</sup>

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<sup>22</sup> The OWFI reported a rise in divorces as a result of parents pressing daughters to marry young or girls' and boys' haste to marry to escape their household: "In 2015 [w]e have registered at least 4,150 divorces in Baghdad, a record number. A family sees a man with a new car who proposes to their daughter, and they agree to marriage without even checking how he was able to buy the car. Then they discover he is jobless, and problems begin". Crisis Group interview, Baghdad, 28 July 2015. Crisis Group spoke with a sixteen-year-old boy from Sadr City who said he had been a victim of sexual abuse. His father threw him out of the house while obtaining financial compensation from the culprits, which he pocketed. Other interviews suggested a wider trend.

### III. Generation 2000

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The patronage system that ensured Maliki's and the political establishment's survival froze politics around a small network of persons, undermined possibilities for leadership renewal within parties, further eroded governance and, while appearing to have achieved social peace, laid the ground for new turmoil.

The millennial generation has grown up with vanishing reference points in both public and private spheres and few prospects. Each task is an encounter with a Green Zone-controlled patronage network whose tentacles spread throughout the corrupt bureaucracy, seeming to envelop the country's life.<sup>23</sup> In destitute areas, young men needing to contribute to family income abandon studies before finishing primary (*ibtidaaiya*) or middle-school (*mutawasita*) to take precarious day-labourer (*kasaba*) jobs.<sup>24</sup> Entering the job market young, men may rush to marry, but those able to earn enough to pay the bride's price often lack funds to rent a small apartment. Continuing to live with family can create tensions between spouses and in-laws and other problems. A twenty-year-old woman recounted:

My father was murdered in the 2007 sectarian war. Three years ago I agreed to marry a man I had met only twice. I moved in with him and his mother. My mother-in-law continually asked me for money, and when I did not comply, she incited my husband to beat me. When I gave birth to a boy, my husband divorced me, and I never saw the child again. My family refused to take me back, so I found myself in the street. I had no other choice but to work in a night club in Karrada [Baghdad central district], where I got pregnant again. The police raided the club, and I went to prison where I gave birth to my second child.<sup>25</sup>

Lack of prospects also affects the educated middle class. Professionals are no longer at the top of the social pyramid, as salaries have not kept up with costs. New doctors and engineers can hardly afford to rent in their own neighbourhoods, so are reluctant to marry on starting income. A university degree, unlike party ties, no longer

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<sup>23</sup> What should be simple bureaucratic procedures become interminable processes as a way of generating income throughout the bureaucracy. A 26-year-old man recounted his experience renewing a driver's licence: "I wanted to do it without bribing anyone. I first did an eye exam at a health ministry branch, which I took to the traffic police ... in charge of renewing driver's licenses, and the process became endless. They asked me for an official paper from my neighbourhood administrator proving my residence in Baghdad .... Then they asked me for the signatures of the head of the provincial council and the mayor .... the owner of a nearby barbershop told me the only way to speed things up would be to pay an extra 50,000 ID (nearly \$45) to the directorate's cashier". Crisis Group interview, Baghdad, 27 July 2015.

<sup>24</sup> Baghdad day labourers earn on average 35,000 ID (less than \$30) per week. They tend to live in neighbourhoods where they pay 200,000 ID (nearly \$180) per month for a two-room flat, possible only through the family's collective income and living under one roof with other relatives. A Sadr City teenager was typical: "I was born here in 2000. We grew up with thirteen children in the same flat of 36 sq. metres. When I finished primary school, I began working in the central market for 5,000 ID [less than \$5] per day". Crisis Group observations, interview, July 2015.

<sup>25</sup> Crisis Group interview, Baghdad, 26 July 2015. A sixteen-year-old girl in Sadr City explained that, to save money, four families lived in her house, and "sometimes married couples share a room, using a blanket suspended from the ceiling to separate themselves from the others before going to bed". Ibid. See also Rania Abouzeid, "Out of Sight", *The New Yorker*, 5 October 2015.

guarantees that graduates can practice their professions.<sup>26</sup> Regardless of sect or economic background, youths are confronted with a choice: complicity with the patronage system, find a way to circumvent it, join a military group or leave. Many fight with or against IS or try a dangerous journey to Europe because it offers better prospects than trying to navigate a suffocating reality.

#### A. *Isolation, Ghettoisation and an Evolving Sectarianism*

Generation 2000's early experience was the 2005-2007 sectarian war, which drew invisible, insurmountable boundaries between cities and provinces and between communities that demarcated themselves by ethnic and confessional identities. The "surge" reinforced isolation of groups in Baghdad, separating them by concrete walls. After the 2011 U.S. troop withdrawal, the Maliki government retained these and imposed restrictions on mobility, in some cases limiting neighbourhood entry to residents. With the heritage of sectarian divide, these steps further restricted young people's social connections. For many, relationships were limited to their localities, which often overlapped with their ethnic or confessional group.<sup>27</sup>

Those now in their late twenties participated in or saw the street fighting known as *al-ahdath al-taefiya* (the sectarian events). Relatives or friends were killed or forced to leave neighbourhoods depending on their sect. The millennials experienced displacements as children; by teen years, the barriers had solidified.

While the former generation knew sectarian divisions and participated in the fighting, the present one has grown up with sectarianism as an a priori condition that constrains friendships, mobility, marriage choices and daily practices.<sup>28</sup> Elders with civil war memories avoid certain areas, but young Iraqis barely know such localities. A twenty-year-old born and raised in Mahmoudiya, a Shiite town south of Baghdad, said of a neighbouring Sunni town he has never seen, "in Latifiya, they have services because they are Sunnis. Here, because we are Shiite, we don't have anything, except the *marjaeeya*. If Daesh [IS] enters Mahmoudiya, the Latifiya Sunnis will transfer allegiance and side with them".<sup>29</sup> In a near-mirror image, a 30-year-old Sunni from Baghdad's Mansour neighbourhood, echoing perceptions rooted in the civil war, said he considered Mahmoudiya dangerous: "you can hardly drive [there] and expect to get out in one piece".<sup>30</sup>

<sup>26</sup> A schoolteacher's average monthly salary does not exceed \$400; a doctor's average start is \$600/\$650. Neither is enough to rent an apartment and live in a Baghdad middle-class area like Mansour, Harethiya or Karrada, with \$500-\$1,000 rents. Crisis Group observation, July 2015.

<sup>27</sup> See on the civil war, Crisis Group Report, *The Next Iraqi War?*, op. cit., on security measures under Maliki, Crisis Group Report, *Iraq's Sunnis*, op. cit., and Amin Sade, "Obstructing Reforms", *Sada*, 8 August 2013. The divide affects practices, habits and relations. A Baghdad twenty-year-old said, "if you want to go out, you feel you cannot. Even friendship is complicated; you never know who you can trust". Crisis Group interview, 29 July 2015. Most southern youths have visited only Karbala and Najaf for pilgrimages, never a Sunni area or Baghdad. Those born in Ramadi, have rarely visited Baghdad, not 90 minutes away. Crisis Group observations, 2013-2015.

<sup>28</sup> An OWFI member said, "the practice of intra-family marriage is on the rise even among middle-class professionals. Parents prefer to marry their daughters to family members or people of the same neighbourhood". Crisis Group interview, Baghdad, 28 July 2015.

<sup>29</sup> Crisis Group interview, 23 July 2015. A Shiite from Baghdad's Karrada neighbourhood called Latifiya an "al-Qaeda cradle". Crisis Group interview, July 2015. The *marjaeeya* is the source of emulation in Shiite religious tradition, in Iraq embodied by Grand Ayatollah Ali al-Sistani.

<sup>30</sup> Crisis Group interview, Baghdad, July 2015.

Geographical isolation has nurtured sectarianism by locking youths within the boundaries of their community.<sup>31</sup> While Sunnis and Shiites confronted each other in the streets during the sectarian war, young people from different sects now have competing representations of reality that depend on the narratives to which they are exposed within their localities rather than direct experience. The gulf between those competing representations has become sharper since the rise of IS. A Shiite student from Baghdad comparing 2006 with today said, “there is no longer a difference between Shiites and Sunnis in Baghdad. No one will ask you what you are at a checkpoint”, but this contrasted with the view of a Sunni youth in Baghdad, who perceived sectarian discrimination on the rise: “Now they know immediately who is Sunni or Shiite without even checking your ID or your name as before. They look at the type of car you drive, the way you dress, the way you greet them”.<sup>32</sup>

### B. *Growing Anti-establishment Sentiment*

The degradation of state institutions nurtured feelings among youths of disdain toward political leaders. Asked for an opinion, the answer frequently is “*bas ya-boog*”, a dialect expression meaning “they just steal”. Youths regularly accuse them of pocketing public resources and constraining individual aspirations. In the words of a young man who frequents the park on Mutanabbi Street (a rare Baghdad place where youths still gather Friday mornings):

In Iraq, nowadays, all you need to be a successful politician are weapons and fighters. The only thing politicians know well is how to steal, steal, steal [*bug, bug, bug*]. They are anti-people: they invade and occupy each corner and aspect of our life. They are the main reason for this [IS] conflict. The state is a failure. When I see a soldier, I do not respect him .... The army is a cowardly bunch.<sup>33</sup>

Though these feelings are widely shared across sectarian lines, young people are divided in expressing them. The sentiments have surfaced within civil society initiatives that sought to broaden their local dimension, but isolation within localities and sects has made youth mobilisation on a national scale difficult. The protests that began in Tunisia, Egypt and Syria in 2011 had a unique character in Iraq. Protesters expressed a common theme of fighting corruption and bad governance, but the movements that erupted against local politicians in Baghdad, Basra and even Suleimaniya in Iraqi Kurdistan remained largely disconnected.<sup>34</sup> Youths shared an emotive impulse against the status quo but seemed disinclined to establish a political movement against the country's leadership.

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<sup>31</sup> Isolation cemented local identities even within the same sect. Thus, the large majority of Mahmoudiya youth have never visited Baghdad's Sadr City (its largest Shiite neighbourhood) despite it also being Shiite-populated and a mere twenty kilometres away. A Mahmoudiya resident said he considered this “a dangerous trip”. Sadr City residents, in turn, would be surprised to hear of anyone having visited Mahmoudiya. Crisis Group observations, July-September 2015.

<sup>32</sup> Crisis Group interviews, Baghdad, July 2015. Sunnis are more likely to be on the receiving end of discriminatory practices.

<sup>33</sup> Crisis Group interview, Baghdad, 26 July 2015.

<sup>34</sup> See Marina Ottaway and Daniel Kaysi, “Iraq: Protests, Democracy, Autocracy”, Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, 28 March 2011. Civil society initiatives remain largely local. Ahmad Thamer Jihad, “Don't leave Iraq to thieves and murderers”, *Niqash*, 5 November 2015.

The millennial generation has an amorphous identity: depending on the context and who seeks to mobilise them, ethnic, sectarian, tribal, locally geographic or other sub-national identity will emerge as the avenue through which members see and challenge the establishment. Iraqi youth were the most vulnerable to deepening sectarian polarisation after the Syrian uprising, and this pitted young against young along sectarian lines even as they all shared an anti-establishment animus.



## IV. Mobilisation for Combat

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### A. *A Dying Insurgency's Revival*

In 2012, Syria's uprising became a full-scale war involving neighbouring powers (Iran, the Gulf monarchies and Turkey) that polarised the region partly along sectarian lines. Iraq, the geographic epicentre, was quickly affected, prompting re-mobilisation of ex-insurgents and militia members. A protest movement allegedly funded by Gulf sources emerged in Sunni areas. Anti-establishment feelings boiled over in protests whose civil-society character mixed with symbols of a sect or geographic area. Clerics, tribal leaders and branches of the old Islamist and nationalist insurgency organised tent sit-ins and "protest squares" in the main majority-Sunni cities, Ramadi, Samarra, Hawija and Mosul. Twenty-year-old clerics and tribal leaders enlivened Friday prayers, and teenagers joined in, making the protest squares a social gathering as well as expression of political engagement.

Compounded by government failure to offer prospects to especially the masses of idle entrants into adult life, the protests acquired a stronger political overtone. In May 2013, special forces cracked down on a tent sit-in Hawija, killing at least 50 and rekindling revenge sentiments among those in their late twenties who retained vivid memory of the sectarian-driven repression they had experienced the previous decade and whose insurgency had failed to defeat the Shiite-dominated government.<sup>35</sup> While elders tried to contain the situation, young and ambitious clerics and tribal leaders incited Friday audiences.<sup>36</sup> Their aggressive rhetoric caught on among teenagers who had hardly been outside their own cities and whose experience of the government and Shiites was often limited to unpleasant interactions with security forces.<sup>37</sup> An elder tribal leader participating in the protests worried: "We have a hard time controlling our young boys in the protest squares. We organise football matches to keep them busy, but tension is growing by the day. They ache to take on weapons".<sup>38</sup>

The government's attempt to end the protests by co-opting Sunni tribal and political figures disrespected by young people consolidated a partnership between ex-insurgents in their late twenties and Sunni teenagers. The former viewed the jihadist cells scattered across the Iraq-Syria desert since the time of the U.S. occupation as a temporary ally. Both groups welcomed the jihadists' arrival euphorically, if for different reasons. To ex-insurgents, jihadists were a strong military partner in their desire to revenge the lost battle against the government. Teenagers, with no memory of the jihadists' al-Qaeda in Iraq incarnation, welcomed them as champions of a new

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<sup>35</sup> See Crisis Group Middle East Report N°50, *Falluja's Faustian Bargain*, 28 April 2014, p. 9.

<sup>36</sup> Two clerics in their twenties, Sheikh Saeed al-Lafi from Ramadi and Qusay al-Zein from Falluja, emerged as prominent Friday prayer protest leaders in the squares. For an overview of Sunni youth protests and government response, see Crisis Group Report, *Iraq's Sunnis*, op. cit.

<sup>37</sup> A former insurgency member taking part in a sit-in said, "we think that the armed opposition did not achieve its goals in Iraq and that America handed Iraq to Iran and the Shiites. Factions of the former resistance have been scattered across the country, but we are counting on the success of the Syrian revolution, which will provide us with a surplus of men and weapons. Maliki's government fully realises this. We see in these protests a chance to liberate Iraq from Iran". Crisis Group interview, Erbil, 14 February 2013; Crisis Group Report, *Iraq's Sunnis*, op. cit., p. 23.

<sup>38</sup> Crisis Group interview, Sheikh Majeed, Ramadi, 9 March 2013.

order.<sup>39</sup> A resident of al-Qaim, who witnessed the fall of his border city to IS militants in June 2014, recounted:

Fifteen fighters entered the city. During Friday prayers they announced they had come to end government injustices and terminate the amnesty police and soldiers enjoyed in the city. Young boys took to the street cheering victory. The jihadists recruited a number of these who had no connection to the insurgency and no affiliation with political parties but were supporters of the protests. They tasked them with ensuring protection of public and private property, without asking them to swear allegiance. Only after weeks of testing their potential were the youths asked to pledge absolute allegiance to Daesh.<sup>40</sup>

Jihadist fighters advanced in city after city, village after village, declaring creation of an Islamic State in June 2014.<sup>41</sup> Key to their success was ability to direct youths' anti-establishment sentiments against the entire political class and redefine a confrontation that began between Sunni street and Sunni elites as a sectarian one opposing Sunni provinces and the Shiite-dominated Baghdad government.

#### **B. Militia Commanders Return**

Something similar swept across the Shiite provinces. As security in Syria deteriorated, the threat against the Shiite sanctuary of Sayyida Zeinab in Damascus revived memories of the traumatic 2006 bombing of the Al-Askari Mosque in Samarra, apparently by al-Qaeda. From late 2012, Iranian Revolutionary Guards began recruiting Iraqis who had been militia commanders during the U.S. occupation and failed to integrate into the political process afterward. These men reorganised militias or built new ones and sent fighters to Syria under the tolerant eye of the Maliki government and the main Shiite political forces.<sup>42</sup> Shiite clerics, often militia commanders' peers who had climbed to authority in Shiite religious seminaries (*hawza*) and been confined to the shadows after the militia fight ended, also found an opportunity to regain popularity by supporting such recruitment.<sup>43</sup>

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<sup>39</sup> In 2005, under Abu Mus'ab al-Zarqawi's leadership, al-Qaeda in Iraq proclaimed an Islamic State. Its authoritarian practices challenged local and tribal values, unleashing an indigenous, U.S.-supported revolt that pushed it out of urban centres into the desert; in 2011, it took advantage of Syria's chaos to move there and grow. Crisis Group, *Iraq after the Surge I*, op. cit.

<sup>40</sup> Crisis Group email communication, al-Qaim resident living under IS, October 2014.

<sup>41</sup> For background, see Crisis Group Alert, "Iraq after Hawija: Recovery or Relapse?", 26 April 2013; Reports, *Iraq's Sunnis and the State*, and *Iraq: Falluja's Faustian Bargain*, both op. cit.; and Middle East Briefing N°38, *Iraq's Jihadi Jack-in-the-Box*, 20 June 2014.

<sup>42</sup> Already in mid-2013, nearly 50 fighters weekly were flying from Iraq to Syria to join splinter factions of former Iran-backed militias (the Mahdi army of Shiite cleric Moqtada al-Sadr, the Badr Brigade and the Hizbollah Brigades) under command of ex-militia cadres who had not re-integrated in the political process. "Iraqi Shi'ites flock to Assad's side as sectarian split widens", Reuters, 19 June 2013.

<sup>43</sup> For instance, a man known as Abu Zeinab (nom de guerre), an ex-Mahdi army fighter, was reportedly in charge of organising recruitment, equipment, bookings and security permits for those flying to Syria. Among others with similar roles in Syria were Sheikh Auws al-Khafaji, another Mahdi army splinter figure, and Sheikh Abu Kamil al-Lami, a member of the Mahdi army offshoot, the League of the Righteous (Asaab Ahl al-Haq). In February 2013, Wathiq al-Battat, ex-Hizbollah Brigades (Kataeb Hizbollah), founded a new corps, the Mukhtar Army, with the purpose of defending

The 10 June 2014 collapse of the Iraqi army in Mosul exposed the dysfunction and corruption of the government and Shiite political leadership.<sup>44</sup> Scenes of IS massacring Shiite army cadets at the Speicher military base went viral on social media, further demonstrating Baghdad's impotence.<sup>45</sup> A 26-year-old Hizbollah Brigade fighter said:

We can no longer count on the army to defend this country. They are not motivated to fight, while we are sleeping in the dust on the front lines, risking our lives every moment. Army officers are corrupt; they spend their time in luxurious hotels with women and leave the jihadists on the loose in return for money. This country is in ruins.<sup>46</sup>

The fear that IS could advance to Samarra, Karbala and Najaf validated for Shiites, teenagers in particular, the argument of militia commanders and clerics that they should rally to defend their shrines, because Shiite politicians had failed to create a functioning army.<sup>47</sup> Clerics opened Shiite prayer houses (*husseiniya*) for recruitment, as tribal leaders did with their guesthouses (*mudhif*). Acknowledging the imperative of fighting IS but also seeing the dangers in attempting to resist a mass call-up of Iran-backed militia fighters, the Shiite political and religious establishment tried to ride the wave rather than stem the tide. Iraq's highest religious Shiite authority, Grand Ayatollah Ali al-Sistani, issued a binding religious edict (*fatwa*) on 13 June, calling on youths to volunteer in defence of the country. The call to sign up spread by word of mouth across the south and resulted in a massive mobilisation of young volunteers (*mutatawaaen*) in what was later called "popular mobilisation" (*al-hashd al-shaabi*). A *hashd* officer in Karbala recounted:

We were already active before Sistani's *fatwa*. Now our militia members with previous military experience and [Shiite army] officers are organising recruitment and training. We have recruited more than 3,000 fighters from the tribes to defend the holy shrines in Samarra. Now we are focused on safeguarding the Imam Hussein shrine [in Karbala].<sup>48</sup>

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Shiites against attack and sending fighters to Syria. "Iraqi Shi'ites flock to Assad's side as sectarian split widens", *op. cit.*

<sup>44</sup> The government tolerated the smuggling; fighters flew from Najaf, reportedly directed by a Dawa party member. Yet, before 2014 none of the main Shiite political forces sent fighters to Syria, neither the Badr Brigade, formerly the armed branch of the Islamic Supreme Council in Iraq (ISCI), an Iran-backed former opposition group fighting Saddam Hussein's regime, nor the Mahdi army, the armed branch of the Sadr movement, which received some Iranian backing during the U.S. occupation. Crisis Group interview, Basra, September 2015.

<sup>45</sup> See "Iraq: Islamic State Executions in Tikrit", Human Rights Watch, 2 September 2014; and Tim Arango, "Escaping death in northern Iraq", *The New York Times*, 3 September 2014.

<sup>46</sup> Crisis Group interview, Baghdad, 26 April 2015.

<sup>47</sup> A 24-year-old who fought in Syria said, "the [Iranian] Revolutionary Guards are our brothers; we are part of the same axis, which rejects state borders. I consider [Syrian President] Bashar al-Assad a criminal, but we fought for the protection of Sayyida Zeinab". Crisis Group interview, 4 April 2015. Another, interviewed on his way to fight in Syria, said, "it is my duty to go there and fight to defend Sayyida Zeinab. Should we see Sayyida Zeinab, the Prophet Mohammed's grand-daughter, captured again?" Reuters, 19 June 2013.

<sup>48</sup> Crisis Group interview, officer of the *hashd* Liwa Ali al-Akbar, Karbala, 29 July 2015. Though there is no accurate count of *hashd* recruits, in early 2015 it was estimated to be between 90,000

The Sistani *fatwa* was a deft but desperate attempt to save the legitimacy of the Shiite clerics and the political establishment by giving a nationalist sheen to anti-IS operations under the aegis of the Shiite world's most respected religious leader.<sup>49</sup> It succeeded to an extent but had the unintended result of giving the Shiite community a leadership role in defence of the country, with Shiite teenagers eagerly compensating for the political class' failings by fighting IS in a war against their Sunni peers – in other words, precisely the sectarian conflict IS wanted.

### C. *Volunteering to Fight*

Joining the *hashd* was the only way for many youths to earn a salary and benefits for their families if they died. Most who enrolled had been working as day labourers or in the lower public sector ranks, with no possibility of a decent living.<sup>50</sup> Still, while income was an incentive, their motives cannot be reduced to material interest. The *hashd* attracted many destitute youths in part because recruitment targeted the most densely populated, poorest areas (like Sadr City in Baghdad, Basra, Diwaniya and Amara) or was done near the frontline (for example, Shula and Hurriya neighbourhoods in Baghdad and Karbala). Young men continued to volunteer even when the government or militia defaulted on pay. In 2015, volunteers joined training sessions for reservists that offered no remuneration.<sup>51</sup>

It is likely that youths were driven by enthusiasm and the prospect of heroism, which circulated in their communities, more than by rational motives or religious belief.<sup>52</sup> After Sistani's *fatwa*, *hashd* symbols spread throughout Shiite towns and neighbourhoods. Teachers and parents lauded volunteers and encouraged students and sons to join them. A father who lost his son in battle showed a picture of his body in the hospital and said, "we could not stop him from going. He slipped out to the recruitment centre during the night. He was only seventeen. We are very proud of him. After he joined the *hashd*, he married and brought us his salary".<sup>53</sup>

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and 120,000. See Mustafa Habib, "Are Shiite militias growing more powerful than the Iraqi army?", *Niqash*, 29 January 2015.

<sup>49</sup> The son and representative of Grand Ayatollah Muhammad al-Hakim in Najaf said, "the state failed to protect the people from Daesh and also could not accommodate the volunteers, and so [Grand Ayatollah] Sayed Sistani had little choice but to call for popular mobilisation". Crisis Group interview, Izzeddine Mohammed al-Hakim, Najaf, 28 September 2015.

<sup>50</sup> The large majority of *hashd* volunteers have not finished primary or middle-school studies and worked in precarious conditions as day labourers, making a maximum of 25,000 ID per week (barely \$20), too little to pay monthly rents in the area of some 200,000 ID (nearly \$180). *Hashd* pay differs from group to group. A member in Baghdad said he received 750,000 ID (around \$630) monthly, one in Karbala 875,000 ID (some \$735): 500,000 ID as salary, 250,000 as danger indemnity and 125,000 for food. Crisis Group interviews, Baghdad, Karbala, July 2015.

<sup>51</sup> Crisis Group observations, Baghdad and the southern provinces, July 2015.

<sup>52</sup> The largest proportion of recruits appear to come from the Baghdad and Basra peripheries, while Shiite religious centres, such as Najaf and Khadamiya (in Baghdad), home to religious holy sites, send only a small number. Many come from Karbala, a city with two holy shrines close to the front line with IS in Anbar.

<sup>53</sup> Crisis Group interview, Mahmoudiya, 26 July 2015. A twenty-year-old said: "My uncle is part of the *hashd*. I decided to join the training to help him. My dream is to become an army officer! My father also encouraged me to join to help the country. I'm not afraid to die; everyone has to die sooner or later". Crisis Group interview, *hashd* training centre, Basra, 17 September 2015.

Young people were also attracted by the instant fulfilment, even martyrdom, the *hashd* offered, when no other prospects existed.<sup>54</sup> IS's sudden arrival produced a sense of unpredictability and collective precariousness that persuaded youths to live for the moment rather than plan. Adnan, a 21-year-old from Mahmoudiya, was an exception in his neighbourhood for finishing high school and entering an engineering college in Baghdad, but the *fatwa* dramatically changed his direction:

Once [Grand Ayatollah] Sayed Sistani issued his *fatwa*, I left university and signed up. University is useless at this moment. We must fight and defend the country that the politicians left to Daesh. Politicians are all robbers. Religious figures are not.<sup>55</sup>

The *hashd* also gave youths unprecedented symbolic and material power to play a dominant role in their direct environment and a social ladder that bypassed the patriarchal family, tribal groups and patronage networks of Iraqi society. Many Shiite youths perceive themselves as having the role of saving an Iraq that is theirs to own and reshape within an exclusively Shiite identity ever since Shiite parties won the 2005 elections. Unlike the 2005-2007 war, however, when youths killed one another in their neighbourhoods, the fight against IS leaves room to demonise a less direct and personal enemy whom many have never seen or met.<sup>56</sup>

#### D. *Genie Unleashed*

Neglected for a decade, youths unwittingly became the drivers of a political transformation that the political leadership was ill-equipped to ride or contain. The sharp fall of oil prices, which coincided with IS's ascendancy, reduced funds and further weakened the political class' ability to use patronage to broker social peace.<sup>57</sup> The ruling elites began to look to mobilisation as the best way to secure political and economic assets.<sup>58</sup> Maliki used his position to move money to the *hashd*, in order to align it within the framework of the state and gain leverage over it. The government ended financial aid for tribal leaders, transferred much of the defence and interior ministry budgets to finance the *hashd* through Maliki's office and the national

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<sup>54</sup> A recruitment officer said, "we receive an increasing number of recruits. The problem is with the youngest. Some behave without thinking on the battlefield. The largest problem is with those who join because they want to die". Crisis Group interview, Karbala, 28 July 2015.

<sup>55</sup> Crisis Group interview, Mahmoudiya, 26 July 2015.

<sup>56</sup> A sixteen-year-old volunteer, depicting the enemy he believed the *hashd* was fighting, said, "this is not a war against Sunnis. What we are fighting is similar to the Mongol invasion". Crisis Group interview, *hashd* training centre, Basra, 17 September 2015.

<sup>57</sup> A Badr cadre and provincial council member said of political class unpreparedness, "the problem is that there is no politics. When the situation changes we adjust policy, not the other way around. We are never prepared for the next step". Crisis Group interview, Basra, 17 September 2015. The government calculated the 2014 budget and expenditures on the 2013 average oil price of \$80-\$90 per barrel, setting an ambitious export level of 3.4m barrels per day. In June 2014, the price was \$70 per barrel, and exports were 2.2m barrels. By September, the country had a \$75bn deficit. *Al-Arabiya* website, 26 September 2014. The 2015 price fell further.

<sup>58</sup> Parts of the security apparatus, such as the Badr Brigade, which dominates the police command structure, took off their uniforms and joined the militias. A Badr member said that after the Sistani *fatwa*, "Badr members left the police force and sped to the *hashd* recruitment centres". Crisis Group interview, Sheikh Ahmad Sleybi, Basra, 18 September 2015. See also, "Iraq crisis: Rebranded insurgents gain whip hand on streets of Baghdad", *The Guardian*, 22 June 2014.

security organisation (*jihaz al-amn al-watani*), and compelled each *hashd* unit to register with the defence ministry.<sup>59</sup>

Despite government and Daawa efforts to control the *hashd* within the state, the *fatwa*'s aftermath saw chaotic attempts by Shiite political and religious figures to protect their support by registering the largest possible number of recruits, each to his own faction. Fatah al-Sheikh, a former parliament member, said, "the government has demanded a list of volunteers to fight Daesh. The politicians today are galvanised to collect lists of names to sell to the *hashd*".<sup>60</sup>

They engaged in fundraising and redirected money from religious endowments and religious taxes (*khums*) to secure salaries for their fighters and benefits for the families of those killed in battle, who were deemed martyrs.<sup>61</sup> Thus, the Islamic Supreme Council of Iraq (ISCI) of Ammar al-Hakim funded its brigades from its affiliated civilian ministries and family benefits through the Hakim family's charitable association.<sup>62</sup> Charitable entities connected to party figures have proliferated in the south. Ostensibly set up to address the large influx of Sunni displaced (IDPs) or conduct other civil-society activity, they have direct access to international aid, mostly from UN agencies.<sup>63</sup> They redirect part of this to sustain party patronage networks of individuals, families and tribes the state budget had financed and families of militia volunteers linked to the party they support.<sup>64</sup>

<sup>59</sup> Faleh al-Fayyadh, the national security organisation's head and national security adviser, has minister rank and is close to the Daawa party. The organisation pays each *hashd* brigade commander (*Abu al-Hashd*) according to the registered fighters under his command and distributes their salaries. In November 2014, Maliki's successor, Haider al-Abadi, proposed to give families of those killed in action the same benefits as those killed while fighting in the army: a pension and plot of land. "شمول شهداء الحشد الشعبي بكامل الامتيازات العسكرية" ["Full military benefits for the martyrs of the popular *hashd*"], Council of Ministers, <http://faily.iq/default/?p=28376>.

<sup>60</sup> Crisis Group interview, Baghdad, 29 March 2015.

<sup>61</sup> Beside the national security organisation, religious personalities close to the Sistani *marjaeeya* relied on the religious endowments (*awqaf*) of the Karbala and Najaf shrines and religious taxes (*khums*), 20 per cent of a follower's income. Politicians have also organised fund-raising campaigns by placing collection boxes (*sundug*) in shops and mosques. Crisis Group observation, Baghdad and southern provinces, July-September 2015.

<sup>62</sup> A Sadrist militant critically observed: "The youth ministry [held by an ISCI member] has redirected the youth and its resources toward the war. The minister spends his time inspecting the *hashd* brigades". Crisis Group interview, Sadr City, 4 April 2015. The Hakim charitable foundation in Najaf organises collection of money to compensate families of those killed in battle. Crisis Group observations, Najaf, September 2015.

<sup>63</sup> The strategy of UN agencies and the World Bank has been to partner with local NGOs to implement stabilisation programs and civil society initiatives in the provinces, where organisations receive funding without governmental oversight. A UN official said, "we chose to partner with local organisations to prevent losing reconstruction and stabilisation funds to government corruption". Crisis Group Skype interview, 10 June 2016. However, this procedure has inadvertently invited party figures to establish NGOs to attract funding, which they use to maintain constituents' support and subsidise families of those fighting in their affiliated militias.

<sup>64</sup> A 30-year-old former Daawa-sponsored Youth Parliament member from Karbala began investing in civil society initiatives in 2015, after the new youth and sports minister cut the parliament's funding. His experience shows the Daawa party's flexibility in sustaining its network and dexterity in exploiting international organisations' poor auditing. He said, "political parties have become boring to people. Now is the time of civil society organisations. In 2016 alone, 70 new ones have been established in Karbala. We receive direct funding from UNICEF to help displaced people in Karbala and sustain families in need, with no distinction between Sunnis and Shiites". Crisis Group Skype interview, 29 May 2016. Another civil society activist said, "I have been part of a youth organisation

Yet, overall, parties lack flexibility to reach large numbers of youths. The familiar channels, party offices, co-option of tribal leaders and leverage over local and central state institutions, are no longer effective.<sup>65</sup> Fundraising campaigns can only temporarily cover arms, salaries and benefits. Efforts to attract recruits have exhausted resources and fragmented each main Shiite political party by making their leaders more dependent on external supplies of arms and funding raised through donors.<sup>66</sup> This has largely resulted in the crumbling of traditional parties and empowerment of those party figures who secured local control through their affiliated militias and accumulated economic assets via their affiliated charities.

Militias began to splinter as well. For example, a struggle unfolded within the Daawa party, with Maliki, ousted as prime minister after IS captured Mosul and other cities, attempting a comeback by backing one of the militias. Even the Sadrists' movement, which has mobilised thousands of youths since 2003, has failed to keep full support in its Sadr City stronghold now that it is part of the political establishment.<sup>67</sup> It experienced a sharp fall in supporters for its militia, the Brigade of Peace (Sarayat al-Salam), while former Mahdi army fighters established a myriad of splinter groups, in addition to the League of the Righteous (Asaeb Ahl al-Haq), which broke from the Sadrists' Mahdi army in 2008 over leadership and funding. Hosham al-Thahabi, an ex-Sadrists' militant, commented:

The Sadrists' forces are poorly managed; defections are accelerating, and new militias acting independently from Sadr are appearing. Akram al-Kaabi, a former Sadrists' "defector", joined the League of the Righteous and later established his own militia with Iranian funds. This is bad news, because Sadrists' constituents make up the largest recruitment pool for all militias.<sup>68</sup>

Shiite parties' attempts to recruit members through their offices were overtaken by militias, which reached youths especially by recruiting at the local level via prayer houses. The militias promise swift promotions and responsibilities, allowing recruits to express their identity in ways unimaginable in the army, police or Shiite parties and so boost their social standing in their home areas. In contrast to middle-age

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in Diwaniya. We have received one million ID [nearly \$861] so far. Poor demographic data complicate the auditing and evaluation of these projects. Unintentionally, the UN and other donors have replaced oil income in the parties' efforts to dispense patronage". Crisis Group Skype interview, 27 May 2016.

<sup>65</sup> As the pro-government "support councils" (*majalis isnaad*) faded, tribal leaders lost along with their finances much of their power over younger members, who were now recruited and paid by the *hashd*. Police and other public-sector employees joined different *hashd* factions while continuing to receive government salaries. Crisis Group observations, Karbala, July 2015.

<sup>66</sup> For instance, militias are dependent on Iran for weapons, vehicles and intelligence. See "Are Shiite militias growing more powerful", *op. cit.*

<sup>67</sup> A former Mahdi army fighter said, "many of those who would have joined us in the past no longer do so; they are now recruited by other groups. Our former fighters are 30; they have families and children and are no longer inclined to heroism and adventure. Even if we still keep strong in the south, we witness a decreasing capacity for mobilisation in Sadr City". Crisis Group interview, Sadr City, 7 April 2015.

<sup>68</sup> Crisis Group interview, Baghdad, 5 April 2015.

Green Zone politicians in suits and ties, the militias promote a new generation of military and religious leaders with whom young Iraqis can identify.<sup>69</sup>

Most *hashd* elements have close links to the Iranian Revolutionary Guards, whose military advisers train their affiliated militias into reliable fighting forces that have an ideological orientation consistent with Tehran's and can be deployed even outside Iraq. An ISCI member said there are two types of Shiite *hashd*:

There are the *marjawi* and the *walayi*, the first under the leadership of Grand Ayatollah Ali Sistani and the second under [Iranian Supreme Leader] Ali Khamenei. For us, supporters of the *marjawi*, the *hashd* is only a temporary project; it should reintegrate into the state, obtain funding only from the defence ministry and operate under the prime minister as a future National Guard, a force with power and training similar to the federal police. For the supporters of the *walayi*, the *hashd* should be a force that can be deployed in Syria or anywhere else where it is needed.<sup>70</sup>

As the *hashd* evolved into a forum for intra-Shiite political competition, each faction developed its own icons, symbols and names, complicating any government effort to merge them under a single command within the state. With the government unable to produce an alternative plan for youth, the struggle against IS dragging on and provincial elections anticipated in April 2017, militias leaders and politicians supporting them may leverage external financial and military support to consolidate their power and undermine the Abadi government.<sup>71</sup> Rather than producing a managed decentralisation, this development is handing extensive powers to local bosses without any central government oversight.

### E. *Disaffected Sunni Youth*

Mobilising youth became equally vital for Sunni provincial and tribal leaders intent on countering IS. Without direct access to weapons, they had to give lists of fighters to the national security organisation in Baghdad or Kurdish parties in Erbil so as to claim funds and arms. Unlike at the time of the U.S. "surge", they could not recruit in insurgent-controlled territories and trigger an indigenous reaction against the

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<sup>69</sup> In Karbala, the police leadership forbade the militias to recruit in police stations, forcing them to use Shiite prayer houses (*husseiniya*). Crisis Group observation, Karbala, July 2015. A young man from Sadr City observed: "Each militia has its own way of cutting their eyebrows, or keeping their hair long or short. The most successful recruiters in Sadr City have adapted to the district's style. Sadr City boys like to peel off their eyebrows, apply tattoos and wear tight trousers. In 2004, Mahdi army fighters would not allow such styles; now each militia in Sadr City accepts it and adopts its own distinct symbol". Crisis Group interview, Baghdad, 26 July 2015. Abu Azrael ("the angel of death"), a former Mahdi army fighter, now a member of the Kataeb Imam Ali militia, is an iconic figure with more than 150,000 followers on social media. See "Iraqi fighter gains social media following in fight against ISIS", *Al-Arabiya* (online), 12 March 2015.

<sup>70</sup> Crisis Group interview, Alaa Mousawi, Baghdad, 17 September 2015.

<sup>71</sup> An Asaeb Ahl al-Haq member explained the group's aspirations: "We are not only a military organisation. We have a project of building a state. We want to reform state institutions and transform the *hashd* into a civilian *hashd* (*hashd al-shaabi al-madani*). Political parties' governance has failed in Basra, and in Iraq generally. We have achieved military victories; we have participated in demonstrations calling for change, and we are now ready to become part of the governorate's and country's leadership". Crisis Group interview, Basra, 28 September 2015.



movement. Though they tried to blame youths' turn to IS on the Shiite-dominated government's failure to provide jobs, they themselves had prepared the way for the jihadists' advance by their embrace of the credibility-destroying patronage system. IS military successes exposed them as persons with no anchor in their own societies and no authority over Sunni areas.

They never led but rather fled the Sunni uprising. Once protests began in 2013 and IS advanced, Sunni leaders moved to safer ground (Baghdad, Erbil, Amman), providing additional evidence to constituents of their self-serving policy. Their cooperation with Kurdish or Shiite militias, which they had condemned for years, undermined their legitimacy even more.<sup>72</sup> Away from IS-controlled territory, provincial officials and tribal leaders could rely only on a limited number of individuals who benefited from their patronage (eg, senior police) or close family (*ayyan al-ashira*). Sheikh Ahmad al-Jibouri, a former *sahwa* member, noted:

In 2006, I recruited more than 6,000 fighters and cleaned al-Doura [a Baghdad neighbourhood] of al-Qaeda. Sunni recruitment to the *hashd* is a masquerade! Some tribal leaders, who promise to deliver a certain number of fighters, submit names to the government only to obtain funds, then flee to Amman.<sup>73</sup>

Once safe, Sunni leaders made little effort to assist those living under IS. Instead, like Shiite politicians, they have tried to rebuild patronage networks via externally-funded charities for IDPs, who need guarantors to access safer areas, obtain documents enabling them to resettle and obtain services in the areas of their displacement. These leaders hope outside powers will restore them to their old positions when IS is driven out – as a reward for not joining – and allow them to lead internationally-funded reconstruction.<sup>74</sup>

On the other side of the front line, IS took advantage of the generational divide. As soon as it controlled a territory, it assigned responsibilities to local youths, recruiting them as fighters or giving those with low-ranking jobs a path to reach positions previously reserved for party members.<sup>75</sup> One of its most effective policies was to give leadership posts to the youngest members of a tribe aligned with the government. Ramadi, which IS captured in June 2015, is an example. Its central districts resisted until elders of the Abu Alwan tribe fled to Baghdad, leaving younger members

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<sup>72</sup> A Mosul resident, expressing disenchantment about Atheel al-Nujayfi, the Ninewa governor, having called on the population to resist, then leaving before IS entered, asked: "Why did Nujayfi not defend us? Why he did not warn us? He accused the army so as to blame all on Maliki. He just used us!" Crisis Group interview, Baghdad, 3 April 2015. A Falluja resident living under IS expressed similar feelings: "Young people see their tribal leaders as merchants (*tujjar*). They went to various countries, including Iran, to increase their fortunes and sell them out. As IS advanced, [young people] are on the ground dealing with the situation, while their elders sit in Baghdad hotels". Crisis Group telephone interview, 20 June 2015.

<sup>73</sup> Crisis Group interview, Baghdad (al-Doura), 28 March, 2015.

<sup>74</sup> In Tikrit, a city taken back from IS in April 2015, members of the Jibouri tribe have set up NGOs to work in reconstruction. Crisis Group Skype interview, NGO worker, June 2016.

<sup>75</sup> In Rawa, Anbar governorate, top public jobs (hospitals, public administration, electricity) were in Islamic Party hands. When IS arrived, senior party figures fled, and IS promoted young, low-ranking employees. Crisis Group, telephone interview, al-Qaim resident, 20 June 2015.

in charge. The latter struck a deal with IS, which included a general amnesty and their elevation to tribal chiefs.<sup>76</sup>

The post-IS phase in Sunni areas will be especially challenging, because social hierarchies are developing under IS rule that are parallel with and disconnected from those in areas under government control. The two will be difficult to reconcile. Tribal leaders empowered by IS may be unwilling to step down and could challenge both Sunni political officials and the legitimacy of tribal elders. This, and because they may be vulnerable to retributive violence, might provoke new generational power struggles within tribes. National leaders will need to devise a non-discriminatory policy that targets youths in areas recovered from IS and prevents a Sunni leadership struggle that would exacerbate the generational divide. Otherwise, people will face a stark choice between collaborators with IS and a discredited political clique that out-sourced recovery of Sunni areas to the *hashd* or the Kurds and intends to use reconstruction funds to rebuild its local support.

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<sup>76</sup> A Ramadi resident said, "each tribal leader has a younger cousin (*ibn ammi*) who can claim noble blood and become sheikh of the tribe. There is a new generation of sheikhs in Anbar. Often those appointed to high-profile positions are younger members of tribes whose elder sheikh sided with the government". Crisis Group telephone interview, al-Qaim resident, 29 July 2015.

## V. The Desperate Alternative: Emigration

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Rather than devise a policy that might spare a new generation another conflict, the Shiite political class has attempted to use the *hashd* movement to contain discontent among Shiite youths and redirect it toward the confrontation with IS. Throughout 2015, *hashd* factions sought to absorb the growing numbers of volunteers without affecting military operations by creating reserve forces (*qwwat ihtiyatiya*) that gave students and day workers basic training but often made no other use of them. Under severe financial pressure, the government focused spending on youth mobilisation against IS, diverting it from jobs creation and other purposes. In June 2014, for the first time in a decade, ministries did not post new openings and have posted few since.<sup>77</sup>

Educated young people, the future professional middle class, are at the margin of political leaders' attention, hard hit by the budget crisis and society's militarisation and facing a choice of adjusting to rule by armed groups or emigrating. IS successes have deepened the divide between them and destitute youths empowered by militias. A 23-year-old female student at Baghdad's College of Medicine expressed a common sentiment:

We tolerated many things after 2003, but we reached saturation point. After [the IS conflict], I decided to leave in order to complete my studies abroad. Here I have only a 20-per cent possibility to succeed in what I am doing compared to the previous generation, and we are no longer respected in this society.<sup>78</sup>

Government policy coupled with the economic crisis have helped further marginalise the middle class. In areas the government controls, its fading ability to enforce the law in a militia-dominated environment compels young professionals to ask militias for protection. Armed groups (militias and IS alike) in need of their skills, in particular those of doctors, increasingly try to recruit them, either forcibly or by creating professional associations parallel to the state's.<sup>79</sup>

Other strains result from the higher education ministry's decision not to recognise diplomas from universities in IS-controlled areas. It has attempted to relocate those institutions to areas controlled by Baghdad or the Kurds, but professors and students have difficulty accessing the new sites due to movement restrictions and fear of retaliation.<sup>80</sup> In government-controlled areas, corruption that preceded the

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<sup>77</sup> Majeeda al-Timimi, a member of parliament's finance committee, said, "in June [2014], more than 16,000 new jobs were unassigned for lack of funds, while 30,000 new positions were issued by the national security organisation and nearly \$3 million was allocated to [Maliki's] office to pay the *hashd*". Crisis Group interview, Baghdad, 28 July 2015. Party disinvestment from state institutions was apparent. An employee of the higher education ministry observed: "Since Mosul fell, the ministry has not had resources to complete projects and resume recruitment. The minister asked employees to donate blood for injured *hashd* fighters, and pictures of the *hashd* are on show in the ministry building". Crisis Group interview, Baghdad, 27 July 2015.

<sup>78</sup> Crisis Group interview, Baghdad, 27 June 2015.

<sup>79</sup> Militia factions have established associations of doctors who volunteer to treat injured *hashd* fighters on the front lines. See [www.youtube.com/watch?v=rjydjiBo5dg](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=rjydjiBo5dg).

<sup>80</sup> The higher education ministry has attempted to transfer Mosul College of Medicine to Kirkuk, currently under Kurdish control. Students displaced in Baghdad cannot easily access Kirkuk due to restrictions imposed by the Kurdish regional government. The ministry's alternative proposal to move the college to Baghdad has also failed, since most Mosul professors have relocated to the

IS conflict has become even more rampant. Students who join the *hashd* are often allowed to move up a grade in school despite having failed their exams or stayed away from school, while the most prestigious colleges now have admission quotas reserved for private-school students regardless of their marks.<sup>81</sup>

As a result, a perception has grown among medical and engineering students that they can escape the destructive cycle only by leaving. Syria's conflict pulled the trigger. Starting in 2015, as Turkey's smuggling roads to Greece opened, Iraqis followed Syrians to Europe. The pattern of flight resembled that of militia mobilisation: contagious, spreading by word of mouth and social media, often within small circles of friends in a neighbourhood. But these professionals (particularly doctors) face special challenges. Those trying to leave IS-controlled areas often must pay smugglers heavily. Faced with a massive brain drain, the government has tried to make it difficult for young graduates to obtain the original copy of their diploma, which they need to prove their degree and practice abroad.<sup>82</sup>

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Kurdish region and avoid the capital due to the Shiite militias' control. A practicing doctor said, "whatever will be decided, we risk having a university either without professors or without students". Crisis Group interview, Baghdad, 20 July 2015.

<sup>81</sup> Crisis Group interview, OWFI member, Baghdad, 23 July 2015. A young doctor said admission to the College of Medicine required a high school grade of 97-100 and that the higher education ministry has smoothed admission criteria by allocating a 10 per cent quota for students who did not reach that level, enabling a number of them to use personal connections to gain entry. Crisis Group telephone interview, 20 October 2015.

<sup>82</sup> Doctors can still obtain a copy of their diploma by paying as much as 70 million ID, nearly \$60,000. Crisis Group interviews, Adhamiya hospital, Baghdad, 25 July 2015.

## VI. Taking it to the Street

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### A. Protesters

In July 2015, Iraq's youth found a third way to express discontent: rather than taking to arms or voting with their feet, they staged mass demonstrations to protest poor governance. It started in Basra in July, where resentment against the political establishment intersected with local anger at the provincial governor's repeated failure to improve services.<sup>83</sup> The protests were quickly replicated across the south and in Baghdad under the slogan of fighting corruption (*fasaad*) and demanding political reform (*islah*).

Though the protests were in majority-Shiite areas, they assumed a kaleidoscopic rather than sectarian character, reflecting the rich diversity of society. Protesters hailed from different class backgrounds, raising community symbols alongside nationalist ones. The latter revealed Shiites' appropriation of a nationalist discourse that urban Sunni elites had defined prior to 2003. What started as an anti-corruption campaign soon evolved into an array of demands focused on the end of the post-2003 political system based on ethnic and sectarian quotas (*muhasasa*) and the establishment of a "civil state" (*dawla madaniya*). The insistent appeal for reform reflect young people's rejection of the status quo and their search for a new status and role not currently available. A protester said:

We are for reform: general, total reform! It has been fifteen years now with these same people. We should have popular committees instead of parliament, or a prime minister without a parliament, or a technocratic cabinet. I am not sure what the right formula is. I only know that we should start from scratch.<sup>84</sup>

Like Sunni protests two years earlier, the inchoate nature of demands for radical change created room for radical politicians to capitalise and take charge.

### B. Riding the Wave

Youths found in the new movement a platform for expression more than an avenue for political participation and change. Its hybrid identity made it easy to manipulate. The first to step into the vacuum in August 2015 were some Shiite militias that had led the fight against IS; with battlefield experience, they presented themselves as potent challengers to the faltering Abadi government. The country might have slid into chaos or a militia-led coup except for a second intervention by Grand Ayatollah Sistani, who expressed support for Abadi if he carried out important reforms, including replacing his cabinet with unaffiliated technocrats.<sup>85</sup> This was but a stop-gap, however, and quieted things only temporarily. Weak within his Daawa party and unable to gain support from other blocs, Abadi failed to join the energies unleashed in the streets to his broader reform agenda. Purging top officials accentuated intra-Daawa

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<sup>83</sup> Waheed Ghanim, "Basra's beleaguered governor under fire", *Niqash*, 30 July 2015.

<sup>84</sup> Crisis Group Skype interview, 28 May 2016. Another 30-year-old, who did not join the protests, said, "people don't know what they want or where the country is headed. The demonstrations are merely a channel to express a sense of loss". Crisis Group Skype interview, 27 May 2016.

<sup>85</sup> See "Iraq: Conflict Alert", op. cit. Tim Arango, "In bid to counter Iran, Ayatollah in Iraq may end up alienating it", *The New York Times*, 1 November 2015.

rivalries without bringing sensible change to everyday lives or answering youth's thirst for direction. Embodying the ruling system, the political class was incapable of effecting genuine reform.<sup>86</sup>

As the opportunity slipped from the prime minister's hands, Moqtada al-Sadr, an activist with a clerical pedigree and history of resistance to the U.S. occupation, stepped into the breach. In February 2016, his political bloc, al-Ahrar (Liberals), took charge of the protest movement. Through a meticulously planned youth mobilisation strategy, it attracted segments of youth beyond Sadr's close supporters. For three months, he commanded the street. On 27 February, he organised a mass demonstration in Baghdad's Tahrir central square; a month later, he began a sit-in inside the Green Zone, while his supporters stayed outside, primed to follow him. On 30 April, they scaled the walls and broke into parliament and the council of ministers. According to a participant, "the al-Ahrar bloc set up demonstration committees (Lijna Tandhim al-Tadahur) in all Baghdad districts and the provinces, registering protesters' names and giving them a special budget allowing them to participate in the demonstrations".<sup>87</sup>

Sadr turned the street into a dynamic variable in politics, even a risky one vulnerable to misuse. Appeals for reform quickly became a populist call for the end of the entire political establishment and framework. Yet, his actions seemed mainly to benefit his own bloc in its bargaining with other Shiite parties.<sup>88</sup> They consolidated polarisation between mobilised youth and elites rather than building a bridge to overcome deep social rifts. Abadi's announcement of the offensive against IS in Falluja at the end of May defused the protest by rallying the nation, but the monster only slumbers, ready to be awakened by a crisis in services and politicians seeing an opportunity for advancement.

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<sup>86</sup> On 11 August, parliament backed the first stage of Abadi's reform program, cancelling the positions of deputy prime minister and the three vice presidencies, one of which was held by his predecessor, Maliki. The parties dominating the parliament could not agree on replacing ministers with technocrats, however. A Baghdad resident said, "Abadi changed some top-level figures, but our lives have not changed at all in the past months. So people found in Moqtada al-Sadr a new hope for change". Crisis Group Skype interview, 27 May 2016.

<sup>87</sup> Crisis Group Skype interview, 28 May 2016.

<sup>88</sup> On 26 April, Abadi struck a deal with al-Ahrar, replacing five ministers with technocrats. Three of the five, who had been affiliated with Ahrar, were replaced with new figures who, though technocrats, are close to Ahrar and could work to increase the group's influence. On the political crisis, see Maria Fantappie, "Iraq on the Edge of Chaos", Crisis Group blog post, 14 May 2016.

## VII. Fixing Iraq's Youth Challenge

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Non-state actors have been the most successful in mobilising and framing young people's lives. While the agendas may differ, they have recruited directly within localities (neighbourhood or village); provided a sense of belonging to a collective inspired by ideals (IS: establishing a caliphate; Sadr: fighting corruption); and given opportunities for advancement within informal structures (IS, Shiite militias, the Sadr bloc's demonstration-organising committees), allowing youths to gain prestige in their home environments (family, tribe, neighbourhood).

The government and political parties have been unable to reproduce successful mobilisation and social mobility in their structures. Bewildered and in disarray, the political establishment appears to have opted for a default strategy, counting on the cost of prolonged conflict becoming so high that it may yet recoup some of its legitimacy. Shiite parties that oppose the militias' de facto rule hope growing casualties will exhaust their support.<sup>89</sup> Sunni leaders waiting for IS defeat, hope to regain power and standing in their communities for lack of a better alternative. The risk inherent in such passive approaches is that the conflict's heritage will be prolonged and difficult to overcome both in areas from which IS is dislodged and elsewhere in the country. And what will happen with the many young fighters once their combat role ends? Speaking from experience, an ex-Mahdi army fighter said:

Once the [IS] fight is over, what will we do with those who have become used to fighting? They will blackmail society and claim this is *their* victory, that they have defended *our* houses, *our* families. They will keep their weapons and feel they are above the law. The government may have no choice but to fight them.<sup>90</sup>

The conflict against IS has reshuffled social hierarchies and empowered and legitimised new leaders, creating a fresh reality with which the political class will have to contend sooner or later. In Sunni-populated areas, establishment politicians could try to regain legitimacy by distributing foreign aid and engaging local youths in reconstruction, but this is likely to resurrect the very patron-client relationships that proved unsustainable after the U.S.-led "surge". And if they fail to engage young people beyond the patronage networks, they will be strongly resisted by commanders who fought for IS and could thus recoup a measure of local support. Shiite militia commanders and political figures supporting them, such as Maliki or Hadi al-Ameri, the foremost militia commander, could try to capitalise on the popularity they gained in fighting IS to bid for political power and turn their young fighters into supporters in future elections.

Lack of agility in adjusting to rapid change has enabled a cycle of escalating conflict that could precipitate political class demise. It might also destroy the state's capacity to govern and foreign powers' ability to safeguard their strategic interests through an Iraqi government they need to confront the transnational IS threat. A society increasingly drained of its middle class and populated by armed actors who are eclipsing law-enforcement agencies may cause a growth in micro-conflicts – intra-tribal disputes and gang fighting – that will increase young people's dependence for

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<sup>89</sup> Asked about future policy, an ex-lawmaker close to Abadi said: "Sooner or later people will tire of seeing their children die as martyrs". Crisis Group Skype interview, 28 October 2015.

<sup>90</sup> Crisis Group interview, Baghdad, 10 April 2015.

protection and economic resources on local patrons or militia commanders, or both. Even when these actors are not fighting, their mobilisation efforts may undermine the state's legitimacy and coherence. By calling youths to join street protests while blocking parliament from convening and legislating reforms in May, Sadr already exacerbated the divide between the street and political elites without providing a workable alternative.

Young people whose anti-establishment sentiments are being directed toward opposite poles of a sectarian agenda might become even more susceptible to crass political manipulation by actors intent on fuelling domestic and regional conflicts. Shiite youths have proved a critical resource for Iran, which has recruited them to fight its war in Syria, where one of its principal enemies is IS, which has a significant Iraqi component in both leadership and rank and file. As fighters or emigrants, Generation 2000 could become a transnational challenge.

The generation's grievances and loss of hope can no longer be disregarded. The Abadi government and the international community must, at the eleventh hour, preemptively devise a youth policy grounded in the notion that young people need avenues for political participation and social advancement outside the parties' discredited co-option by patronage. Any post-IS reconstruction and stabilisation campaign, even if implemented locally, requires a national vision for addressing the youth problem and a multiyear plan that targets this age group. Offering youth a clear direction is a greater priority than merely providing funds and jobs.

Until now, the government has used state legitimacy and institutional benefits to boost a mobilisation into militias it did not call for and could neither prevent nor control, and which is undermining state institutions. It should do the opposite: use the same legitimacy and benefits to "civilianise" the *hashd al-shaabi* into a *hashd al-madani* (civilian mobilisation) under its direct control, recruit youths in their communities and organise them within the administrative framework of provincial administrations. This would involve refocusing *hashd* neighbourhood-based recruitment centres from defence to local governance, thus filling a gap left by local authorities who have failed to provide adequate services or security.

Such an effort could resonate with fighters who profess political aspirations. It might allow Iran to preserve its interests in southern provinces, while giving the central government a measure of leverage against it. Most importantly, it could be replicated in areas freed of IS control, where a stability plan involving Sunni leaders should avoid repeating mistakes, including use of state resources to "purchase" local legitimacy. Local leaders should engage youths directly in reconstruction, regardless of tribal affiliation or who fought with or against IS.

More immediately, the government should tackle the militia problem and prospects for the young by organising any further military recruitment under the army, supervised by the defence ministry; developing a plan to provide these new state employees with the usual benefits, or at least guarantee a right to them once funds are available; compelling non-governmental entities to register with the planning ministry, while urging donors to fund only those that are registered and to assist in monitoring use of such funds; and developing a jobs plan for high-school and university graduates and/or a professional-training, apprenticeship scheme, with guaranteed income and pension rights as funds become available.

International institutions that manage financial and development support for Iraq, such as the IMF, the World Bank and UN agencies, should consider whether to revise their approach. By giving financial help to charitable organisations and



initiatives linked to party figures and affiliated militias that operate outside the law, or demanding to reduce state benefits and allowances, they contribute inadvertently to these groups' active undermining of the state. This is something neither they nor the prime minister's other external supporters who profess a desire for a stable, functioning Iraq have an interest in doing.

## VIII. Conclusion

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The plight of Iraq's young people is perhaps the gravest result of the turmoil of the past few decades; unless it creates viable prospects for them, the country is unlikely to escape further cycles of instability. The current vacuum sucks youths into one of three directions: protests (with aspiration to dramatically transform a non-functioning system seemingly immune to reform); fighting groups on either side of a sectarian divide; or migration toward Europe.

The issue is not one of youth radicalisation, as conventional wisdom suggests.<sup>91</sup> Young Iraqis are not radicalised so much as recruited into organisations that provide community and direction, regardless of ideology. The solution lies not in de-radicalisation programs, with heavy emphasis on counter-narratives, as if the problem was addiction, requiring detox, but in giving them viable alternatives that can reduce fighting groups' ability to attract them in the first place.

A fresh, state-based, internationally-backed approach by the Abadi government aimed at reconnecting young people to the society in which they live and breathe is the best formula to prevent destructive exploitation. The past has shown that fighting youths deemed "radicals" and co-opting the others through the usual patronage channels is not a sustainable solution and indeed worsens the problem, if only by pushing fresh waves of desperate emigrants toward distant shores.

**Baghdad/Brussels, 8 August 2016**

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<sup>91</sup> UN Security Council Resolution 2,250, 9 December 2015.

Appendix A: Map of Iraq



The boundaries and names shown and the designations used on this map do not imply official endorsement or acceptance by the United Nations.