



# INVESTING IN IRAQ'S PEACE:

How Good Governance Can Diminish  
Support for Violent Extremism

# EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

When the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS) the Sunni extremist group, quickly conquered much of Sunni-dominated Iraq in 2014, pundits described it as a natural outcome of the country's sectarian inheritance. Iraq's artificial borders, drawn in 1920, placed the country on the fault line of the world's Sunni-Shia divide. ISIS's quick successes, the thinking went, were simply another manifestation of that division. Yet our research in Iraq indicates that a major factor in ISIS' rise was not immutable sectarian division but rather an absence of inclusive, responsive and accountable governance.

After the United States-led invasion of Iraq, political actors actively stoked sectarian divisions for political gain. Sunnis and other minority groups were systematically marginalized, harassed by security forces, charged with terrorism and imprisoned without evidence or trial, and afforded poorer public services (either intentionally or as a result of limited state reach and capacity). These divisive policies fed on sectarian ideologies and catalyzed sympathy for armed insurgencies, which purported to offer marginalized groups an alternative to the corrupt Iraqi government.

News of Prime Minister Maliki's resignation in August 2014 resulted in a dramatic shift in public perceptions of government. Though Prime Minister Maliki's successor, Haider al-Abadi, is also a Shia, Sunnis anticipated an improvement in public service delivery and viewed government institutions more favorably, according to Mercy Corps public opinion surveys. Further, the change in leadership, our study finds, led to a sharp decrease in support for armed insurgents, such as ISIS, among marginalized groups like Iraqi Sunnis. In other words, sectarianism seems to have been overplayed as the primary or sole driver of instability. Getting governance right would, it appears, ameliorate popular support for sectarian militancy.

However, this line of reasoning assumes that expectations of better governance are actually met. While

Prime Minister Maliki's resignation opened a window of opportunity for Iraq to heal the wounds of the previous administration, the new prime minister's reforms are slowly progressing given the various obstacles and vested interests he faces. As a result, public opinion polls show that confidence in the central government continues to erode. Starting in July 2015, public frustration with the government erupted in widespread nonviolent demonstrations throughout the country against corruption, poor services, and sectarianism. The protests have continued into late 2015 after dwindling in early fall during religious holidays.

Yet this nonviolent movement risks being overshadowed by the rise of armed groups, including the increasingly powerful Shia militias. The prime minister appears to exercise little control over armed groups. This presents a grave danger to the future of Iraq. While Mercy Corps' research finds that sectarianism has, to date, been sensationalized as the predominant driver of Iraq's instability, the manipulation of sectarian identities by political actors aligned with these armed groups may nevertheless harden sectarian divisions. Unaddressed, sectarianism could become as intractable as it is often popularly portrayed.

Evidence from this study shows that improving government legitimacy is vital to a just and peaceful Iraq. This does not mean replicating the failures of past "hearts and minds" campaigns meant to win legitimacy for the state through top-down, costly stabilization and reconstruction projects.<sup>1</sup> Rather, effective development can happen even as the conflict continues in Iraq, if approaches are coupled with efforts to enable Iraqi citizens to make their government deliver for them through programs that promote citizen engagement, enhance government-citizen dialogues, and mobilize civic-minded youth to be leaders.

<sup>1</sup> For example, Berman, Felter, and Shapiro (2015) argue that large and more high-profile projects, which lack transparency and community engagement, may empower insurgents and exacerbate hostilities.



There is no silver-bullet to building stability in Iraq but good governance is essential to addressing the root causes of instability and an active civil society is vital to good governance.

Importantly, this research finds that recent citizen-oriented governance investments such as civil society programs are beginning to demonstrate impact: public confidence in civil society is rising, creating an opportunity that must be seized. This report recommends firmer, long-term support for Iraqi civil society, which can broker dialogue between government and citizens, improving transparency, accountability, and legitimacy.

Unfortunately, donor investments in Iraqi civil society and governance are sharply declining. In 2011, the U.S. government was spending an average of \$802,000 per soldier in Iraq – or \$80 billion per year for a minimal 10,000 troop presence. What the U.S. government now

plans to invest in democracy and governance programs dramatically pales in comparison: \$72.5 million.<sup>2</sup> This is a grave policy oversight. There is no silver bullet to building stability in Iraq, but good governance is essential to addressing the root causes of instability, and an active civil society is vital to good governance. This report provides insights and recommendations into how Iraqis and major donors can judiciously and effectively help create the way for a just and peaceful future in Iraq.

<sup>2</sup> "Congressional Budget Justification: Foreign Assistance Summary Tables Fiscal Year 2016," United States Department of State, February 2, 2016, <http://www.state.gov/s/d/rm/rls/ebs/2016/>.



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## CHAPTER I. INTRODUCTION

Today, after close to \$2 trillion invested, repeated military interventions, and hundreds of thousands of lives lost, Iraq remains in crisis. ISIS controls roughly one-third of the country.<sup>3</sup> The costs of the war, along with widespread graft and low oil prices, threaten to bankrupt the state. More than three million Iraqis have fled Anbar, Nineveh, and other areas under the hold of ISIS, resulting in massive internal displacement. Sectarian militias – many of them backed by regional powers – are on the rise, taking advantage of the state's weakness. Meanwhile, popular discontent over government corruption and poor services has erupted into widespread demonstrations throughout the country.



If Iraq cannot deal with these crises, the country risks further instability. A failing Iraq would ripple politically and economically throughout the region. The fallout from a destabilized Iraq is already being felt in the refugee crisis currently facing Europe.<sup>3</sup>

Notwithstanding Iraq's ominous challenges, there is hope. Iraq's people, war weary and tired of sectarian divisions, are eager for a future of peace and development. A new national government, headed by Prime Minister Haider al-Abadi, has announced a major reform package. Civil society, which has long been dormant, has begun to gain the trust of communities and increasingly serves as a vital bridge between citizens and government. These developments have created a space where cycles of violence may be slowed and eventually broken, but the opportunity must be grasped. Iraq's future hinges on understanding and being responsive to the country's underlying sources of instability.

Although Iraq is a unique case, its crises nevertheless parallel those of other states, from Syria to the Democratic Republic of Congo. It is an increasingly common finding: where governments fail to be responsive, accountable, and just toward citizens, insurgent groups can gain traction.

To inform future policy and funding in Iraq and other fragile states, Mercy Corps undertook multiyear research to identify how strengthening governance responsiveness and legitimacy through civil society may lead to sustainable peace. This report is based on data from three rounds of nationwide public opinion surveys between 2013 and 2015, and in-depth interviews with Iraqi citizens: youth, internally displaced persons (IDPs), civil society leaders, government officials, and activists. It presents findings and recommendations for scaling “what works” in Iraq while correcting the country's course where policies may soon fail.

## KEY FINDINGS

**1. Poor governance that results in injustice, real or perceived, is a key driver of conflict:** What is often described as ethnic and sectarian conflict between for example, Sunnis and Shias, Arabs and Kurds, in reality has a different explanation. Iraq's instability is rooted in poor governance, not in ancient group rivalries. Our survey data indicate that when people who feel marginalized begin to believe the government is going to be more responsive, accountable, and fair, support for armed violence and the sectarian groups that perpetuate it decreases.

**2. While sectarianism is often incorrectly blamed as the main source of conflict, it is nonetheless a threat to future stability:** Our evidence points to governance as a key driver of Iraq's conflict. Nevertheless, as the violent conflict continues or escalates, sectarian divisions have the potential to increase as political opportunists – both domestic and foreign – stoke tensions to gain power. This is most clearly seen in the growth of sectarian militias, which risk engulfing Iraq in a divisive internal conflict and present major obstacles to reconciliation.

**3. Civil society is vital to improving governance and advancing reconciliation:** Civil society is increasingly gaining the trust of Iraqis and is a growing medium for citizen action and voice. In recent protests in the south and center of the country, youth activists and other civil society actors have channeled citizens' discontent over poor service delivery into sustained, peaceful efforts to combat corruption and government abuses. Though civil society is playing a critical role in bridging the gap between citizens and government, the key question is whether, in the face of rising expectations and frustrations, it can direct new energies – such as those unleashed by the demonstrations – into nonviolent change.

**4. Iraqi youth, too often sidelined, are of vital importance to governance and civil society efforts:** Iraq's political, social, and economic future hinges on its youth; unfortunately, present trends are not promising. Frustrated youth are emigrating when they can, impoverishing the country's future, and young men are the foot soldiers of the country's nonstate armed groups. Building a peaceful future for Iraq will require empowering the country's youth and positively channeling their energies.

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3 F. Al-Khattab, “Mosul, Baghdad, and ISIS,” *Middle East Monitor*, June 20, 2015, <http://www.middleeastmonitor.com/articles/middle-east/19348-mosul-baghdad-and-isis>.

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## Iraq's Crises at a Glance

• **ECONOMIC:** Fiscal pressures are intensifying, with the government deficit expected to expand from 5.3 percent of GDP last year to as high as 23 percent of GDP in 2015 due to low oil prices and rising humanitarian and security spending.<sup>4</sup>

• **CONFLICT:** As a result of the ongoing conflict with ISIS, 17,168 civilians were killed in Iraq during 2014, according to Iraq Body Count. The number of civilian casualties continues to climb, with 7,899 civilians killed from January through the end of June 2015.<sup>5</sup>

• **DEVELOPMENT:** Poverty levels have increased and stood at 22.5 percent in 2014. The number of people living below the poverty line increased by an estimated 2.8 million in 2014.<sup>6</sup>

• **HUMANITARIAN NEED:** At least 10 million Iraqis require assistance based on the Humanitarian Needs Assessment for 2016. This includes more than 3.2 million people internally displaced since January 2014, 415,000 returnees, and 247,000 Syrian refugees. More than 2 million people live in areas under the control of ISIS.<sup>7</sup>

## MERCY CORPS: WHAT WE'VE DONE AND LEARNED SO FAR

Mercy Corps has been carrying out humanitarian and development programs in Iraq since 2003. Currently our programming spans governance, civil society development, youth and social cohesion programs, and life-saving humanitarian assistance. In December 2015, Mercy Corps Iraq closes its largest program, a three-year, \$55 million, USAID-funded program known as Broadening Participation through Civil Society (BPCS). The nationwide scope of BPCS provided a unique opportunity to examine the influence of civil society and good governance on conflict and stability. Thus, the findings of this report stem from the work done and data collected through the BPCS program.

This study intentionally builds on previous research that Mercy Corps conducted on governance in fragile environments. Our recent study on drivers of violence among youth on three continents, *Youth and Consequences*, challenges common assumptions that simply providing young people with jobs will prevent them from joining armed groups. Injustice – including perceptions of discrimination and political marginalization, pervasive corruption, and abuses by state institutions – rather than unemployment, is the primary motivator for many youth to join armed groups.<sup>8</sup> The findings of *Youth and Consequences*, corroborate evidence from Mercy Corps' analysis of survey data from men, women, and youth across 13 Sub-Saharan African countries, which showed that negative perceptions of governance more frequently predicted support of or willingness to participate in political violence, as opposed to employment and economic indicators.<sup>9</sup>

In Iraq, our body of research has tried to shed light on the effectiveness of our approach to addressing development and humanitarian concerns in fragile environments through partnership with local actors. In 2010, Mercy Corps

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4 "Iraq Overview: Context," World Bank, September 15, 2015, <http://www.worldbank.org/en/country/iraq/overview>; A. Shahine and N. Syeed, "IMF Moves Closer to Increase Aid to Iraq and Jordan," Bloomberg Business, October 21, 2015, <http://www.bloomberg.com/news/articles/2015-10-21/imf-moves-toward-more-iraq-aid-with-talks-on-monitoring-program>.

5 "Iraq 2014: Civilian Deaths Almost Doubling Year on Year." Iraq Body Count, January 1, 2015, <https://www.iraqbodycount.org/analysis/numbers/2014/>.

6 "Iraq Overview: Context."

7 United Nations Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (UNOCHA), "Iraq: Humanitarian Bulletin 16 October–5 November 2015," Reliefweb, November 8, 2015, <http://reliefweb.int/report/iraq/iraq-humanitarian-bulletin-16-october-5-november-2015-issued-8-november-2015-enku>.

8 *Youth and Consequences: Unemployment, Injustice and Violence* (Portland, OR: Mercy Corps, 2015), <https://www.mercycorps.org/research-resources/youth-consequences-unemployment-injustice-and-violence>.

9 *Why Youth Fight: Making Sense of Youth Political Violence in Sub-Saharan Africa*, Mercy Corps, 2014, <https://www.mercycorps.org/sites/default/files/Why%20Youth%20Fight.pdf>.



## More about BPCS

With the opening up of the political space after 2003, international organizations directed significant support toward Iraq, and Mercy Corps, through Broadening Participation through Civil Society, gained the opportunity to help nurture the development of Iraq's civil society. The overall goal of BPCS is to "help Iraq's democratic systems become more participatory and dynamic as a result of civil society sustainably deepening citizens' social and political engagement." To achieve this goal, the program works closely with Iraqi civil society groups to increase their institutional capacity so that they can engage with citizens and government in order to shape public policy. The program works with a broad range of local organizations, from good governance groups, human rights organizations, and youth activists to microfinance and economic development organizations. Mercy Corps' approach to building capacity emphasizes helping local civil society organizations identify their voice and expertise; supporting them in developing action plans; and creating linkages with other local organizations, government institutions, the media, and the private sector to ensure long-term sustainability and influence. To date, BPCS has strengthened the capacity of more than 130 civil society organizations from across all parts of Iraq to mobilize and organize citizens, implement projects, coordinate with local government, and influence policy changes that benefit Iraqi communities.

commissioned a study on different mechanisms of providing aid in Iraq and Afghanistan, which found that community-led aid models have been the most effective at helping societies transition from conflict to recovery.<sup>10</sup> Through our BPCS program, we had the opportunity to further examine how local actors, such as civil society, can not only address citizens' immediate concerns but also help bridge the gap between citizens and their government. In Iraq, where the citizen-government bond is often tenuous, our research indicates that civil society – in addition to improving government effectiveness and inclusiveness – can play a critical role in stabilization and reconciliation efforts.<sup>11</sup> Importantly, civil society groups also have close connections with communities that other actors, such as international NGOs and government, do not. The current study builds on evidence that Mercy Corps has accumulated from previous research. Therefore, it focuses on understanding the contributions that more equitable and just governance can make to stability, and how civil society can help channel citizens' aspirations for change into nonviolent rather than violent action.

## METHODOLOGY

### QUANTITATIVE DATA

The quantitative analysis in this report relies heavily on three public opinion polls on civic attitudes and behaviors carried out in Iraq in 2013, 2014, and 2015 through Mercy Corps' BPCS program. An independent firm was contracted to administer the face-to-face surveys, which were nationally representative, reaching more than 5,000 respondents across the country in each of the three years.<sup>12</sup> We use data from all three years of the survey to assess changes over time in citizens' opinions on a wide array of topics, including government performance, social cohesion, civil society, and levels of support for armed violence.



10 "The Benefits of Community-Led Development Programming in Insecure Environments: Findings from Iraq and Afghanistan," Mercy Corps, 2010, <http://www.mercycorps.org/leapp>.

11 "Bridging the Gap: Evidence on the Links Between Civil Society and Good Governance in Iraq," Mercy Corps, 2014, <https://www.mercycorps.org/research-resources/bridging-gap>.

12 While the 2013 survey covered all 18 provinces in Iraq, because of the deteriorating security situation, Nineveh governorate was left out of the 2014 poll, and both Nineveh and Anbar were dropped from the 2015 poll.

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## Key Terms

**GOVERNANCE** refers to the exercise of economic, political, and administrative authority to manage a country's affairs at all levels (local, regional, federal, etc.). It involves the process and capacity to formulate, implement, and enforce public policies and deliver services.

**GOOD GOVERNANCE** encompasses a system that engenders transparency, pluralism, citizen involvement in decision-making, representation, and accountability.<sup>13</sup>

Perceptions of **INJUSTICE** are often related to experiences of disenfranchisement, exclusive governance structures, corruption, and abuse by government security forces. For many marginalized groups, narratives of grievance are exacerbated by the shortcomings of the state itself, which is weak, venal, or violent.<sup>14</sup>

Increasingly, **STABILITY** is considered to encompass more than the absence of immediate political threats. According to the Overseas Development Institute, stability encompasses a series of interconnected goals, including a safe and secure environment, rule of law, stable governance, a viable market economy, and social and psychological well-being. Stabilization, which has traditionally been viewed as a military term referring to the end of immediate violence, now often addresses the broader “political and social conditions necessary for recovery, reconstruction, development, and a ‘lasting peace.’”<sup>15</sup>

To examine the causal link between governance and stability, the study leverages a natural experiment created by the unexpected resignation of Iraqi Prime Minister Nouri al-Maliki in the late summer of 2014. The occurrence of this event in the middle of the administration of our second public opinion survey provided a unique opportunity to understand its effect on stability. We use Prime Minister Maliki's resignation as a critical event signaling a change in governance, and we compare responses in our survey related to support for armed violence that took place before and after Prime Minister Maliki's resignation on August 14, 2014. Given the unpopularity of the Maliki regime, his resignation under international and some domestic pressure could be seen as a credible signal that the new Iraqi government would usher in a new era of citizen-oriented governance in Iraq. We test this assumption in our survey analysis by examining the degree to which Prime Minister Maliki's resignation was seen as an indication of positive governance reforms and the extent to which it changed Iraqis' support for armed opposition groups. See “More on the Experiment” for additional information about the design of the experiment.

### QUALITATIVE DATA

To build on our quantitative findings, Mercy Corps conducted 38 semistructured key informant interviews across Iraq in September 2015. We conducted interviews in the Kurdish region of Iraq (in Erbil, Kirkuk, and Sulaymaniyah), in Baghdad, and in Basra. Key informants included civil society leaders, youth demonstrators, humanitarian activists, national parliamentarians, academics, provincial government leaders, international NGO staff, and IDPs from regions conquered by ISIS. Interviewees responded to questions informed by our national surveys. In particular, they shed light on drivers of support for armed groups; the relative ease with which ISIS conquered predominantly Sunni areas of the country; the rise of sectarian armed groups, particularly the Shia militias; the growing role of civil society; the evolving popular perspective on the national government of Haider al-Abadi; and the prominence of popular demonstrations against corruption, poor services, and sectarian politics that, throughout much of 2015, gripped the country.

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13 USAID, *USAID Strategy on Democracy Human Rights and Governance* (Washington, DC: USAID, 2013), [https://www.usaid.gov/sites/default/files/documents/1866/USAID%20DRG\\_%20final%20final%20206-24%203%20\(1\).pdf](https://www.usaid.gov/sites/default/files/documents/1866/USAID%20DRG_%20final%20final%20206-24%203%20(1).pdf).

14 *Youth and Consequences*.

15 Humanitarian Policy Group, “A Clash of Principles? Humanitarian Action and the Search for Stability in Pakistan,” HPG Policy Brief 36 (London: Overseas Development Institute, 2009), <http://www.odi.org/sites/odi.org.uk/files/odi-assets/publications-opinion-files/4854.pdf>

## CHAPTER II. GOVERNANCE FAILURES, IDENTITY AND THE RISE OF ARMED GROUPS

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Contrary to popular belief, the rise of ISIS in Iraq is rooted less in sectarianism than in governance failures. Though the two reinforce each other, sectarianism is more often an outcome of bad politics, not vice versa. Mercy Corps research finds that when perceptions of the government improve, support for armed groups like ISIS diminishes among aggrieved groups. This is perhaps best illustrated by the resignation of Prime Minister Nouri al-Maliki in 2014, whose replacement by a more conciliatory Shia politician – Haider al-Abadi – signaled a sudden drop in sympathy, among Sunnis, for insurgents.



“When ISIS arrived, they said they were going to liberate the people from Maliki,” the young woman stated. She was an IDP from the predominantly Sunni city of Tikrit, which fell to ISIS in June 2014. “And the people wanted to be liberated,” she said. “That is why Tikrit fell so easily.”

In the months before ISIS raised its flag over Tikrit, the extremists worked to soften the city. Car bombs and kidnappings targeted those who might resist: state security forces, government representatives, and journalists. But the heart of the ISIS campaign was the effort to win over a population that had for years felt oppressed, abused and marginalized by the central government.

“Most supporters of ISIS simply wanted revenge on the government,” said one man, citing the abuses perpetrated by Baghdad’s security forces. Iraqi IDPs who fled areas conquered by ISIS described national security forces – including the police – as ISIS’s most effective, if unintentional, recruiters. The police, one man said, were “ISIS makers.”

**But the heart of the ISIS campaign was the effort to win over a population that had for years felt oppressed, abused and marginalized by the central government.**

“Security forces would stop you on the road for no reason. People would be sent to jail. [The national police] could do whatever they want,” said a former provincial council member from Mosul. “The people were very angry with the government.” After taking over Mosul, Iraq’s second largest city, ISIS released the inmates of the local prison, which had been used to indiscriminately imprison Prime Minister Maliki’s Sunni political opponents.

“[ISIS] came in through the back door, and very few people from the community tried to stop them,” a journalist from Mosul who fled to Kurdish Region of Iraq said, “because life for Sunnis under the government had been so bad.”

“Of course, once people realized what ISIS was,” she said, smiling sadly, “it was too late.”

## **SECTARIANISM IN IRAQ: MYTHS AND MISCONCEPTIONS**

Iraq’s instability is attributed disproportionately to sectarianism.<sup>16</sup> Historically, however, Sunnis and Shias often coexisted peacefully in Iraq. Though segregation has increased, there is broad intermixing among different sects and ethnic groups.<sup>17</sup> While the Baath Party, which ruled until 2003, was more Sunni than Shia, millions of Shias were party members.<sup>18</sup> Ex-President Saddam Hussein occasionally co-opted Islamic discourse when it suited him; however, overt sectarianism was not, generally speaking, a dominant feature of Iraq’s largely secular political arrangement.<sup>19</sup> Party loyalty, not sectarianism, was the guiding ethos.

Things changed after the United States–led military invasion of Iraq in 2003. The Iraq Coalition Provisional Authority put in place by the West established a new political system founded on sectarian identity: citizens were forced to declare a sect on all state documents, for instance, and each sect was allocated a quota on the country’s governing council.<sup>20</sup> Sectarian identity, long a component of personal pride, was made into a divisive question of inclusion or exclusion. Meanwhile, the de-Baathification policy primarily impacted the country’s Sunni populations, disempowering the military and bureaucratic elites.

16 This is in spite of the fact that present-day Iraq straddles the historical fault line of the world’s Sunni-Shia divide. Just 100 kilometers south of Baghdad lies the venerated city of Karbala. Each year thousands of Shia worshipers flock here to celebrate the day of Ashura, marking the death of Imam Hussein. It was in Karbala in 680 AD that supporters of Hussein ibn Ali, the grandson of the prophet Muhammad, and a military detachment loyal to Yazid I, the caliph, met in a battle that would decisively mark the divide between Sunnis and Shias across the Muslim world.

17 S. Ramadani, “The Sectarian Myth of Iraq,” *The Guardian*, June 16, 2014, <http://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2014/jun/16/sectarian-myth-of-iraq>.

18 H. Al-Qarawee, “The Rise of Sunni Identity in Iraq,” *The National Interest*, April 5, 2013, <http://nationalinterest.org/commentary/sunni-identities-rise-iraq-8314>.

19 M. Al-Gharbi, “The Myth and Reality of Sectarianism in Iraq,” *Al Jazeera America*, August 18, 2014, <http://america.aljazeera.com/opinions/2014/8/iraq-sectarianismshiasunniskurdsnourialmalaki.html>.

20 *Ibid.*



The government's negligence in addressing underlying grievances and poor governance in areas where populations felt marginalized were significant factors in ISIS's ability to gain control in parts of Iraq.

From 2006 on, dominant political forces in Iraq used sectarian divisions to build and maintain a power base. This was accentuated in the struggle to form a government following the 2010 Parliamentary elections. According to former U.S. military advisor and scholar Emma Sky, this was a missed opportunity for a pivotal change in Iraqi politics – toward compromise and coalition and away from divisive zero-sum positions. Since then, Sky claims, the situation in Iraq has progressively deteriorated.<sup>21</sup>

With the withdrawal of U.S troops in 2011, promises of reconciliation with parties representing disillusioned Sunnis were not delivered upon. Rather, thousands of Sunnis were imprisoned on terrorism charges without evidence, and prominent Sunni politicians, such as Vice President Tariq al-Hashimi and Minister of Finance Rafi al-Essawi were jailed. These moves triggered a wave of protests in Sunni areas in 2012 and 2013. Tens of thousands of Sunni protesters flooded cities like Ramadi, Fallujah, Samarra, Mosul, and Kirkuk, calling for political reforms including the resignation of Prime Minister al-Maliki. The protests were peaceful. However, the government's response was not. A raid on a protest camp in Hawija killed at least 44 civilians, and at least 10 more were killed in Ramadi.<sup>22</sup> In the end, the protests failed to deliver meaningful changes because of Baghdad's recalcitrance, leaving many Iraqi Sunnis more disillusioned than before.

21 E. Sky, "Emma Sky on Iraq After the Surge," interview by G. Rose, *Foreign Affairs*, June 5, 2015, <https://www.foreignaffairs.com/videos/2015-06-05/emma-sky-iraq-after-surge>.

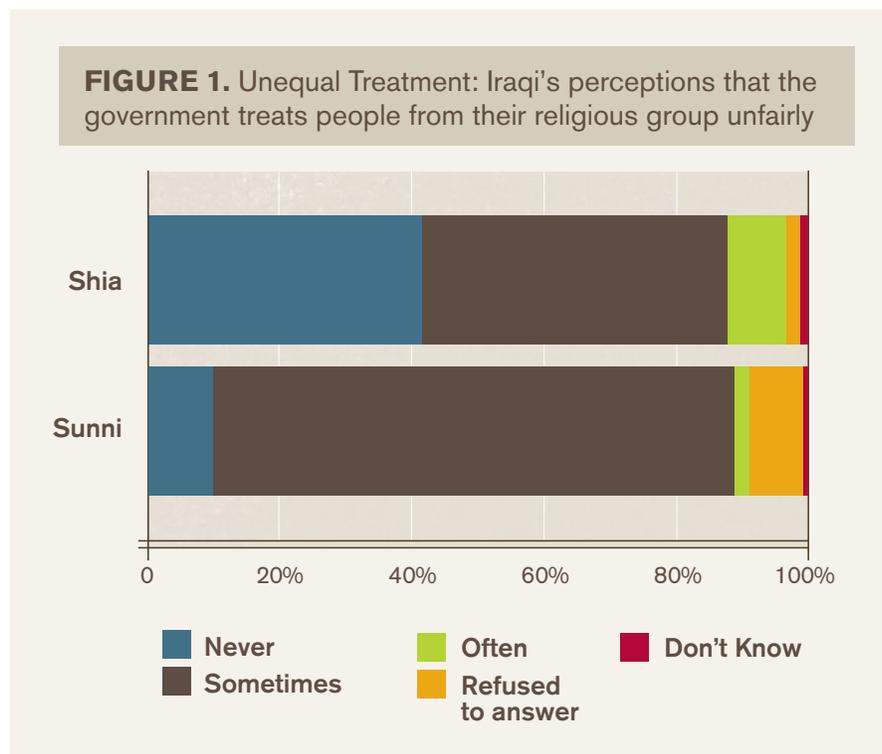
22 P. Boghani, "In Their Own Words: Sunnis on Their Treatment in Maliki's Iraq," *Frontline*, October 28, 2014, <http://www.pbs.org/wgbh/pages/frontline/iraq-war-on-terror/rise-of-isis/in-their-own-words-sunnis-on-their-treatment-in-malikis-iraq/>.

## INSTABILITY ROOTED IN POOR GOVERNANCE

The extent to which Sunnis in Iraq support ISIS is often debated. Certainly, many former Baathists, who had been specifically targeted and marginalized from government and military service, rallied to ISIS's banner.<sup>23</sup> But given ISIS's reputation for human rights abuses, only a minority of Sunnis appear to embrace ISIS's leader, Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi. Data from Mercy Corps' 2015 poll show that support for ISIS is generally very low.<sup>24</sup>

Yet while most Sunnis do not support ISIS, many are not inclined to fight against ISIS or defend the central government. ISIS's ability to improve public services in areas that the government had neglected proved effective in helping it secure some initial support among the local population. According to Khitam Al-Khaykane, an Iraq expert from the United States Institute of Peace, the government's negligence in addressing underlying grievances and poor governance in areas where populations felt marginalized were significant factors in ISIS's ability to gain control in parts of Iraq.<sup>25</sup>

Mercy Corps' surveys bear this out. Over the past three years, satisfaction with the central government has been low and falling. Discontent with the government has grown, and Iraqis are increasingly impatient with widespread corruption. Meanwhile the provision of basic services has deteriorated. These failures of governance create a clear sectarian divide. Surveys found that most respondents believed the government actively discriminated against their ethnic or religious group in doling out services and engaging with citizens. In 2015, up to 62 percent of the population believed the government often or sometimes treated people of their ethnic or religious group unfairly. This was particularly evident among Sunnis. **See Figure 1.**



<sup>23</sup> M. Stephens, "Iraq Crisis: How Extreme Are the Fighters in ISIS?," *BBC News*, June 21, 2014, <http://www.bbc.com/news/world-middle-east-27945954>.

<sup>24</sup> To measure support for ISIS in our 2015 survey, we employed a list experiment, a form of survey experiment used to ask a sensitive question in an indirect way. The results of the list experiment found no significant level of support for ISIS. For more on list experiments, see G. Blair and K. Imai, "Statistical Analysis of List Experiments," *Policy Analysis* 20 (2012): 47-77, <http://imai.princeton.edu/research/files/listP.pdf>.

<sup>25</sup> K. Al-Khaykane, telephone interview, October 19, 2015.

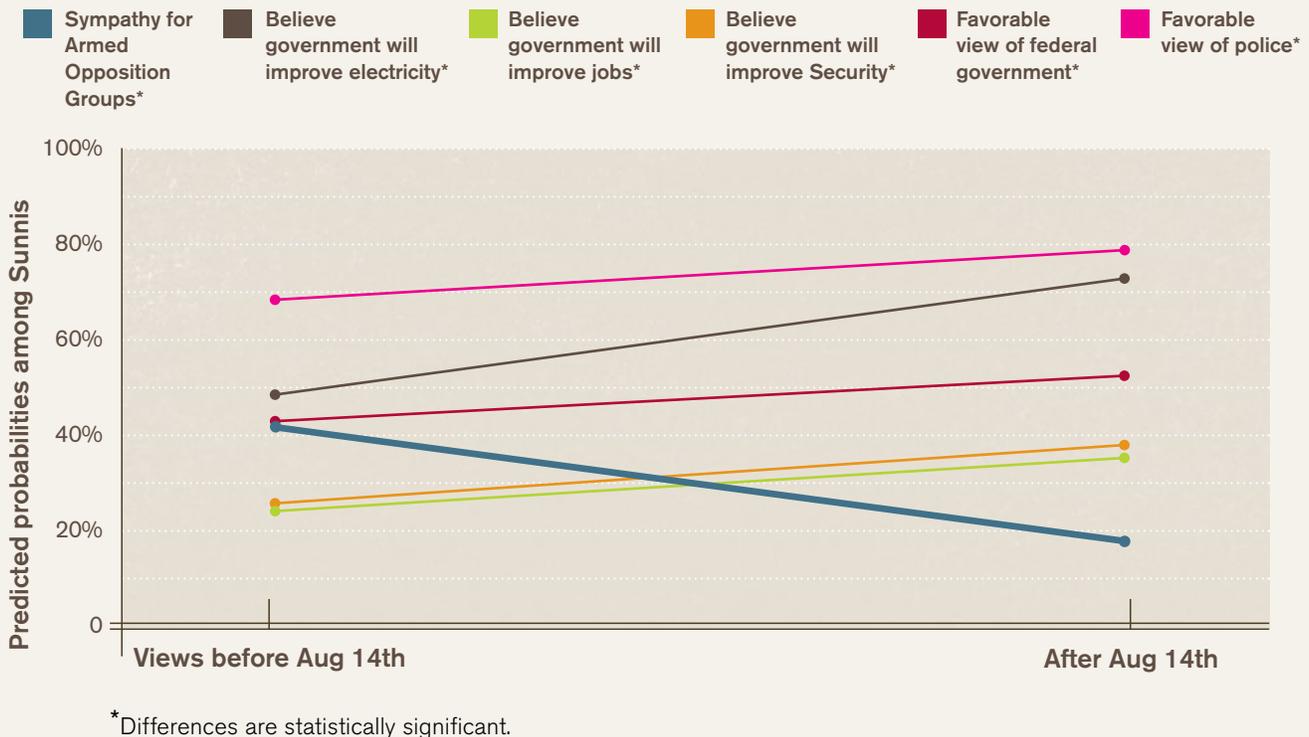
## PRIME MINISTER MALIKI'S RESIGNATION

On August 14, 2014, Prime Minister Maliki resigned, ending a political impasse and making way for Haider al-Abadi, who – many hoped – would be better placed to curb sectarian politics and counter the appeal of ISIS.<sup>26</sup>

Across Iraq, Mercy Corps observed that the announcement of Prime Minister Maliki's resignation impacted how people viewed armed opposition groups. Most noteworthy, the resignation announcement significantly reduced support for armed groups among Sunnis from 49 percent to 26 percent (see Figure 2). Though the new Prime Minister Abadi was a Shia from Prime Minister Maliki's party, Sunnis nonetheless saw some hope in the new government, suggesting that identity politics was not the primary driver of support for armed violence. Rather, Sunnis became more confident that the new government would effectively provide inclusivity and important public goods, like electricity and security, and address unemployment. Overall, they viewed the federal government, and other state institutions like the police, more favorably after the resignation than before.

Prime Minister Maliki's resignation demonstrated the malleability of public attitudes toward Baghdad. It also created an opportunity for the Iraqi government – an opportunity that Prime Minister Maliki's successor, Haider al-Abadi, has been unable to fully seize due to the resistance of vested interests.

**Figure 2.** Against the Grain: The effect of Prime Minister Maliki's resignation on Sunni's views of armed opposition groups and governance



26 J. Ferziger and N. Hamid, "Maliki Resigns as Prime Minister to Make Way for Abadi," *Bloomberg Business*, August 15, 2014, <http://www.bloomberg.com/news/articles/2014-08-14/iraq-s-maliki-resigns-agrees-to-back-nominee-iraqiya-tv-says>.

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## More on the Experiment

The 2014 poll gave us the unique opportunity to examine the impact of Prime Minister Maliki's resignation – which may have been seen by some Iraqis (especially Sunnis who had been calling for his resignation since 2011) as an indication of positive political change – on attitudes toward armed opposition groups.

Awareness of Prime Minister Maliki's resignation served as our main instrument for testing the link between governance and stability. Since this event was common knowledge soon after it happened, individuals who were surveyed before the resignation on August 14, 2014, were compared with people who were surveyed after August 14, 2014. We focus solely on the survey responses that were collected during the month of August (i.e., about two weeks before and after the resignation) in order to limit the number of other political events that might confound the estimation of the impact of the resignation's announcement on Iraqi public attitudes.

**MEASURING SUPPORT FOR ARMED VIOLENCE:** The main measure we use for support for armed violence is based on a survey question that asks respondents to indicate their level of sympathy for “armed opposition groups (militias, terrorist groups).” The variable was coded as binary outcome, with 1 indicating a lot or a little sympathy and 0 indicating no sympathy at all.

**MEASURING PERCEPTIONS OF GOVERNANCE:** To measure government responsiveness, we use a measure of respondents' expectations of how likely the government was to improve conditions related to employment, security, and electricity, which respondents had rated as their biggest concerns. We also looked at citizens' perceptions of two key state institutions – the federal government and the police. To measure these perceptions, we asked respondents to rate how favorably they viewed these institutions on a scale of 1–7 (with 1 being the least favorable and 7 being the most favorable).

The analysis controlled for individual-level socioeconomic factors, such as sex, urban versus rural location, age, education, employment, religion, and ethnic group. We also included governorate fixed effects in our model to control for provincial differences.

The results in the figures are presented as the predicted probability that a member of a certain group (Shia or Sunni) would answer the question on support for violence positively before and after the resignation, controlling for other variables.

The quantitative analyses are described in more detail in a from a paper by Christoph Mikulaschek, Saurabh Pant, and Beza Tesfaye.<sup>27</sup>

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27 Mikulaschek, Pant and Tesfaye, “Winning Hearts and Minds in a Civil War,” Social Science Research Network. Dec 11, 2015 [http://papers.ssrn.com/sol3/papers.cfm?abstract\\_id=2702219](http://papers.ssrn.com/sol3/papers.cfm?abstract_id=2702219)

## CHAPTER III. BETWEEN YOUTH DEMONSTRATIONS AND SHIA MILITIAS

While the resignation of Prime Minister Maliki opened a window of opportunity for Iraq to begin to heal the wounds of the previous administration, the new prime minister has had difficulty instituting reforms. The past year's popular demonstrations against corruption and sectarian politics have gone largely unanswered, despite the emergence of potentially encouraging reforms. Confidence in the central government continues to erode. Meanwhile, in some areas, Shia armed groups, which are fighting ISIS, have been accused of perpetrating violence against the civilian population, particularly Sunnis. This is a grave risk to the country's future. While Mercy Corps' research finds that sectarian divisions have been sensationalized as a driver of violence, this does not mean sectarian differences cannot deepen and turn increasingly violent over time if governance grievances remain unaddressed.



In 2015, popular protests erupted across Iraq: for weeks, on every Friday, thousands crowded into Baghdad's Tahrir Square or Basra's city center, waving Iraqi flags and singing the national anthem. The popular youth-led protests swept through 11 governorates, beginning in Basra and spreading all the way to Kirkuk and Sulaymaniyah. Mostly young and nonsectarian, the demonstrators protested government corruption, poor services, and the influence of religious parties in politics.<sup>28</sup>

According to Khitam Al-Khaykane, an Iraq analyst at the United States Institute of Peace, "Previous protests against corruption in Iraq have not been so widespread, so well-attended, or so well-organized at the national and provincial levels. Every Friday, the same national-level demands are reiterated. This consistency of message reflects the growing maturity and increasing sophistication of Iraq's civic groups."<sup>29</sup>

Although Prime Minister Haider al-Abadi offered concessionary reforms to protesters and is meeting with them regularly, progress for the reform effort has been slow. Reform, after all, threatens the interests of those who benefit from the status quo. Prime Minister Abadi faces significant opposition from the national parliament, which recently blocked reforms and called for his dismissal.

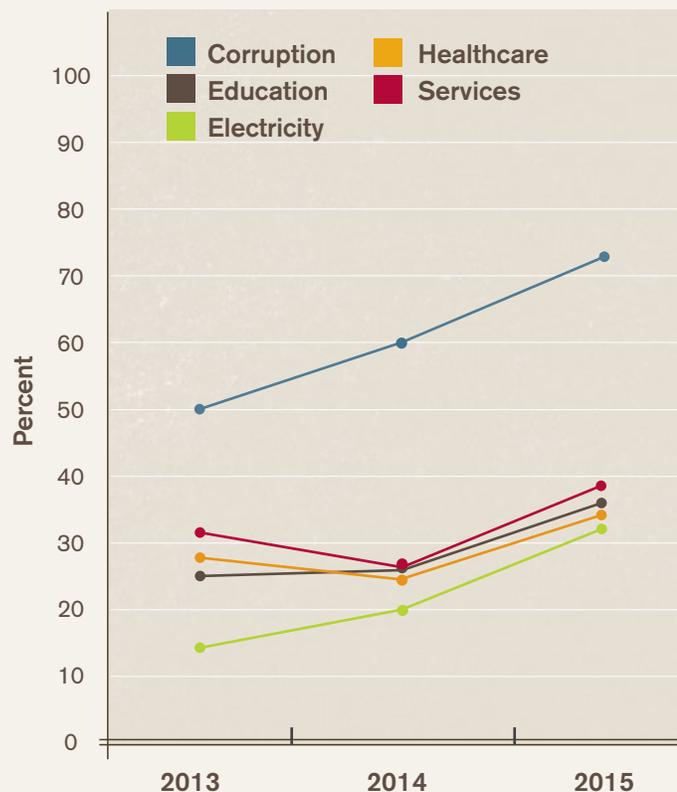
Meanwhile, thugs have been targeting the demonstrations' leaders and the journalists covering the protests. Many of Mercy Corps' partners described being intimidated and beaten. "I haven't slept at home in 25 days," said one organizer from Baghdad. While chain-smoking cigarettes, he described death threats, ominous calls to his cell phone, and men standing outside his house. "I got someone's attention," he said.

Many civil society leaders fear what this will mean for the country. The youth demonstrators, they said, are an important counterweight to government sectarianism and corruption, and provide political cover for Prime Minister Abadi to press ahead with his reform agenda. Sidelineing the demonstrations may be emblematic of a larger problem: the government's inability – or unwillingness – to protect and respond to new voices.

## A FORK IN THE ROAD

"Iraq today faces a choice," Kasim said. Kasim is head of the Iraqi Center for Human Rights Activists, a Mercy Corps partner that works to increase citizen influence and improve government transparency. "Either we must empower the civil society of our country, particularly the youth, or we will abandon Iraq to the forces tearing our country apart."

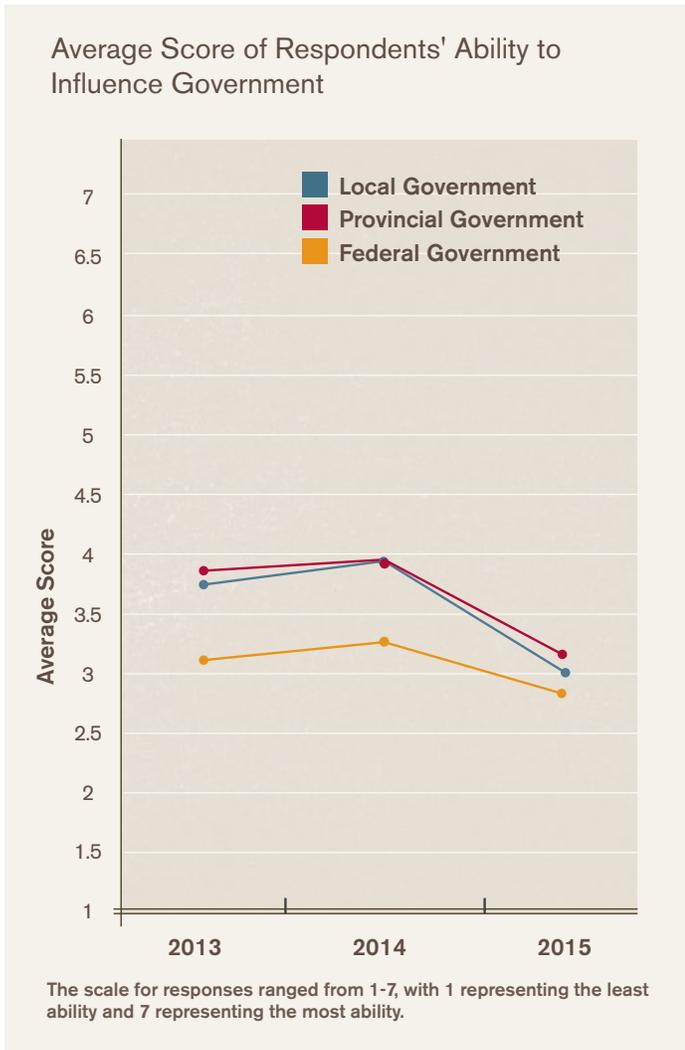
**Figure 3. Perceptions of Corruption and Services: Percent of Respondents the Perceive Issues Worsening**



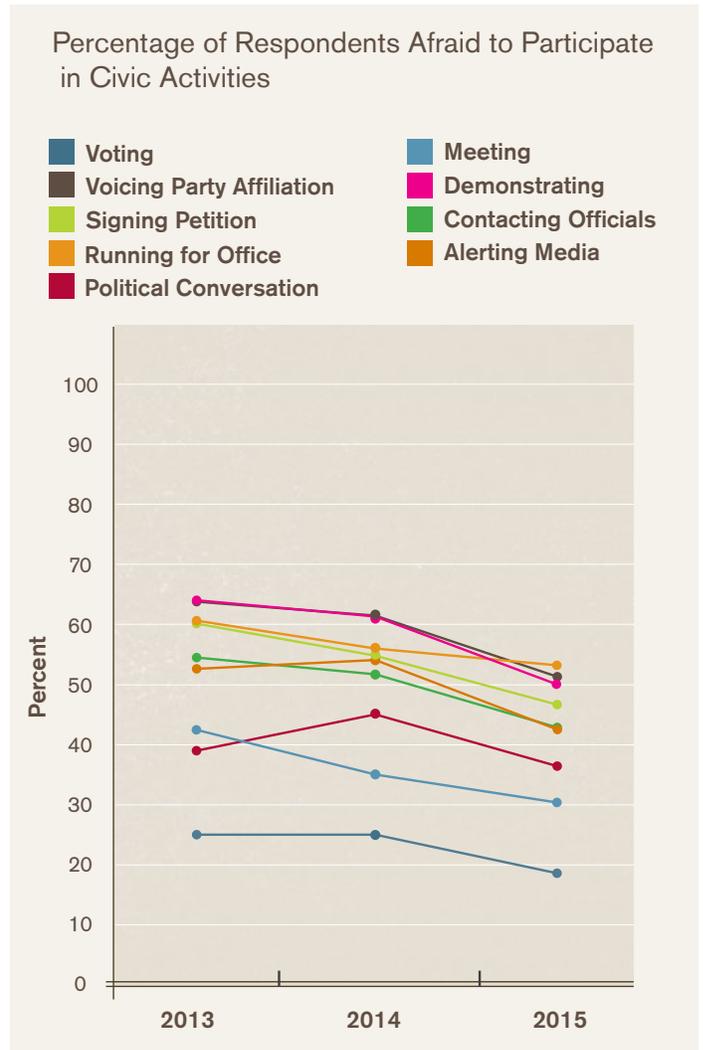
<sup>28</sup> K. Al-Khaykane, "Q & A: Iraqi Protesters Demand Action on Corruption and Reforms," United States Institute of Peace, September 30, 2015, <http://www.usip.org/publications/2015/09/30/qa-iraqi-protesters-demand-action-corruption-and-reforms>.

<sup>29</sup> Ibid.

**Figure 4A. Political Efficacy**



**Figure 4B. Fear of Civic Engagement**



While Prime Minister Maliki's resignation temporarily improved perceptions of the government among marginalized groups, there is no guarantee the effect will last. If the change in government does not result in improvements to the lives of Iraqi citizens, goodwill may dwindle. Worse, raised expectations that are subsequently frustrated may result in a backlash.

Indeed, there are indications Prime Minister Abadi has not been able to arrest growing dissatisfaction with the central government, according to Mercy Corps' surveys. In 2013, 72 percent of Iraqis believed that parliament did not represent the needs and interests of the people. By 2015, that number had jumped to 81 percent.<sup>30</sup> Perceptions of corruption and the worsening of public service delivery have also steadily increased in the past three years. **See Figure 3.**

Troublingly, the disconnect between citizen and government appears to be growing. In 2015, Mercy Corps found only 26 percent of Iraqis surveyed believed they had influence over government decisions, a 7 percent decline

<sup>30</sup> This latter number does not include Anbar and Nineveh provinces, which were excluded from the 2015 poll. We would expect that the decline in support may have been even greater had these two provinces been included.

A young woman with dark hair, wearing a green corduroy jacket and a patterned scarf, stands in the foreground of a refugee camp. The ground is muddy and littered with trash. In the background, there are several tents made of white plastic or fabric, some with UNHCR logos. A woman in red clothing is carrying a child on her back near one of the tents. The sky is overcast.

High levels of disillusionment combined with high levels of engagement make for a combustible political environment.

from the first poll conducted in 2013. Yet even though the majority of citizens feel powerless in the current system, a large number of Iraqis still believe it is their civic responsibility to be involved in politics, with an increase over time (68 percent in 2015 – up from 60 percent in 2014 and 57 percent in 2013). Though Iraqis are becoming increasingly disillusioned with government, a growing number are finding it important to engage in politics and are less fearful of doing so. **See Figure 4A and 4B.**

High levels of disillusionment combined with high levels of engagement make for a combustible political environment. The energy unleashed by the protests will be channeled somewhere. Some disillusioned youth may, like many of their peers, emigrate, seeking a better life in Europe or the United States. Some may simply carry on in Basra, Baghdad, or Kirkuk. But there is the risk that peaceful protests, failing to gain traction, will evolve into something more volatile.

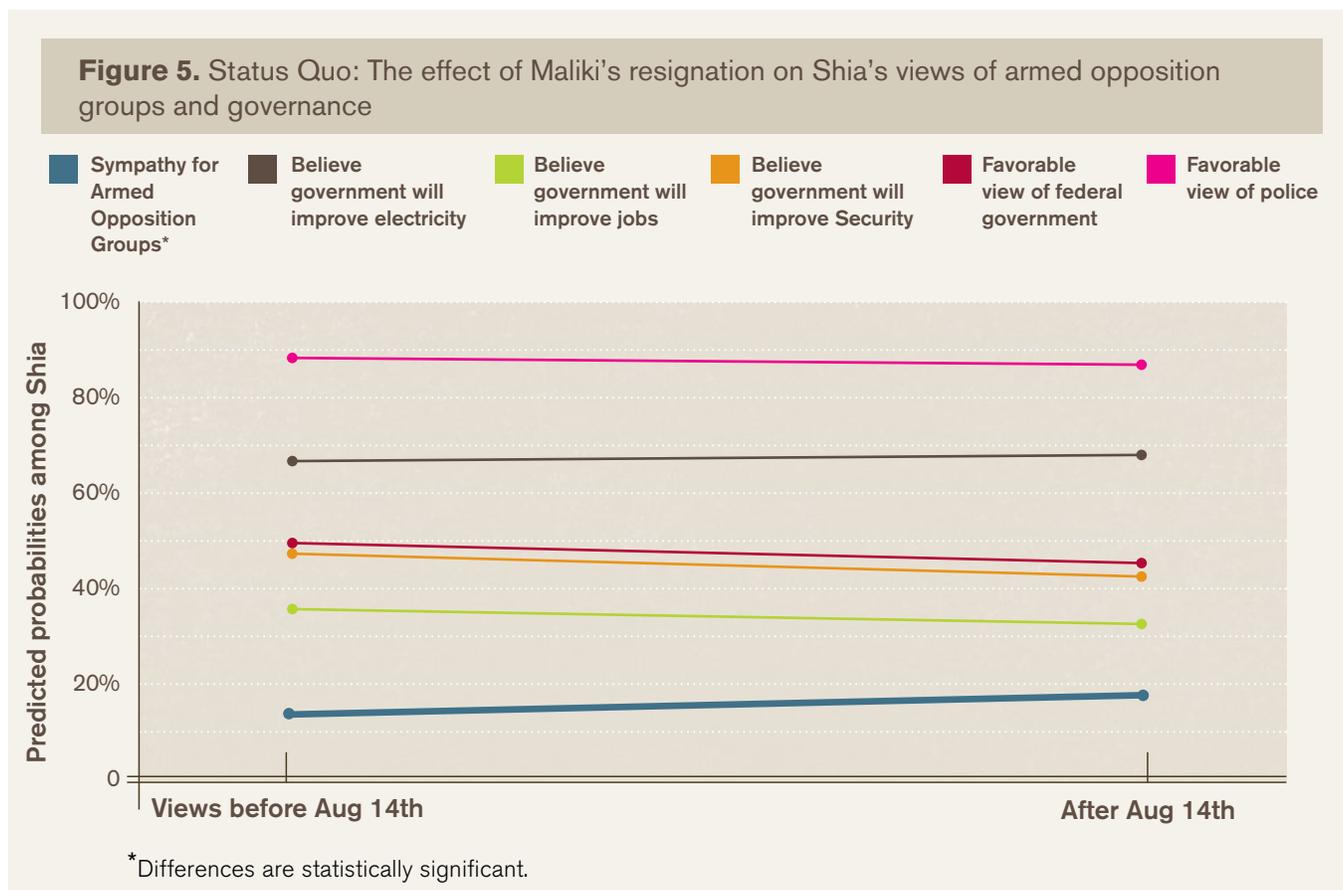
This is perhaps the most dangerous risk: that aggrieved Shia youth may make common cause with increasingly influential sectarian militias. Some protest leaders are already beginning to say it is impossible to work with parliament. The system is broken, they say. Better to scrap it and start over. If peaceful approaches to create change go unheeded, many fear the country's aggrieved youth could make common cause with the increasingly influential Shia militias.

## PUTTING THE JINN BACK IN THE BOTTLE: THE SHIA MILITIAS

On June 13, 2014, Grand Ayatollah Ali al-Sistani, the supreme leader of Shias in Iraq, issued a fatwa calling on Iraqis to take up arms and fight ISIS. Since then, a coalition of Shia militias – many of whom predated the rise of Sunni extremists – have grown in strength and credibility. Loosely organized as the Popular Mobilization Forces (PMF), the Shia militias have, at times, partnered with the Kurdish Peshmerga and Iraqi Security Forces (ISF) to fight ISIS,<sup>31</sup> retake lost territory, and defend the state.

The Shia militias enjoyed rising support in the summer of 2014. Whereas Sunni support for armed opposition groups declined following Prime Minister Maliki's resignation, the likelihood of Shias supporting armed groups increased, from 12 percent to 19 percent. Unlike that of the Sunnis, the Shias' perception of the government and government services was not impacted by Prime Minister Maliki's resignation. **See Figure 5.** If this were only a story about identity politics and sectarianism, we would expect the rise in support for armed opposition groups to be explained by deterioration in Shias' perception of public good provision after Prime Minister Maliki, himself a Shia, resigned. But the fact that these perceptions are unaffected, and that Prime Minister Maliki's successor is also a Shia, points to the conclusion that identity politics and sectarianism are not behind the increase in support for armed violence among Shias.

Instead, the spike in Shia support for armed groups appears to have been driven by fear of ISIS. The extremists actively targeted Shias, and the failure of ISF to stop the extremists' advance led many Shias to more actively support nonstate armed groups: in this case, militia groups like the PMF.



31 L. Al Khatteeb, "Sistani's Jihad Fatwa One Year On: The Man Who Pulled Iraq from the Brink with a Single Statement," *The Huffington Post*, June 14, 2015, [http://www.huffingtonpost.com/luay-al-khatteeb/sistanis-jihad-fatwa-one\\_b\\_7579322.html](http://www.huffingtonpost.com/luay-al-khatteeb/sistanis-jihad-fatwa-one_b_7579322.html).

Many fear the PMF is, like ISIS, a rising sectarian menace, or at least is being increasingly perceived as such. This could catalyze a backlash. While Mercy Corps' research finds that sectarianism has, to date, been sensationalized as a driver of Iraq's instability, the manipulation of sectarian differences by armed actors in the context of ongoing violence may nevertheless harden sectarian divisions and expand the conflict. This, in turn, can further polarize groups, creating a reinforcing feedback loop between sectarianism and violence, with detrimental consequences such as those seen between 2005 and 2007.

## **“WE NEED TO TAKE A STAND, AS IRAQIS”**

At the gates of Baghdad's International Zone – still colloquially known as the “Green Zone” – crowds of youth waved Iraqi flags. “The militias, ISIS, the political parties: they are tearing our country apart,” said a 25-year-old university graduate who participated in the demonstrations. “If we don't change how Iraq is governed, there will not be an Iraq.”

The clock is ticking. Iraq's militias, and their political factions, have made entreaties to youth protesters, lending credence to some fears that frustrated demonstrators could ally with armed groups.<sup>32</sup> “The youth have the power,” said one tribal leader. “We need to prioritize them.” Otherwise, he said, “they will bring death to our country.”

Recently, the demonstrators have also received encouragement from a surprising source: Ayatollah al-Sistani urged Prime Minister Abadi to take a tougher stance on corruption and called for more demonstrations against the government.<sup>33</sup> Many of the youth demonstrators interviewed for this research were buoyed by Sistani's declaration.

“We need to take a stand, as Iraqis,” said a young man from Basra. However, taking a stand has its price: a few weeks earlier, local forces had captured and tortured him. It's unclear if the men who held him were state security forces, militia members, or political party thugs. He pulled up his shirt to show the scars on his back. Despite this experience, he remains committed. Protesters want to help build what Iraq has never had, he said: “a true civil society.”



32 M. Salim and L. Sly, “We've Had Enough!": Baghdad Protests Challenge Iraq's Prime Minister,” *The Washington Post*, August 7, 2015, [https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/weve-had-enough-baghdad-protests-challenge-iraqs-abadi/2015/08/07/a129caca-3d21-11e5-a312-1a6452ac77d2\\_story.html](https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/weve-had-enough-baghdad-protests-challenge-iraqs-abadi/2015/08/07/a129caca-3d21-11e5-a312-1a6452ac77d2_story.html).

33 Agence France-Presse in Baghdad, “Thousands of Iraqis Protest against Corruption and Power Cuts,” *The Guardian*, August 7, 2015, <http://www.theguardian.com/world/2015/aug/07/iraq-protest-corruption-power-cuts>.

## CHAPTER IV. REBUILDING IRAQ: CIVIL SOCIETY, STABILITY AND RECONCILIATION

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Iraq faces an existential crisis that requires far more than military solutions. The rise of ISIS and the sectarian militias are symptoms of a central government that is perceived alternately as weak and predatory. Improved perceptions of government institutions are critical to undermining popular support for armed groups that threaten long-term stability. Governance reforms will be vital to building and preserving the legitimacy of Baghdad, yet governance reform is unlikely to be successful or meaningful without an active, engaged Iraqi civil society. Unfortunately, international donor support for Iraqi civil society appears to be withering. This trend must be reversed.



Many of the long-term challenges facing Iraq emerge from the tenuous bond between citizens and the state. According to Mercy Corps' research, political reforms that improve perceptions of government institutions and expectations around fair service delivery are directly linked to a decline in sympathy for armed groups. Simply put, stability is rooted in good governance.

Mercy Corps' findings imply that governance reforms will go a long way toward promoting stability and reconciliation. But there is an important caveat: what matters is not just the reality of reform but also the perceptions of those reforms. Improved services alone are not enough. The perception that services are delivered fairly and that the government is responsive to community needs – without bias as to sect or ethnicity – is vital.

International development actors must take care not to repeat past mistakes. Post-2003, considerable reconstruction efforts in Iraq focused on improving government services and investing in communities. Western donors devised “hearts and minds” campaigns, funneling tens of billions of assistance dollars to build infrastructure and high-profile community development projects, aimed at improving Iraqis' views of their government. Yet these efforts are widely considered to have been ineffective.<sup>34</sup> Complex social and political problems tend to elude short-term technical solutions. The impulse to use aid as a stabilization tool to meet immediate security objectives has generally been proven unrealistic, particularly since efforts were driven by faulty assumptions about drivers of conflict.<sup>35</sup> Many programs aimed at winning “hearts and minds” in Iraq and other places operated on the shaky assumption that insurgencies can be curbed by responding to economic deprivation, without understanding and addressing the more complex perceptions of social and political injustice that inflame conflict.

To this end, research on stabilization or counterinsurgency strategies, using examples from Iraq and other conflict-affected countries, has found that “there is a growing body of research and literature suggesting that the provision of aid and development by the U.S. military and NATO partners in these contexts has proved to be ineffective. It is being demonstrated that local populations respond more favorably to the restoration of security and good governance, and to those programs that substantively address social and economic concerns, especially if delivered by the national authorities.”<sup>36</sup>

Iraqis don't want to be beneficiaries, they want to be citizens.

Ultimately, improving governance cannot be a top-down endeavor alone, whereby the services are doled out to communities in order to purchase legitimacy. The legitimacy won in this manner is unlikely to be sustainable. Rather, better governance is rooted in process: *How* something is done is often just as important as *what* is done. According to qualitative research,

past efforts to improve governance failed because they were not transparent and inclusive. What is needed is policies and projects that result from the back-and-forth exchange between citizens and their government. Iraqis don't want to be beneficiaries, they want to be citizens.

Building this sense of citizenship and connection with government in Iraq is a tall order. Reforms at the top will be vital but not, in and of themselves, sufficient, without long-term investments in Iraqi civil society that create opportunities for citizens to engage with government on key issues affecting them and their country.

34 See A. Long, *On “Other War”: Lessons from Five Decades of Rand Counterinsurgency Research* (Santa Monica, CA: Rand National Defense Research Institute, 2006); and J. Williamson, “Using Humanitarian Aid to ‘Win Hearts and Minds’: A Costly Failure?,” *International Review of the Red Cross*, 93, no. 884 (2011): 1035–61, <https://www.icrc.org/eng/assets/files/review/2011/irrc-884-williamson.pdf>.

35 This phenomenon has been well documented in Afghanistan. See P. Fishstein and A. Wilder, *Winning Hearts and Minds? Examining the Relationship between Aid and Security in Afghanistan’s Balkh Province* (Somerville, MA: Feinstein International Center, 2012), <http://fic.tufts.edu/assets/WinningHearts-Balkh-Province.pdf>.

36 Williamson, “Using Humanitarian Aid to ‘Win Hearts and Minds.’”

## CIVIL SOCIETY ON THE RISE

The academic literature generally sees civil society as a vital intermediary between citizens and their government – a mechanism, in other words, for feedback and accountability.<sup>37</sup> Given that democracy is based on the consent and interests of its constituents, an active civil society provides the forum through which those interests can be expressed.<sup>38</sup> Similarly, civil society provides an avenue for government to more directly engage with the population.<sup>39</sup>

Civil society can be an important counterweight to the forces of instability. If civil society is empowered, effective, and trusted, it can channel citizen frustrations into nonviolent activism. Additionally, civil society, where it appears to citizens to be leveraging change, can improve perceptions of government legitimacy.<sup>40</sup> In other words, government can gain from cooperating with civil society to address citizens' concerns. A cooperative and respectful relationship is often missing either because government views civil society as an adversary or because civil society sees its role as only a watchdog and not a partner. Without losing its independence, however, civil society can establish a healthy collaboration with government to identify shared goals that will ultimately be mutually beneficial.

Iraqis increasingly see a credible civil society in all its forms as an important medium for citizen action and voice. In 2013, 39 percent of Iraqis surveyed by Mercy Corps said that civil society makes a difference in their lives. By 2015, that number had jumped to 50 percent.

Moreover, in recent years, Iraqi civil society, through the work of Civil Society Organizations (CSOs), has asserted itself as an important catalyst for governance improvements. In Diyala Governorate, civil society, led by the al Noor Universal Foundation, initiated an advocacy campaign that influenced the provincial budget. In Wasit Governorate, the local human rights organization successfully lobbied the provincial government to improve budgetary transparency. The organization was subsequently invited to assist the provincial government in drafting a law outlining public participation in local government. In Muthana Governorate, electricity shortages amid scorching summer temperatures raised a public outcry.<sup>41</sup> The Iraqi Foundation for Cultural Liaison, a local organization, organized town hall meetings, conferences, and media outreach to raise awareness and mobilize citizens. These efforts led Muthana's Directorate of Electricity to increase the provision of electricity to meet citizens' needs.

37 J. A. Scholte, "Civil Society and Democracy in Global Governance," *Global Governance* 8, no. 3 (2002): 281–304, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/27800346>.

38 V. Stanski, "Linchpin for Democracy: The Critical Role of Civil Society in Iraq," *Journal of Third World Studies* 22, no. 2 (2005): 197–225.

39 T. Rajesh, "Civil Society and Good Governance," *Media Asia* 29, no. 1 (2002): 3.

40 For instance, previous survey research has shown that the belief that civil society organizations can influence policy and development in Iraq has been linked to higher perceived levels of government responsiveness and trust in government. See Mercy Corps, "Bridging the Gap."

41 IRIN, "Iraq: Power Shortage in South Prompts Major Health Concerns," June 21, 2004, <http://www.irinnews.org/report/23754/iraq-power-shortage-in-south-prompts-major-health-concerns>.



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Although many of their wins so far have been at the local level, CSOs are increasingly voicing citizens' concerns on sensitive national political issues such as national reconciliation and government decentralization. A clear example is the work being done by the Iraqi Center for Conflict Management and Negotiation Skills ("the Center"), an organization that Mercy Corps helped to establish before turning it over completely to Iraqi leaders. Working through a network of trained mediators from diverse backgrounds including parliamentarians, activists, and development workers, the Center has documented several successful policy changes in the current crisis, such as convincing parliament to approve the distribution of salaries to more than 20,000 public-sector employees in areas under the control of ISIS. According to the Center's director, Saad Alkhalidi, "It wasn't just about salaries; people in those areas had long felt ignored by the government." Had it not been for this bold move, Alkhalidi believes that ISIS could have further capitalized on civil servants' continued frustration in places like Nineveh Governorate.



## **CIVIL SOCIETY AND RECONCILIATION**

Importantly, civil society is not just a mechanism for articulating citizen concerns and channeling them toward the government – though it is certainly that. It is also a means for building cohesion within and across communities, helping groups negotiate differences peacefully. Mercy Corps and its partners have certainly observed civil society in this role. Civil society activists in Kurdish Region of Iraq have smoothed frustrations between host communities and IDPs (or, in some cases, between different groups of IDPs). CSOs have also negotiated agreements between tribes through organizations such as the Center, with its national network of mediators positioned around the country. The Center has also developed and presented to central government leaders a national reconciliation strategy, informed by more than 80 meetings with citizens in all 18 governorates – particularly including people displaced from areas that are under the control of ISIS. Civil society leaders have additionally offered advice to youth demonstrators and, at militia recruitment centers, are offering volunteer opportunities to youth, providing a source of meaning rooted not in the gun but in civic activism. In a post-ISIS era, where the scars of sectarian liberation campaigns and likely cycles of vengeance may provide a new threat to Iraq's stability, civil society's role in reconciliation will only grow more important.

While it is often difficult to measure the impact of civil society investments – because of the long time frames involved, the absence of concrete indicators, or the stop-start nature of the sector's progress – an active, mature civil society is fundamental to forging a nonsectarian identity and an avenue for peaceful political activism in Iraq.

Other factors contributing to the country's instability – including the influence of regional actors and the spillover of the Syrian war – are important challenges for which the international community must continue to search for solutions. But without a strong civil society that cuts across sects and ethnicities to encompass communities, regions, and the country, a democratic and stable Iraqi state seems all the more distant.

## “WHEN WILL WE INVEST IN THE PEACE?”

The challenges that loom before Iraq are daunting: reknitting a fractured state in the aftermath of years of conflict, the rising threat of sectarianism, and governance failures. Millions have been displaced. In an apparent effort to punish ISIS supporters, communities have been burnt to the ground, leaving internally displaced Iraqis homeless. The stresses on host communities and tensions between hosts and their Iraqi “guests” continue to mount.

Meanwhile, many fear the conflict will deepen the divisions already threatening the state. The liberation of ISIS-held communities may create an environment ripe for vengeance. Those who fled Anbar and Nineveh are angry with those who remained behind, accusing them of supporting ISIS. “We know who they are,” said one displaced youth from a village in Nineveh. “They used to be our neighbors, but now they are ISIS and they are terrorists. They took our homes and pushed us out. When my village is liberated, there will be revenge.” Sadly, many of those who didn't flee after ISIS arrived were simply too weak or poor to do so, and now they risk being branded as terrorist sympathizers.

The threads tying the Iraqi state together may look tenuous, yet there is hope rooted in a burgeoning civil society.

“Reconciling the grievances behind the conflict, and those that have been created by the conflict ... that will take a very long time,” said Ala Kemal, a longtime human rights activist in Sulaymaniyah and a graduate of the Center. “And it will take more than money,” she said. “It will require investments in civil society and peace building.”

Indeed, effective civil society investments are perhaps more expensive in time than they are in money. They require long-term investments and active mentorship, a willingness to engage consistently for years, and recognition that progress will be uneven. Unfortunately, the appetite for comparatively cheap, long-term investments in governance and civil society in Iraq appears to be waning. The United States and other donors have moved recently to scale back democracy and governance investments. Since the military draw down, USAID spending on democracy and governance programs in Iraq has shrunk dramatically, from \$229.5 million in 2011 to roughly \$75 million in 2015.

This move is dangerously premature. The threads tying the Iraqi state together may look tenuous, yet there is hope rooted in a burgeoning civil society. Attempts to divide Iraqis along sectarian lines have spawned a popular backlash. Protestors in Baghdad and the south this summer rejected the divisive politics that threaten to rip Iraq asunder. Civil society is on the rise and so is public confidence in it. It remains one of the best channels for improving governance and accountability, and creating a sense of identity that transcends region, ethnicity, and sect. But while military aid, always healthy, has spiked dramatically to combat ISIS, the meager international support for civil society and good governance has withered. This situation will undoubtedly have implications long after the military campaign is concluded.

“Everyone wants to invest in fighting,” Ala said, “but when will we invest in the peace?”

CHAPTER V.  
**RECOMMENDATIONS**



Whereas popular narratives often suggest that Iraq's instability primarily derives from sectarianism, Mercy Corps' research finds the main culprit is poor governance: marginalization of minority groups, corruption, abusive security forces and a failure to deliver basic services equitably. Improving government fairness, transparency, accountability and responsiveness are all vital to build a stable and just Iraq over the long-term.

But this is easier said than done. Recent history shows that externally-imposed efforts to improve governance are not only ineffective, but sometimes counter-productive. Why? Because Iraqis want to be citizens, not beneficiaries. Efforts to improve governance must be rooted in a foundation of equity and shared identity. Inclusive dialogue between the government and its constituents would seem to be prerequisite, as well as tangible commitments to creating a more accountable, inclusive and pluralistic governing system.

This type of systemic exchange requires a robust civil society that can partner with local, provincial and national governments. It has been a difficult ambition to realize. Years of repression under Ex-President Saddam Hussein and the turmoil following the 2003 invasion slowed the growth of Iraqi civil society. Today, however, Iraqi civil society is gaining momentum and public confidence is on the rise. This trend must be sustained and extended. As Mercy Corps' research suggests, Iraq's burgeoning civil society is increasingly well placed to improve governance – and, in so doing, advance the country's long-term prospects for peace.

## **To build a stronger cooperative relationship between civil society and government on key policy issues:**

- 1. The Abadi government and Iraq's political parties should improve and formalize relations with civil society actors, including by the establishment of official, regular and inclusive civil society consultative processes.** Civil society is a vital partner in effective governance. Iraqi governments –both central and provincial– should collaborate with rising civil society to address corruption and to improve government transparency. The government should establish regular forums in which civil society leaders can advise provincial and central government officials, serve as a conduit for the transparent release of information and act as an effective advocate for responsive policies. This should build on the advisory council model established between civil society and provincial governments, while expanding civil society engagement from the grassroots to the capital.
- 2. Donors should commit to multi-year investments in Iraqi civil society.** Long-term stability in Iraq hinges on the development of a robust civil society that can partner with formal governments to improve services and enhance legitimacy. Unfortunately, civil society often lacks the resources and backing to achieve sustainable impacts on good governance. Iraq's civil society sector is finally gaining momentum. Now is not the time to cut funding. In order for Iraqi civil society to play their much-needed role in decentralization, humanitarian response, development and ensuring transparency of government expenditures, major donors should establish a multi-year commitment to improving civil society and to growing the opportunities for government-civil society cooperation.

## **To improve the capacity of local actors to represent citizens' concerns and play an active role in good governance:**

- 1. Donors and INGOs should move beyond traditional capacity building approaches to engage civil society partners in actively informing programs and governance investments.** Donors and INGOs must work to further strengthen CSO's capacity: to manage project funds, to collaborate with each

other, to engage with communities and to develop coordinated advocacy plans. These investments will help ensure civil society organizations serve as a medium for citizens to peacefully participate in promoting good governance. Ultimately, civil society organizations must be empowered to take the lead in informing programs and future governance investments. This will not only increase the likelihood of future projects' success, but also help raise the standards, experience and credibility of civil society partners.

- 2. Implementing Partners should facilitate stronger working relationships between youth demonstrators and civil society actors.** Iraq's youth demonstrations have energized thousands of advocates for improved governance. Unfortunately, lack of progress risks undermining demonstrators' faith in civic engagement. NGOs working in this space should facilitate partnerships between youth organizers and established civil society organizations that aim to coordinate and help voice the concerns of protesters in constructive way. The energy of the youth demonstrators needs to be positively channeled, and Iraq's growing civil society organizations could provide mentorship, an avenue for activism and a framework for maintaining non-violent campaigns to improve governance.

## **To avert further conflict and the rising sectarian tensions in the country:**

- 1. Apply lessons learned from past “hearts and minds” initiatives efforts by ensuring governance investments are long-term, kept distinct from military operations, and informed by feedback mechanisms at the local, provincial and national government levels.** Past efforts to improve governance in Iraq have been overly top-down and, consequently, deaf to local needs. Future investments must be more comprehensive, capitalizing on the potential of Iraqi communities. Institutional reforms – at the local, regional and national level – must be paired with efforts to amplify local voices and expand the reach and credibility of civil society. This is vital to expanding the legitimacy, credibility and effectiveness of government. These efforts will likely require new partnerships between NGOs, who work in local communities, and global donors, who have often prioritized improving governments' institutional capacity.
- 2. The government of Iraq should strengthen the Reconciliation Committee in the Prime Minister's office.** Even after ISIS has been forced to retreat from Iraq, inter- and intra-communal retributions against those who supported the extremists – or were merely perceived to do so – will likely begin. A proactive reconciliation strategy is needed now to stem vengeance attacks and future sources of instability. This should include mechanisms to monitor abuses against civilians on all sides of the conflict, clearly communicated access to justice platforms and a long-term vision to support community-level reconciliation and transitional justice efforts. Civil society and international donors will be strong partners in this effort if Iraqi political leadership exhibits vision and commitment.
- 3. The government of Iraq, supported by donors, should continue to improve its responsiveness and accountability in providing public goods effectively and equitably.** Our research suggests that support for armed groups was driven, among marginalized populations, by the perception that sectarian preferences influenced the delivery of critical government services. To improve future stability, service delivery must be effective and equitable, both in reality and in perception. Progress will require government to work closely with civil society, particularly among marginalized groups, to identify and support projects in a manner that is transparent and easily accountable.



**4. Implementing agencies should ensure projects are transparent, locally owned, context-specific and, where possible, low profile to avoid exacerbating conflict.** Careful attention must be paid to conflict dynamics in designing programs that are meant to respond to citizens' concerns and improve government responsiveness. A recent study on aid to conflict-affected communities shows that in some cases more aid can actually increase both the incidence and duration of conflict. The same study found that the key to ensuring that aid in fragile contexts does not fuel greater conflict is to design interventions that are targeted, low-profile and informed by a rigorous analysis of the conflict and its various actors. By contrast, evidence from evaluations of development projects in fragile states indicates that large and more high-profile projects, which lack transparency and community engagement, may empower insurgents and exacerbate hostilities – or at the very least alienate those constituencies they are supposed to benefit. In Iraq and other complex conflict settings, plans for future investments should ensure that the delivery of aid is transparent, inclusive and responsive to local dynamics. This requires carefully selecting partners to ensure a shared commitment to goals and values.

## CHAPTER VI.

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44 131 662 5160  
[mercycorps.org](https://www.mercycorps.org)

## CONTACT

### BEZA TESFAYE

Mercy Corps  
Conflict and Governance Research Manager  
[btanfaye@dc.mercycorps.org](mailto:btanfaye@dc.mercycorps.org)

### KARI JORGENSEN DIENER

Mercy Corps  
Deputy Director – Policy and Advocacy  
[kdiener@dc.mercycorps.org](mailto:kdiener@dc.mercycorps.org)

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