Beyond the Islamic State: Sectarianism in Iraq
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The Amnesty International report, released on 14 October and entitled Absolute Impunity: Military Rule in Iraq (http://www.amnesty.org/en/library/asset/MDE14/015/2014/en/17cbb7ef-7ca4-4b5a-963e-661f256fdddb0/mde140152014en.pdf), exposes the actions of Shia militias in committing widespread human rights abuses throughout Iraq, including the abduction and killing of Sunni civilians, in operations which it describes as involving ‘varying degrees of cooperation from government forces – ranging from tacit consent to coordinated, or even joint, operations’. The report was compiled on the basis of interviews with victims, their relatives, witnesses, medical and other implicated professionals.

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The abuses of Shia militias documented by Absolute Impunity are generally framed by the perpetrators as retaliation for ISIS attacks, but their victims are arbitrary, and the motives are frequently criminal rather than purely sectarian. Kidnapping is used a means of extorting money from families and occasionally Shia and Christians are also targeted. However, the vast majority of victims are Sunni who, in the current climate, have little recourse to justice. The majority of victims and their families interviewed for the report felt that going to the police would not only be pointless, it would also put them in greater danger, indicating the public perception of the level of collaboration between the militias and the state.
Such attacks by Shia militias, along with political exclusion, are the key grievances that drive support for the Sunni armed groups that are the focus of Beyond the *Islamic State: Iraq’s Sunni Insurgency* (http://www.understandingwar.org/sites/default/files/Sunni%20Insurgency%20in%20Iraq.pdf), which was released by the Institute for the Study of War on 6 October. These armed groups are numerous and diverse, ranging in ideological background from salafi-jihadi (http://www.religionandgeopolitics.org/religion-geopolitics/glossary/salafism) to Sunni secular nationalist, and in some cases co-operate to varying degrees with ISIS. However, according to the report, this co-operation is merely strategic: all of the groups described have significant differences in ideology to ISIS and have also had episodes of direct confrontation with ISIS in recent months.

The existence of these groups and the widespread support they enjoy indicates that that even if ISIS is removed there will not be a peaceful settlement in Iraq without fundamental change in political representation for Sunnis. As the report states: "The problem of anti-government militancy in Iraq will not be solved by destroying ISIS".
KEY FINDINGS

Two recently published reports from Amnesty International and the Institute for the Study of War reveal the depth of Iraq’s sectarian problems beyond the battle between ISIS and regime forces. The reports examine the range of Shia and Sunni militias engaging in sectarian conflict and undermining the prospects of peace.

KEY FINDINGS

- The Sunni armed groups that the report focuses on are: Jaysh Rijal al-Tariqah al-Naqshabandia (JRTN); The General Military Council of Iraqi Revolutionaries (GMCIR); The Fallujah Military Council; The Council of Revolutionaries of the Tribes of Anbar; The 1920 Brigades; The Islamic Army of Iraq; Jaysh al-Mujahidin; and Ansar al-Islam.
- These groups represent a diverse ideological spectrum. The JRTN and GMCIR are largely composed of former members of the military and regime of Saddam Hussein, and reflect a pan-Arab Ba’athist heritage. Jaysh al-Mujahidin and Ansar al-Islam are salafi-jihadi in orientation, but also comprise a nationalist element, contrary to ISIS. While demands are generally
presented within a political framework, some of these groups would almost certainly refuse to take part in any sort of democratic process.

- Widespread Sunni dissatisfaction with and animosity towards the national government because of support for Shia militias and a lack of effective representation means that the majority of Sunnis will not support an Iraqi-led military campaign against ISIS, and any such campaign will merely provide opportunities to other Sunni armed groups to gain in strength and accelerate Iraq’s descent into sectarian civil war.

- Armed Sunni groups do not have the support of all sections of the Sunni population, there are significant numbers of Sunnis who favour co-operation with the Government in order to defend against ISIS. There are also Sunni tribal communities in ISIS controlled areas where, although resistance has currently been quelled by ISIS, would be likely to support the Government against ISIS or other armed groups if they were guaranteed the requisite military and political backing.

- The current perceived sectarian status of the Iraqi government and security forces by Sunnis is a major obstacle in the Iraqi government’s ability to engage local communities in ISIS-controlled territories in order to resist ISIS control over Sunni heartlands.
CONCLUSIONS

Both reports argue that the failure of the Iraqi government to adequately represent all of its citizens has contributed to the current severe instability and descent towards outright sectarian civil war. The abuses of human rights committed by Shia militias documented in *Absolute Impunity* constitute a serious obstacle to a future political settlement, because of alienation and resentment caused by the real and perceived state complicity in these attacks.

While the armed groups documented by *Beyond the Islamic State* generally do not target civilians, and therefore do not commit human rights violations on the same scale, they also pose a challenge that is being largely ignored as the ISIS phenomenon occupies the world’s attention. Even if ISIS is defeated, armed Sunni groups that oppose cooperation with the Government will continue to enjoy widespread support while the Sunni population of Iraq perceives itself as being subject to state neglect and oppression.
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