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Washington's Sunni Myth and the Civil Wars in Syria and Iraq

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In Iraq, the senior Shia leaders of the Popular Mobilization Forces (P.M.F.) recently gathered for a meeting. Among them was a leading Sunni P.M.F. commander, who later recounted this story to me. When the men broke for prayer, a Shia leader noticed they were not being joined by their Sunni comrade, who remained seated. The Shia leader asked, “Why don’t you join us?”

He responded, “I don’t pray.”

“What do you mean, you don’t pray?” asked his Shia counterpart.

“If I prayed,” answered the Sunni leader, “I would be with the Islamic State fighting you.”

If you read Western media outlets, including *War on the Rocks*, you might think that most of the problems in the Middle East can be traced to Sunni disenfranchisement, especially in Syria and Iraq. The broader Western debate about the ongoing civil wars in the Middle East is plagued by a false understanding of sectarian identities. Washington elites imagine a broader Sunni sense of identity that does not exist outside the confines of Saudi Arabia and territories held by jihadist groups. This has the malign effect of encouraging policies that add fuel to the fires consuming Syria and parts of Iraq. Alongside this narrative exists another that portrays Iraq’s Popular Mobilization Forces as bloodthirsty sectarian militias engaged in constant abuses against Iraq’s Sunni Arabs — but this is simply not the case.

Similarly, these same voices describe the Syrian government as an “Alawite regime” that rules and oppresses Sunnis. However, Sunnis are heavily represented at all levels of leadership in Assad’s government. The territory it controls at this point in the war and at all points past is majority Sunni. And the Syrian armed forces are still majority Sunni. Alawites may be overrepresented in the security forces, but all that means is that they get to die more than others. If it is an “Alawite regime,” isn’t it odd that includes and benefits so many non-Alawites?

Sunnis not only have political power in Syria, but they also have social power, more opportunities, and a greater range of choices in life compared to other states in the region ruled by Sunni heads of state. At the heart of this negligent misapprehension of what is actually happening in the Middle East is an acceptance and mainstreaming of notions of Sunni identity propagated by the most extreme voices in the Sunni world: Saudi Arabia, al Qaeda, and the Islamic State in Iraq and the Levant (ISIL).

Some American analysts have accepted the shrill claims of those who purport to represent the Sunni Arab world, such as Saudi Foreign Minister Adel Jubeir. They have accepted the sectarian victimization narrative as articulated by Syrian insurgents and their spokesmen — as if these voices represented the majority of Syrian people or even most Syrian Sunnis. They have accepted appeals for support from the angriest Iraqi Sunni rejectionists, as if giving in to their demands would push them to fight ISIL or move toward reconciliation to Iraq. By rejectionists, I mean those, whether Baathist or Islamist, who do not accept the new order and instead seek to overthrow it. Based on my years living and working in the Middle East, these voices do not represent those they claim to speak for. The Saudis’ only appeal to other Arabs is the money they have to offer. The Syrian rebel spokesmen represent only a fraction of Syrian Sunnis. The self-appointed Iraqi Sunni leaders control neither men nor territory. The United States is listening to

the wrong Sunnis. When President Obama or General David Petraeus or others repeat the myths of disenfranchisement these voices propagate, they reinforce and legitimize a dangerous sectarian narrative that should instead be countered.

The alternative ideology to the self-proclaimed Islamic State, whether in the Middle East, in Europe's slums, or the former Soviet Union, is not to promote a Sunni identity — what the Bush administration pursued with its mantra of “moderate Sunni allies.” Instead, a counter-ideology should promote citizenship and secular states. This is the model that the West helped destroy in Egypt after Gamal Abdel Nasser died and the model it is currently destroying in Syria. In two articles, I will describe why the West's view of sectarianism gets the region terribly wrong, resulting in policies that perpetuate rather than resolve the interconnected civil wars that plague the Middle East. In this first part, I use facts on the ground gathered in my years of working in the region to explain how Washington's view of Syria and Iraq do not comport with what is actually happening there. In the second part, I will offer a counter to the Western narrative of sectarianism in the region and propose a dramatic re-think of how the West and the United States in particular should approach the Middle East. What I have to say will surely strike you as controversial. Some of you will dismiss me out of hand, especially because I am writing under a pseudonym. I only ask that you approach the facts and analysis below with an open mind and critically assess whether the dominant Western policy approach to the Middle East truly serves American interests. I, for one, do not think it does. And it has led to the region's descent into hell.

Misreading Sectarianism in Syria

There is a cacophony of voices constantly complaining that the U.S. government does not sufficiently support the Sunni sectarian insurgents it backs in Syria. At this point in the conflict, these voices are open about the fact that these Sunni Arab “moderates” cooperate with al Qaeda, but go on to say they still deserve Washington's support. Sometimes, it seems they argue that we help al Qaeda win in Syria so that its men don't flee further west to us. Last year Gen. David Petraeus proposed arming al Qaeda in Syria against ISIL. At *War on the Rocks*, Faysal Itani bemoans the idea that Russia and the United States might cooperate to degrade Jabhat al Nusra, an avowed Salafi jihadist group that until very recently operated as an al Qaeda affiliate.

These advocates too often ignore that the Sunni insurgents have been receiving ample assistance and that Syria's political and military elite is majority Sunni. Yes, I am talking about the Assad regime. Those who lament the meager assistance provided by the United States to Syrian insurgents overlook the fact that this is one of the best-supported insurgencies in history. Moreover, they discount how successful Syria's insurgents have been at driving Assad's forces out of most of the country. Most of the country has fallen into chaos or into the hands of the jihadists who cooperated with U.S.-backed groups. In fact, external aid to Syria's insurgents was so successful that it forced the Russian military to directly intervene to prevent the total collapse of Syria. Earlier this month Salafi-jihadists led by a Saudi cleric used suicide attackers and foreign fighters to nearly storm into the government-held half of Aleppo. And yet they were lauded as heroic rebels by Western media and applauded by the official Western-backed Syrian opposition leadership. If they succeed, over one and a half million residents of the government-held area of Aleppo will be at great risk.

These same Western voices who criticize the White House for not supporting Syria's rebels more robustly are also often quick to argue that more support to "moderate" insurgents earlier on would have prevented the rise of the jihadists and brought down the Syrian government.

These voices were and remain wrong because they underestimate the extent to which sectarianism and Salafism were already important trends among Syria's Sunni rural class and its urban poor. These segments of society have always formed the core of the insurgency. Their movement was dominated by Sunni sectarian Islamists who could finally express themselves freely after they expelled the state from their areas. The logical outcome of this movement is extremism. You cannot blame all or even most of this on the Syrian regime's harsh methods. Advocates of more support to so-called moderates early on forget what happens when states collapse and militias emerge. People embrace more primordial identities and extremist militias dominate.

Moreover, Western critics of Washington's less than full-throated support for the armed Syrian opposition have always underestimated the commitment of Syria's allies. And they forget that Syria was taking place in a regional context where sectarian scores had to be settled. The Saudis and Qataris hoped to overthrow the Syrian government and turn it into a "Sunni" regime, and they saw Syrians as tools to achieve those goals. Iran was and remains committed to stop this from happening. These Gulf states were crucial in fostering the insurgency, but this left the rebellion reliant on external actors.

All this external support the Syrian insurgents received made these groups less closely involved with their own society. Effective insurgents are organically connected with their communities and place great emphasis on their well-being. This is often because they need communities to provide resources, shelter, and other forms of support. If a group is financed from outside the country, it can operate independent of these concerns and impose a reign of terror on a community or ignore the fact that its actions lead to the community's destruction.

From my perspective as someone living and working in the region, American analysts seem even more sectarian than most people in the Middle East in promoting and legitimizing the Sunni-Shia divide. Sectarian-based movements and this American pro-Sunni sectarianism are seen by modernist and progressive Arabs in both the Sunni and Shia camps as abhorrent and dangerous. For those who want a Sunni force, they have ISIL, the Sunni militia *par excellence*. And the vast majority of ISIL's victims have been fellow Sunnis.

It is commonly argued that only a Sunni Arab force can defeat the Islamic State. It is likewise argued that ISIL cannot be defeated as long as Assad is president because he is a magnet for jihadists, because the United States needs Sunni allies, and because Sunnis feel like they lost everything since 2003 and remain oppressed. These are flawed notions that rely on false assumptions about identity in the region, and they pose a grave danger for Syria, Iraq, and the Middle East as a whole.

This faulty American thinking on sectarianism in the Middle East was recently typified by former ambassador Robert Ford in *The New Yorker*. Referring to the so-called "dissent cable" written by hawkish State Department officials, Ford said:

The dissent message makes clear that the focus on the Islamic State will not win the hearts and minds of enough Syrian Sunni Arabs to provide a long-term, sustainable solution to the Islamic State challenge in Syria. The Syrian Sunni Arab community views the Assad government as a greater problem than the Islamic State.

In Syria, a majority-Sunni military force exists. It represents the only national institution remaining in a state that does not make nearly as many sectarian distinctions as its opponents seem to think. Yes, I am talking about the Syrian armed forces. The majority of Syria's state employees, government officials, and soldiers are Sunni, even today. The majority of the still-powerful urban capitalist class is Sunni. As someone who has been interacting with people on every side of the civil war for its entire duration, I have learned that even some of Assad's top security chiefs are Sunni, such as Ali Mamluk, the head of national security who supervises the other security agencies. Colonel Khaled Muhammad, a Sunni from Daraa, is in charge of securing Damascus for the feared Department 40 of the Internal Security. Deeb Zeitun, the head of state security, and Muhammad Rahmun, the head of political security, are both Sunni, as are the head of foreign intelligence, the minister of defense, senior officers in air force intelligence, the minister of interior, the head of the ruling Baath party, the majority of Baath party leaders, and the president of the parliament. The commander of the National Defense Forces (N.D.F.) in Daraa is a Sunni man of Palestinian origin. The commanders of the N.D.F. in Quneitra, Raqqah, and Aleppo are likewise Sunnis. One of the regime's leading anti-ISIL fighters who receives support from all regime security branches is Muhana al Fayad. He leads the large Busaraya tribe between the Derezor and Hassake areas and is also a member of parliament. Even some pilots dropping barrel bombs on insurgent-held communities are Sunni. Many heads of military intelligence branches are also Sunni.

Sunnis in the Syrian government include many hailing from ISIL-held areas, such as Derezor and Raqqah, or insurgent-held areas, such as eastern Hama, Daraa, and the Aleppo countryside. This is key to understanding the regime's survival. The head of security in the northeastern Hassake province which borders ISIL-held areas is himself a Sunni from the town of Muhassan in Derezor. His town is held by ISIL, and he has relatives who defected from the Syrian security forces to join various insurgent groups. Muhammad Rahmun, the aforementioned head of political security, is from Khan Sheikhun in Idlib, and he has relatives in groups such as Jabhat al Nusra. As a result, the regime never cut off links to areas held by insurgents and ISIL and still pays civil servants in some of these places. This leaves a door open for people to return to the state. The regime continues to fight tooth and nail to maintain control over Aleppo and Derezor, two Sunni-majority cities, and it struggles to provide state services to these communities. Finally, the leaders of the delegations representing the Syrian government that have gone to Geneva to negotiate the political process have all been Sunni, as have nearly all of their staffers.

When Robert Ford claims as that Sunni Arabs in Syria are more worried about Assad than the Islamic State, he is dangerously mistaken. Most of Ford's "Syrian Sunni Arab community" remains in government-held areas and did not rise up. Damascus is an overwhelmingly majority-Sunni Arab city. If they viewed the Assad government as a greater problem than the Islamic State, then Damascus would have fallen to insurgents or at least would have endured the same constant car bombings that Baghdad has. Baghdad has proportionally far fewer Sunnis than Damascus, but jihadists are still able to find safe havens there and launch more attacks than

Syrian insurgents in Damascus. But Damascus, of course, has not been immune to these attacks. The two Syrian cities most hit by insurgent rockets and mortars are Damascus and Aleppo, both overwhelmingly Sunni cities. Most of the many hundreds of dead civilians from indiscriminate insurgent attacks on government-held areas have been Sunnis, which is why the Sunnis of government-held west Aleppo cheered when government forces recently made gains against insurgent-held east Aleppo. Even the pro-regime militias in Aleppo are Sunni, such as Liwa Quds and the clan-based militias that have remained loyal to the state. Of course the vast majority of the government's victims have also been Sunni, and this has driven some to extremism. This war, however, is very much Sunni vs. Sunni in many places.

Not all Sunnis in Damascus love Assad, of course, (although more do than you would expect), but when I speak with them, it is clear they oppose the opposition and prioritize stability. The alternative vision equates Sunni Arabs with radicals and proposes that the United States radicalize its policy enough to win them over.

This obsession with supporting “Sunni Arabs” has led the United States to support unruly and corrupt militias who happen to be Sunni and Arab, but aren't al-Nusra, al Qaeda, or ISIL. The mainstream Syrian insurgents (the Free Syrian Army, or FSA) are not located in the right areas to launch assaults on ISIL and do not possess the right incentives to do so. Over the last few years, FSA groups have become increasingly parochial. They fight for local issues, defend their villages and neighborhoods, reach accommodations with whomever they can, and lack motivation to go further. The many agreements the regime has reached with insurgent-held towns around Damascus, in southern Syria, and elsewhere evidences the exhaustion of these groups and their desire to find a settlement at the local level. The FSA lacks the mobility required to engage in the remote battles that the war on ISIL requires. When the so-called moderate opposition fights the jihadists, it gets beaten or melts away.

There are also Islamist insurgents such as Ahrar al-Sham, Faylaq al-Sham, or Nuredin al-Zenki (now famous for its latest beheading video). They fight ISIL only when it attacks them, and even then, many of their men are reluctant to fight against fellow Sunni Muslims. It is ironic that the P.M.F., which contain many thousands of Sunnis and are part of the Iraqi state, are called Shia militias while the Syrian insurgents who are entirely Sunni and explicitly fight for Sunnis are described as rebels. Islamist insurgents possess ideological and political aims inconsistent with U.S. interests (or with those of most Syrians, for that matter) and actually bear no small resemblance to those of ISIL. Ahrar al Sham is incapable of fighting without Jabhat al-Nusra alongside it or without getting approval from Jabhat al Nusra. And while Jabhat al-Nusra recently dissociated itself from al-Qaeda, this move was blessed by al Qaeda — not exactly a good recommendation. Al-Qaeda understood that an independent al-Nusra, or one that at least seems independent, is better for its jihad and would allow its assault on Aleppo to be described by western journalists as being carried out by “rebels.” Of the thousands of insurgent groups running rampant in Syria, some lack an ideology and are accidental guerillas — but this dominant Salafi jihadi ideology was imported from abroad. It rejects freedom, progress, and modernity. The language of these groups when talking to the West is seductive — or at least the language of their “activist” apologists — but their discourse in Arabic is indistinguishable from al Qaeda or ISIL. They differ only over who should have power and whether it is legitimate to establish a caliphate today. Anybody with basic Arabic can hear their voices calling in unison for

the extermination of rival sects as the main objective of their war. They are not fighting for democracy, freedom, or human rights.

In Syria, moderate Sunnis are fighting al Qaeda and ISIL. One of these is Khaled Abaza, a Sunni commander of a paramilitary unit in the south who has been fighting against Jabhat al Nusra and other extremist groups for several years. I have personally observed former insurgents who now fight ruthlessly alongside government forces and against both Jabhat al Nusra and ISIL, such as fighters from Aqnaf beit al Maqdis (a group that was based in the Yarmuk camp).

Iraq and the Myth of the Bloodthirsty Shia Militias

The Western narrative of the nature of the ongoing conflict in Iraq similarly matches up only poorly with facts on the ground, especially as it concerns the role of sectarian identity and persecutions on every side. This is evident nowhere more than the Popular Mobilization Forces (P.M.F.), an umbrella group of institutionalized militias mobilized to fight against ISIL. During the now concluded battle for Falluja, a new genre of articles emerged warning hysterically about the role of the P.M.F. in Iraq. These articles incorrectly described the P.M.F. as sectarian or Shia militias devoted to persecuting Sunnis. In fact, these units are part of the Iraqi state, coordinate with the Iraqi Security Forces, and answer to the Iraqi prime minister. Because they were largely established in response to a sudden and immediate threat, their organization has been a gradual process, culminating in the 2016 decision to transition away from factions and into a formal military structure. With a few exceptions, P.M.F. units have not engaged in widespread abuse of Sunni populations during this war against ISIL. While most P.M.F. units are Shia, interlocutors in my meetings with Iraqi P.M.F. officials and members of the Iraqi government have told me that there are 30,000 Sunnis receiving P.M.F. salaries. These include leaders such as Yazan al Jiburi, who liberated Tikrit in cooperation with Iranian-backed units, and Wanas Hussein, whose tribe bravely resisted ISIL and whose sister Omayya Jabara was the first woman to die fighting ISIL. Some of these Sunni units are tribal holding forces, while at least 7,000 proper fighters fall under the P.M.F. chain of command. There are also hundreds of Sunnis in majority-Shia units and a few thousand Sunnis who fight alongside these units but are not yet officially registered and do not receive salaries. Further, these units do not engage in any more violations than the forces the American-led coalition supports. Some, such as Saraya Salam (formerly known as the Mahdi Army), are in fact the least sectarian and most disciplined of the various military and paramilitary units fighting in Iraq today.

Many Western analysts seem to think that just because a security force is majority-Shia that it will somehow be unable to resist killing and persecuting Sunnis. Some in the West even questioned whether the government of Iraq should have liberated Falluja, a city less than an hour away from Baghdad, from ISIL (just as they doubt whether the Syrian government should retake the half of Aleppo occupied by jihadists). These voices seem more worried about the Iraqi government treatment of Falluja than about ISIL, as if this jihadist group treats its residents well on account of a shared Sunni identity. One merely needed to look at Samara or Tikrit, cities already liberated from ISIL, to see that Sunnis are not being abused after their liberation from ISIL.

Baghdad stands as another example — a Shia-majority city with dense Sunni enclaves, such as Aadhamiya, Amriya, and many others. Its Sunni neighborhoods used to be insurgent strongholds. Now, Shia-majority security forces secure these neighborhoods, which are also full of displaced Sunnis from Anbar province. They are safe and unharmed. Cafes, restaurants, tea houses, and shops are busy day and night. The biggest danger in Baghdad is ISIL. If Shia vigilantes in the security forces wanted to target all these unarmed and vulnerable Sunnis, they could — but they do not. The Anbar provincial council is based in Baghdad's Mansur district and protected by Shia-majority security forces.

The P.M.F. are a majority-Shia force fighting to liberate majority-Sunni areas from ISIL on behalf of Sunnis. Surely, abuses have taken place. Houses and mosques have been destroyed and there have been extrajudicial killings. But these violations pale by comparison to events of the Iraqi civil war during the American occupation. Iraq may have actually transcended the Sunni-Shia paradigm in a way that will seem counterintuitive to Washington-based analysts. Today, the threat is inter-Sunni violence, inter-Shia violence, inter-Kurdish violence, and Arab-Kurdish violence.

The Sadrists, one of the Shia political factions in Iraq, know that their competition in Iraqi politics does not come from Sunnis but from their Shia rivals in Dawa, Badr, and the Supreme Council. The Sadrists admit that Iraq cannot be ruled without its Sunnis. This is why Sadr has opened up to the Saudis. If Iran's regional rivals were smart, they would not try to counterbalance Iran in Iraq using a handful of Sunni rejectionists too few in number to pose a threat. Instead, they would support the large Shia bloc that opposes excessive Iranian influence in Iraq. When Sadrist supporters stormed the Green Zone and Iraqi Parliament in April of this year, they stole from Sunni hardliners what they had dreamed of for over a decade: marching into the Green Zone to ransack the Shia government. Iraq can no longer be simplistically divided into a Shia government and Sunni opposition. Instead, there are Shias and Sunnis in the government, as well as in the opposition. Sadrist supporters chanted nationalist slogans, including calls for Iran to get out and rejecting Qassem Suleimani. The Sadrists proved that Iraqi Shia can be patriotic Iraqis rather than tools of Iran. And in Iraq today, the politician most popular among Sunnis is Ayad Alawi, who is Shia!

The battle to retake Falluja ended in a victory. The key element was the participation of thousands of P.M.F. fighters, as I observed and as my research with commanders on the ground confirms. Initially, the P.M.F. was assigned to retake the countryside around Falluja while the army and police assaulted the city. After these forces failed, the P.M.F. contingent entered the city and liberated it. These men, almost all Shia from the Badr forces, were at first dressed in police uniforms. But by the time they defeated the enemy, they were open about their role as P.M.F. members.

Yet it is undeniable that abuses typical of counterinsurgency campaigns took place in Falluja: Western human rights researchers who conducted field work in Anbar confirmed to me that there are between 600 to 900 men missing after the various Anbar operations and that about 600 men who fled the Falluja area were beaten or tortured. The P.M.F. needs a penal code, and it must publicly punish wrongdoers and conduct transparent investigations to demonstrate accountability. If the P.M.F. wants to become a permanent Iraqi institution, as seems likely, this

could be supported by the United States and other members of the anti-ISIL coalition in a way that increases accountability for the force and helps ensure that human rights abuses are dealt with. The United States and its European allies can place conditions on support the Iraqi government receives to force better behavior among militias.

Much of the destruction in Iraq results not from battle but instead from revenge by both the P.M.F. and by tribes, including Sunni tribes. Deliberately destroying homes to punish a community is a war crime, and the international community is offering stabilization and reconstruction money to Iraq. Donors could impose conditionality on funding, refusing to pay to fix the damage resulting from war crimes committed by the P.M.F. or Iraqi security forces. The United States and the international community should engage with the P.M.F. to encourage better discipline, just as it does with partner military forces around the world. Some Iraqis might be skeptical about American admonitions, however. Iraqi security forces emerged during the American occupation of Iraq, when innocent prisoners were abused, brutal solutions were sought, and men were rounded up en masse. It was in this period that the Sunni victimization narrative arose.

So while abuses surely have occurred, claims that Sunnis are being persecuted wholesale in Iraq overlook a far more nuanced reality. Some Sunnis are indeed persecuted, including men from certain places under a policy of guilt by association (something the Syrian government engages in as well). So a man from Falluja, Jurf Assakhr, or other towns perceived to have a history of harboring al Qaeda and the Islamic State may be persecuted — but not all Sunnis. The Sunnis of Baghdad are not being targeted, for example. It is not 2006, when Sunni bodies were found in dumpsters every day. Even after mass-casualty attacks targeting Shia civilians such as the July 3 attack that killed about 200 or another attack this past May, there were not retaliatory attacks against Sunnis.

Moreover, the persecution of Sunnis in Iraq that exists, while inexcusable, is not indiscriminate. Based on my interviews and research, men who fled from ISIL-held areas early on and sought shelter in government areas, including in majority-Shia areas, are not suspected of ties to the jihadist group and are left to live their lives. However, those who remained behind or fled more recently are sometimes persecuted under the often unfair assumption that they sympathized with terrorists. From the point of view of security services, these are men who have chosen to stay in Falluja for the last two years, unlike the many Fallujans who fled ISIL early on and sought safety in Baghdad. Security services have a right to worry that some ISIL fighters had infiltrated the ranks of the fleeing civilians. In a significant improvement over what Iraqis call the period of “sectarianism” that ended in 2008, the violations today involve far less killing but instead the destruction of homes and villages in revenge for a perception that residents supported ISIL. The P.M.F. are imperfect, as is every security force in the Middle East. Given the role of Falluja as a safe haven for those beheading Shia and supporting insurgents, it is surprising how restrained the P.M.F. have been. Outside observers can debate about whether the Iraqi government should have prioritized the liberation of Falluja, but Baghdad does not have that luxury. Falluja is 50 kilometers away from the capital and not far from the key shrine city of Karbala. It also straddles the highway to Amman that is a key trade route.

While the P.M.F. benefit from Iranian advisors and assistance, these units are commanded by Iraqis and remain under the authority of Iraq's prime minister. At first the P.M.F. allowed the Iraqi Counterterrorism Service (CTS), police, and army to attempt and fail to take the city. Meanwhile, the P.M.F. respect the orders of the Iraqi prime minister, contradicting those who claim the units simply represent an extralegal force controlled by Iran. Western media (and some Arab satellite channels) have stoked Sunni fears and turned Falluja into a rallying cry, but it is not the P.M.F. themselves that are the cause of the rallying cry.

Finally, the P.M.F. is a clearing and supporting force rather than a holding force. It liberates territory from ISIL or supports the Iraqi Security Forces (itself majority-Shia) when they do so. Then the P.M.F. move on, leaving local (Sunni) forces to hold and the government to (hopefully) build.

The Iraqi army and security forces are also majority Shia, just like the P.M.F. . There is no alternative to the P.M.F. in Iraq, as their recent key role in liberating Falluja proved. Since the P.M.F. took Tikrit, most of its residents have returned and life has returned to normal. Because the P.M.F. were not allowed to participate in the liberation of Ramadi, the city had to be destroyed for lack of a willing ground force to take it. None of this is to say that the P.M.F. are the ideal force. It is an emergency solution in response to an existential threat, and it has saved Iraq from total collapse. Instead of eschewing the P.M.F. , the United States should engage with it. Instead of preventing the P.M.F. from participating in operations to liberate towns, the United States should be incorporating it into its planning alongside the conventional Iraqi security forces. This will help integrate the P.M.F. further into the Iraqi state.

Wither the Western Sectarian Narrative?

As I have explained, the Western narrative of these conflicts and the role of sectarian identity in particular simply does not match up with facts on the ground. This has led to poor policy choices at every turn.

None of this is to excuse the abuses of the Syrian state and the Iraqi state. In Syria in particular, the government has unleashed desperate levels of brutality, using collective punishment, indiscriminate attacks on insurgent held areas, and harsh siege tactics to prevent insurgents from penetrating state-held areas and to force them to accept ceasefires. This has certainly led to radicalization as violence always does. This legacy of war crimes committed by all will hopefully be dealt with, but the first priority must be ending the wars. But there are broader issues that Washington must confront.

In my next article on this topic, I will discuss how we got here, the crisis of Sunni identity that sits at the heart of these conflicts, and how Western and, in particular, American policy should change to accommodate the realities of the Middle East and to focus on building and reinforcing non-sectarian national institutions and national forces.