



**UNPACKING
FEDERALISM IN IRAQ:
*INSIGHTS FROM BASRA, NINAWA
AND SULAYMANIYAH***

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Introduction

The modern Iraqi state has been in existence for over a century, and despite witnessing many forms of government – from monarchy to republic to one-party rule – it has always had centralized leadership. It was only after the adoption of the 2005 Iraqi constitution that the state entered an era of not only democratization, but of decentralized federalism. The study and analysis of post-2003 Iraqi state building has been understandably clouded by an emphasis on the morality of regime change and the issue of Kurdish statehood. For those interested in analyzing the democratization experiment in Iraq, the major critique that has prevented in-depth analysis was the inorganic nature of the democratization process itself, as it had arisen out of war and occupation. As for federalism, which frequently got sidelined in analysis, the major concern was the relationship between Baghdad and Erbil (between the federal Government of Iraq and the Kurdistan Regional Government).

The relationship of Baghdad to the other governorates, including Duhok and Sulaymaniyah in Iraqi Kurdistan¹, is often overlooked. This report challenges the conventional wisdom about how federalism is presented outside of Iraq, how it should be studied, and how it relates to the democratization process in the country overall. Rather than fixating on how federalism (as an extension of the democratization state-building project of 2003) is inorganic or poorly constructed in Iraq, this report gives agency back to Iraqis and places their vision for centre-periphery relations at the forefront. There are brewing discussions about federalism taking place in Iraq today, not only on the political level, but in the street, as demonstrated by the October Protest Movement. This report is inspired by the shift in Iraqi public opinion and seeks to document the views of everyday Iraqis and of business and political elite in three governorates that play an important role in the story of Iraq's federalism: Basra, Ninawa, and Sulaymaniyah.

For the last 17 years, there have been repeated calls to transition Basra into a region, sometimes along with neighbouring Maysan and Thi Qar governorates and sometimes independently.² At times these calls were rooted in the perception that Basra was culturally unique, but later, the calls came from a desire to manage Basra's oil wealth. In 2005, the early calls were to form a massive southern region comprising the nine governorates south of Baghdad.³ However, the first campaign for a Basra region was led by former Basra governor, Dr. Wael Abdul Latif, in 2008.⁴ There were other calls by the provincial council in 2010 and later public calls for a region in 2014 and onwards.⁵ Basra is an important case because of its history of attempts to be a region as well as its position as the oil generator that sustains Iraq financially, but that is notoriously neglected and underdeveloped. For these reasons, Basra is a critical case study in this report.

In addition to Basra, this report includes a case study of Ninawa governorate. Ninawa's capital, Mosul, served as the capital for the terrorist group, the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS), for almost four years. The occupation of Ninawa made it de-facto independent from the rest of Iraq. This report is interested in examining whether this experience has impacted how the citizens of Ninawa view federalism, particularly as it was one of the three governorates of which the majority of its citizens voted against adopting the Iraqi constitution in 2005, and by extension, the current model of federalism.⁶ Ninawa is also interesting because of its proximity to, and thereby natural competition with, Erbil, the capital of Iraqi Kurdistan. As a cultural, academic, and business hub, it has a unique position in Iraq. Since its liberation, Ninawa has made massive strides in recovery and hosted rich discussions about governance and state building abound among its civic-minded

1 Also commonly referred to as the Kurdistan region of Iraq. To avoid confusion with the greater Kurdistan, which extends beyond Iraq's borders, and to not overuse the term "region", I use Iraqi Kurdistan throughout the report.

2 Omar al-Jaffal and Safaa Khalaf, "A New Region, or Independence? Basra's Demands Amidst a Local Government Crisis," *London School of Economics Middle East Centre Blog*, October 21, 2020, <https://blogs.lse.ac.uk/mec/2020/10/21/a-new-region-or-independence-basras-demands-amidst-a-local-government-crisis/>.

3 Interview with Dr. Wael Abdul Latif in Baghdad, April 18, 2022.

4 Ibid.

5 al-Jaffal and Khalaf, "A New Region, or Independence? Basra's Demands Amidst a Local Government Crisis," 2020.

6 Jonathan Steele, "Iraqi constitution yes vote approved by UN," *The Guardian*, October 25, 2005, <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2005/oct/26/iraq.unitednations>.

citizens, led by a flourishing civil society.

The third and final case study is of Sulaymaniyah, one of the three governorates that compromise Iraqi Kurdistan. Prior to the adoption of the Iraqi constitution and during the 1990s, Sulaymaniyah had its own separate region from Erbil and Duhok.⁷ Despite the official reunification of Iraqi Kurdistan in 2005, Sulaymaniyah continues to operate many institutions separately from Erbil, in particular the security apparatus.⁸ While reuniting in 2005, there is now growing calls for Sulaymaniyah to split and form its own region.⁹ This growing call from within Iraq's only official region is what makes Sulaymaniyah a vital component of this research.

It does not escape the reader's attention that the three chosen governorates happen to represent a Shia majority governorate, a Sunni majority governorate, and a Kurdish governorate. However, this was entirely by coincidence, as the discussion above explains. Moreover, the presentation of Iraq, as comprising these three distinct identities, is an oversimplification that impacts how federalism should be designed and perceived. Each of these governorates has a complicated and diverse landscape and this report tries to capture the complexities of identity within and across each of these areas.

Federalism can help address many of the administrative and bureaucratic challenges that Iraq faces. Critically, a healthy and functioning federal state can render consociationalism unnecessary, thereby improving governance and alleviating citizen demands and concerns. Federalism can also increase the space for accountability between citizens and their elected representatives, as it delineates government function and ability more clearly to everyday citizens. Federalism allows Iraqis to maintain their sub-state identities, while providing the tools and ease with which to increase sub-national economic ties and to develop a national identity that does not challenge, but rather complements, sub-national identities, be they ethnic or religious.

The purpose of this report is to grasp how Iraqis understand and view federalism, just as the Iraqi street has become more interested and invested in the topic. The report can serve as a launching point for discussions on how to improve the federal system of Iraq and as a way to ensure that citizen voices are included in this discussion. Many factors have contributed to the challenges that Iraq faces today, but instead of focusing on the past, the intention of this report is to focus on the future for the benefit of all Iraqis.

Without doubt, the federal system is ideal for a country as rich and diverse as Iraq. Many successful states in the world are federal, such as Canada, Germany, India, South Africa, and the United States of America. While these are established democracies, there are many lessons Iraq can adopt from their experience and transition. This is a key area for Iraq's allies to provide support in.

Iraq has been overwhelmed with existential challenges in the last two decades from civil war to terrorism, to post-war reconstruction, to economic and public health crises, but it is now at a stage where it must address citizen demands for a better quality of life. At Iraqi universities and in spaces of government, discussions are ongoing about what a better life entails and how it can be achieved. Critical to this discussion is the need to separate short-term responses from long-term structural solutions. Federalism can precisely play this role of structuring the Iraqi state to better serve its many constituents in the long run. Among Iraqi civil society, there are discussions on rewriting the constitution and changing the political system from a parliamentary system to a presidential one; however, these discussions are in fact – at heart – about how to distribute power equitably. In essence, these discussions are about center-periphery relations and about federalism. This report was inspired by these discussions.

⁷ Megan Connelly and Mike Fleet, "Living Apart Together: Decentralized Governance in the Kurdistan Region of Iraq," *Institute of Regional & International Studies*, November 2020.

⁸ Ibid.

⁹ Ibid.

Methodology

Basra, Ninawa, and Sulaymaniyah have all played a significant role in Iraq's history, and they continue to be politically and culturally significant to this day. They each have a distinct culture due to geography, history, and their ethno-religious make up. Most importantly, these three governorates have a unique experience with federalism in Iraq. Sulaymaniyah was integral in the fight for Kurdish rights and for achieving the semi-autonomous region in Iraq. Today, it is struggling with its own place in Iraqi Kurdistan. Basra is witnessing the strongest calls for forming a region in post-2003 Iraq and Ninawa had de facto autonomy from Baghdad when it was occupied by ISIS from 2014 to 2017. Each of these governorates constitutes a distinct case study in this report on Iraqi federalism.

In order to construct each case study, I conducted fieldwork throughout Baghdad, Basra, Erbil, Ninawa, and Sulaymaniyah from March 2022 to September 2022. The fieldwork included interviews with different segments of Iraqi society and focus group discussions with youth. In addition, I analyzed written material produced by key Iraqi figures involved in the discussion and design of federalism.

With regards to the interviews, they were divided into three components: elite political interviews, civil society and academic interviews, and businesspeople interviews. The political interviews included current and former members of parliament (MPs) as well as former ministers and the first post-2003 governor of Basra. The political interviews were semi-structured and included around 15 questions, each taking an average of ninety minutes to complete. In all interviews, hand-written notes were used to record the conversation with verbal consent from the interviewee. In two cases, respondents specifically requested that the interview be recorded on a device. The questions that were posed concerned how these officials viewed federalism, what the attributes of a region are, the political forces that support or prevent federalism, and their vision for the future of their governorate. The first question I ask them is their assessment of Iraqi federalism today. In addition, an important question (from a comparative political science perspective) that was raised to all interviewees was what other country in the world constituted an ideal example of how federalism should function. At least three MPs were interviewed from each governorate, in addition to key figures in from political parties, a governor, and ministers. I intentionally sought out female political figures and successfully interviewed two MPs from Sulaymaniyah, one from Basra, and a federal minister from Sulaymaniyah.

The interviews with academics and civil society members were less structured and conversational. They focused on the development of federalism over the last two decades as well as perceptions of public opinion. The interviews with businesspeople were naturally also conversational as each individual came from a different industry and had a different relationship with the local and central government. Indeed, the business interviews are integral because businesspeople are powerful influencers of politics and are driven by their economic interests. In some cases, they are advocates of further decentralization and in other cases, they push for centralization. The paper aims to depict their views of the benefits and harms of federalism and whether their views were counterintuitive; moreover, it illustrates their views on the economic benefits of federalism. CEOs, chairmen of companies, and investors as well as the head of the Basra Investment Commission were also interviewed. Moreover, I relied on my own insights garnered from my time as advisor to the president of the Trade Bank of Iraq in 2021.

Finally, to understand the perspective of the average Iraqi, I relied on focus group discussions which were held at either a university or at a civil society organization. Each focus group discussion had men and women in attendance and ranged from 11 to 25 participants. The focus group discussion in Sulaymaniyah was virtual due to the timing of the academic calendar. The focus group discussions centered around how federalism was perceived in each community. For example, how

did Iraqis define federalism? How did they define their relationship with Baghdad? What, in their opinion, were the benefits of a federal system and what were the disadvantages? The discussion served as a mutual learning platform where I was able to convey the findings of the academic literature on federalism and the experience of other countries with federalism while the participants provided their insights from their own community and expressed their hopes and fears. I consider these discussions as springboards for future discussions in the Iraqi civil society space.

This research would have benefitted from conducting a public opinion survey in each of the governorates, but considering the time and resource limitations, the focus was on fieldwork and hosting focus groups and interviews. The findings of this research will assist in designing future public opinion surveys on the topic. Current reputable public opinion surveys on Iraq, like the Arab Barometer and the World Values Survey¹⁰, focus on the question of the suitability of democracy for the country, rather than the question of federalism. Rarely are Iraqis asked about centre-periphery relations, especially those outside of Iraqi Kurdistan.

In addition to the data I collected through fieldwork, I was also gifted – along the way – many treatises on the topic of federalism in Iraq, including for example the biography of former Iraqi President, Jalal Talabani, as well as several books on Basra’s potential for a region by Dr. Wael Abdul Latif. The New Generation Party shared their 2030 vision which included their views on the future of federalism in Iraq. Given the importance placed on these materials by my interviewees, I devoted time to reading and analyzing them. This is, of course, in addition to the extensive existing literature which I outline below.

Contextualizing Federalism in Iraq



The vision held by American policymakers, Iraqi politicians, and even academics for the structure of the post-Saddam Hussein Iraq was that of a federal state. The underlying assumption was that federal systems are best suited for multi-ethnic states. From a political perspective, this ensured a “one Iraq” policy, in which the Kurds would not pursue independence. Herein lies the ultimate

¹⁰ See World Values Survey wave 6 official questionnaire.

problem with Iraqi federalism: in their eagerness to create a system impervious to ethno-sectarian fractionalization, the proponents and designers of Iraqi federalism ignored the prerequisites and the qualifications that researchers have long highlighted, ones whose absence exacerbates ethno-religious tensions. As David Cameron, one of the leading authorities on federalism cautioned in July 2006, “a unitary political structure is not possible in Iraq, but a rigidly tri-partite federal structure is not desirable”.¹¹ It is unsurprising that today, the Iraqi public misunderstands federalism and decentralization and associates it with separatism.

Federalism and decentralization are sometimes used synonymously, but their relationship is complex. Federalism “is a form of political organization which unites separate polities within an overarching political system so that all maintain their fundamental political integrity”.¹² By contrast, Jonathan Rodden defines decentralization as “a shift of authority towards local government and away from central governments, with total government authority over society and economy imagined as fixed”.¹³ In other words, centralization or decentralization are a calibration action taken by the central government, while federalism is a protected relationship between the central government and other established sub-national governmental units. This is why there are federal systems that are described as more or less centralized. For example, Cameron explains that while the United States of America began as a decentralized federation, it became more centralized over time.¹⁴ Canada, on the other hand, started as a centralized federation that was referred to as “quasi-federal” and grew to be one of the world’s most decentralized federal systems.

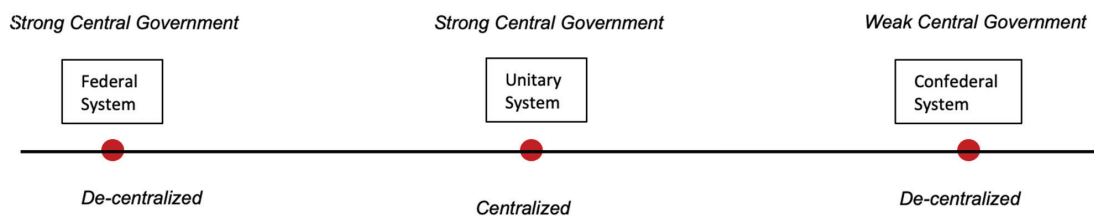


Figure 1 Federalism and Centralization

Despite the ubiquity of federalist systems, much of the academic work on federalism has been informed by studies of the United States, Canada, India, Nigeria, and sometimes Germany and Russia. The focus on the United States is not surprising given that it was the birthplace of *The Federalist Papers*, a collection of essays written by Alexander Hamilton, James Madison (who would become the fourth U.S. president) and John Jay (the first Chief Justice) in promotion of the U.S. constitution. In defending a federation – as opposed to a confederation – Alexander Hamilton writes:

*“America, if not connected at all, or only by the feeble tie of a simple league, offensive and defensive, would, by the operation of such jarring alliances, be gradually entangled in all the pernicious labyrinths of European politics and wars; and by the destructive contentions of the parts into which she was divided, would be likely to become a prey to the artifices and machinations of powers equally the enemies of them all. Divide et impera must be the motto of every nation that either hates or fears us.”*¹⁵

11 David Cameron, “Making Federalism Work in Iraq,” *Forum of Federations*, July 2006, p.11, <http://www.forumfed.org/pubs/iraqfed-dc.pdf>.

12 DJ Elazar, “Federalism vs. Decentralization: The Drift from Authenticity,” *Publius*, 6(4), 9–19, 1976, p. 12.

13 Jonathan Rodden, “Comparative Federalism and Decentralization: On Meaning and Measurement,” *Comparative Politics*, 36(4), 481–500, 2004, p.482.

14 Cameron, “Making Federalism Work in Iraq,” 2006.

15 Alexander Hamilton, “The Same Subject Continued: Concerning Dangers from Dissensions Between the States,” *Federalist No. 7*, <https://guides.loc.gov/federalist-papers/text-1-10#s-lg-box-wrapper-25493270>.

In other words, Hamilton believes that a federation protects the sovereignty of the nation, while preserving the political integrity of the constituent units. Madison later describes the importance of a federation in protecting against both civil war and the tyranny of the majority.

It is fitting then that the *Annual Review of Political Science* published an overview of academic work on federalism that was titled “Madison in Baghdad? Decentralization and federalism in comparative politics”.¹⁶ In this piece, Erik Wibbels provides a compelling critique of the assumptions that underlie many of the work on federalism and many of these are relevant to Iraq. For example, the argument that federalism is the best system to represent the interests of people at the subnational level is challenged by findings that show that many citizens do not know which level of government to go to for certain things. In my own fieldwork in Iraq, which I describe at length in subsequent sections, I found that this is generally true in the three Iraqi governorates I studied. In addition, I have also observed that people sometimes attribute blame to the wrong level of government.

Secondly, Wibbels cautions against assuming that decentralized politicians are “benevolent and understand local preferences better than their national counterparts”.¹⁷ This is an important assumption to unpack in the Iraqi case, as the calibre of local leadership differs across the governorates. For example, there is much more developed local leadership in Iraqi Kurdistan than there is in Basra.

Finally, Wibbels also expresses concern that although much of the research on federalism has found it to be ideal for divided societies, “given the unequal regional costs and benefits of economic openness...the challenge of maintaining territorial integrity in ethnically contentious federations is likely to become more difficult”.¹⁸ Indeed, one need look no further than the rising sentiments of economic injustice emanating from Basra to see why. And yet, federalism is and was deemed appropriate because it “appeals to a country or an international order that is struggling with ethno-cultural conflict, separatist movements and terrorism”.¹⁹

This remains to be the case for Iraq, especially after the events of ISIS occupying a third of Iraqi territory from 2014-2017, the Kurdish independence referendum of 2017, and the calls for revolution and reform in southern Iraq in the 2019 October Protest Movement. This paper will not delve further in the history of the modern Iraqi state, as many historians have written extensively on the subject. Federalism does not erase the desire certain groups may have for independence, and if utilized incorrectly, could spark further divisions. However, if federalism is implemented correctly, it will create a better environment within a state’s borders.

Iraq adopted federalism in its 2005 constitution, but the groundwork was set by opposition parties long before then. In his memoir, the former Iraqi President and Kurdish leader Jalal Talabani, describes federalism as a compromise that occurred between the Kurds and other Iraqi opposition groups, with the buy-in of the Americans.²⁰ Similarly, in his treatise on the 2003 Iraq War, former Minister of Finance and key figure in the anti-Ba’athist opposition movement, Ali Allawi writes: “It was now a cardinal principle of the Iraqi opposition that the Kurds of Iraq would be entitled to a high degree of autonomy in any post-Saddam order.”²¹ Allawi also says emphasizes that the Americans understood this.²² The 17 years that followed the ratification of the constitution have been unstable, with existential crises overshadowing the focus on governance.

In 2011, the Institute for National Strategic Studies held a conference on federalism in Iraq. By that time, Iraq had two parliamentary elections after adopting the Iraqi constitution and five years of

16 Erik Wibbels, “Madison in Baghdad? Decentralization and federalism in comparative politics,” *Annual Review of Political Science*, 9(1), 165–188, 2006.

17 Ibid, p.168.

18 Ibid, p.183.

19 Cameron, “Making Federalism Work in Iraq,” p.2.

20 “The Memoirs of President Jalal Talabani,” eds. Salah Rasheed trans. Shirzad Sheikhani. Beirut: *Arab Scientific Publishers Inc.*, 2018.

21 Ali A. Allawi, “The Occupation of Iraq: Winning the War, Losing the Peace,” New Haven: *Yale University Press*, 2007, p.73.

22 Ibid.

federalism. From then on, the Iraqi constitution laid the groundwork for federalism, but the implementation suffered from lack of clarity. The findings from the conference, as gathered by Dr. Denise Natali, show that although Iraq's governorates have been given greater power, they were unable to unilaterally pursue large scale projects.²³ Moreover, the legal ambiguity and inconsistencies constrained both local and central governments.

The different levels of government struggled to adjust to their new federal structure, whether it was taking advantage of new powers allotted to them, like the governorates, or adjusting to less oversight for the federal government in Baghdad. The adjustment phase has not been smooth, and laws were not helpful in presenting a clear path forward. To make matters more complicated, Iraq struggled with fears of regionalism and the division of the country.²⁴

The fears stemmed from the uneven division of governorates and regions. Although Iraq has 18 governorates, three of them comprise the sole region in the country, Iraqi Kurdistan, which has exercised extensive power in comparison to the other governorates. Moreover, because Iraqi Kurdistan represents a homogenous ethnic group, with a clear separatist movement, it raises fears of disintegration. This has created, in the mindset of many Iraqi politicians and citizens, a conflation between federalism/decentralization and regionalism/separatism.²⁵

This has fed into the agenda of Iraqi politicians who are not interested in federalism and prefer a more centralized state, they use the rhetoric of division of Iraq to shut down any discussion on federalism. However, as Mike Fleet explains, it is the lack of a federal structure that is hurting governance across all of Iraq, even if most of the discussion of federalism in Iraq revolves around the relationship between the federal government and the Kurdistan Regional Government (KRG).²⁶ Fleet delves into both the legal and administrative aspects of federalism in Iraq, showing that the status quo is unsustainable.

The relationship between the central government and the governorates not incorporated into a region is regulated by Law 21, which was first introduced in 2008.²⁷ There have been amendments over the years since the law came into effect, and research by Ali Al-Mawlawi and Sajad Jiyad has examined how local governments have struggled to exercise their power.²⁸ There have also been difficulties and a crisis of will from various ministries in how to devolve powers to governorates. The inability to implement decentralization has not only hurt the credibility of the federal government, but also that of local governments to the extent that there were widespread calls for the abolishment of provincial councils during the 2019 October Protest Movement.²⁹ Provincial councils are responsible, among other things, for the selection of a governor. In the absence of that, prime ministerial executive orders have supplanted them, though not without controversy.³⁰ In Iraqi Kurdistan, a different problem is developing with the delay in elections for the regional parliament.³¹

As described above, there are two fronts to the discussion of federalism: the one between Baghdad and Iraqi Kurdistan, which revolves around the power of regions, and the one between Baghdad and the other governorates, revolving around how much to decentralize powers. The two are connected, as there have been calls by certain governorates to form a region similar to Iraqi Kurdistan. Conversely, there have been calls from within Iraqi Kurdistan for decentralization from Erbil,

23 Denise Natali, "Can Federalism Work in Iraq?," *Institute for National Strategic Studies*, October 21, 2011, <https://www.files.ethz.ch/isn/134644/ER-Iraq%20Federalism.pdf>.

24 Ali Al-Mawlawi and Sajad Jiyad, "Confusion and Contention: Understanding the Failings of Decentralisation in Iraq," *London School of Economics Middle East Centre*, January 2021.

25 Ibid.

26 Mike Fleet, "Decentralization and its Discontents in Iraq," *Middle East Institute*, September 2019.

27 Ibid.

28 Al-Mawlawi and Jiyad, "Confusion and Contention," 2021.

29 Ibid.

30 Ibid.

31 Farman Sadiq, "No election held on time in three-decade old Kurdistan Region of Iraq," *Kirkuk Now*, October 7, 2022, <https://kirkuknow.com/en/news/68902>.

perhaps through the formation of a region for Sulaymaniyah and Halabja³². In addition to the focus on Baghdad-Erbil relations in discussions of federalism in Iraq, the other governorate that is often discussed is Kirkuk, an ethnically diverse, oil-rich, disputed territory.³³ Basra, which I discuss below, is similarly important due to its oil wealth and its repeated calls for a region. These discussions show the complexity and evolution of discussions on federalism within Iraq and how there is dissatisfaction from all sides, those with a region and those without one.

Basra



Among Iraq's governorates, Basra is notoriously oil-rich, yet underdeveloped and neglected. It is the only governorate that is not landlocked, granting it valuable access through its ports to the Persian Gulf. Basra supplies most of the oil produced in Iraq and, according to the World Bank, oil revenues account for more than 85 percent of the government's budget in the last decade.³⁴ Basra's financial importance cannot be overstated which makes the dire living conditions that its citizens' face even more troubling.

From the airport to the city centre, shantytowns spread, unplanned, similar to many major cities like Baghdad. Electricity outages are common amid Iraq's excruciating heat, accompanied by the humidity of Shatt Al-Arab, the body of water where the Tigris and Euphrates rivers meet. High poverty and unemployment rates make an already difficult situation worse. In 2021, the poverty rate was estimated to be between 20 and 25 percent in Basra, while only 13.7 percent nationally.³⁵ Unsurprisingly, Basra was the site of many a protest movement including most prominently, in 2015, 2018, and 2019. Basra was an important hub in the October Protest Movement and many of its activists' faced intimidation, kidnapping, abuse, and even murder.

³² Halabja is a district of Sulaymaniyah with a push for recognition from the federal government in Baghdad to be a governorate.

³³ Due to its oil wealth, Kirkuk has been a point of contention for decades and resurfaced after regime change in 2003. The only area in the constitution that is specified as a disputed territory, resolving its final status had long been a goal of many policymakers and researchers. However, regardless of Kirkuk's status, it would not address the overlying issue of how federalism should be implemented in Iraq and improve governance, whether in the Kurdistan region, Kirkuk apart of it or not, or the rest of the governorates in Iraq. The point of this report was not to resolve the status of disputed territories, but to improve federalism in Iraq, which ideally would lessen the sensitivity of the topic of disputed territories.

³⁴ "The World Bank in Iraq," *The World Bank Group*, June 1, 2022, <https://www.worldbank.org/en/country/iraq/overview>.

³⁵ "Despite oil wealth, poverty fuels despair in south Iraq," *Agence France-Presse*, November 5, 2021, <https://www.france24.com/en/live-news/20211105-despite-oil-wealth-poverty-fuels-despair-in-south-iraq>.

Basra's celebrated poet – Badr Shakir Al-Sayyab – bemoaned, in his most famous poem, *Rain Song*, that “not a year has passed without Iraq having hunger”. However, Al-Sayyab, who died in 1964, represented Basra's cultural significance. And, despite Al-Sayyab's words, Basra's dilapidated state today stands in stark contrast with the memory of a gilded past. It is a combination of these factors – scarcity, poverty, potential, history, and culture – that Basra's residents have expressed a desire for a region of their own.

This desire for a region has manifested in different ways over the past 17 years. The first formal push for a region came in 2008 by former governor of Basra, Dr. Wael Abdul Latif. During our interview, Dr. Abdul Latif clarified that the first calls for a region were from former Prime Minister Ibrahim Al-Jafari, who wanted to form one of the 15 governorates outside of Iraqi Kurdistan.³⁶ During those early days, there was also a call for a Shia region – incorporating the nine governorates southern Baghdad – by the late Abdul Aziz Al-Hakim.³⁷ Neither of these visions transformed into anything tangible.

Dr. Abdul Latif's goal was to transform the Basra governorate into a separate region in 2008. According to Article 119 of the constitution, there are two ways to form a region: either a request by one-third of the provincial council or through a request by one-tenth of the voters in each governorate. Then, a referendum would take place.

According to Dr. Abdul Latif, all the political parties opposed his campaign and, despite having obtained enough signatures to begin the referendum process, the Independent High Electoral Commission was politicized, dooming his project from the start. After that, there were calls for a region by the provincial council of Basra, but Dr. Abdul Latif does not believe they were serious beyond rhetoric. Had they been serious, he believes, they would have benefited from the ease with which a referendum could be started through the provincial council.

Two of the three Basra MPs which I interviewed, Ali Shadad and Zahra Al-Bajari, were both former members of Basra's provincial council. Al-Bajari spoke about her belief in Basra's right to form a region³⁸ and Shadad stated that the province is moving towards regionalism.³⁹ Their perspective reflected that of the focus group I conducted at Iraq University College, consisting of undergraduate political science students. Many spoke about the constitutional right that Basra had to form a region, which they believed they should embark on regardless of the services and development. One student told me, “even if you pave our streets with gold, I will still want a region, to ensure the rights of the people of Basra for the future”.⁴⁰ This enthusiasm for a region to ensure the rights of the people of Basra is similar to that of Dr. Abdul Latif who argued, “it is not just about seeing development, it is about your political right. Basra is the same population as Kurdistan region of Iraq. Yet we are at a lower level politically and economically”.⁴¹

The comparison of Basra to Iraqi Kurdistan was a recurring theme in all my Basra interviews. From Dr. Abdul Latif to the young students in the focus group, everyone believed that Iraqi Kurdistan was given more rights than Basra. This is an interesting observation, as many in Sulaymaniyah argue the opposite, but for other reasons. As the only region established in a federal Iraq, Iraqi Kurdistan has created a fear of division among Iraqis. This is what MP Mustafa Sanad spoke about in his interview, that he pushes for stronger federalism, and not regions, because regions spark fear of division.⁴² While some in the focus group were loud in their calls for a region, others did share their fear of Iraq fracturing if more regions were created, and this fear partly comes from the push for independence by Iraqi Kurdistan in 2017. Considering this argument, those that were

36 Interview with Dr. Wael Abdul Latif in Baghdad, April 18, 2022.

37 Ibid.

38 Interview with Zahra Al-Bajari in Basra, May 9, 2022.

39 Interview with Ali Shadad in Baghdad, March 31, 2022.

40 Focus group discussion held with Basra residents at Iraq University College in Basra, May 10, 2022.

41 Interview with Dr. Wael Abdul Latif in Baghdad, April 18, 2022.

42 Interview with Mustafa Sanad in Baghdad, April 1, 2022.

calling for a region pushed back and claimed that they would want a region established that is constitutional and does not violate any laws or create fears of division like Kurdistan.

The impact of Iraqi Kurdistan on Basra's political elite and public is clear, both the positive experience in pushing Basra to seek a region of its own, and also the negative experience of attempting to secede from Iraq that has dampened Basra's regional ambitions. No one was more aware of the consequences of dividing Iraq than Basra's business class. Hassan Ali Al-Bahadili, CEO of Basrah Mas Company, which was established by Hassan's late father in 2004 is involved in multiple sectors: oil & gas, port services, and hospitality.⁴³ Al-Bahadili described pre-2003 Iraq as "socialist", referring to the state's role in regulating economic life.⁴⁴ Although this has now changed, Al-Bahadili maintains that the "economic revolution" in Iraq was delayed because of political instability and security issues.⁴⁵ This is the same reason that Al-Bahadili fears a region in Basra because the impact it will have on upsetting the political stability in Iraq. He fears that Basra would falter if it had to be responsible for its own security. Having said that, Al-Bahadili welcomed more economic freedom for Basra, particularly reforms that would remove bureaucratic barriers coming from Baghdad.

Decentralization and political stability are also the focus of Hatem Mohsen, the Chairman of Al-Nargis Group, one of the largest companies in Basra.⁴⁶ He spoke in detail of the struggles that faced a Basra-centric business like his. For example, these businesses must have a representative office in Baghdad in order to get paperwork completed. Mohsen was concerned that although the investments which need approval of the local government were moving forward, those that needed the approval of a minister in Baghdad are frozen. Oudah Hameed Yasir, General Manager of Dar Al-Shifaa Investment Hospital spoke about how he has to go to Baghdad for obtaining a loan, despite the fact that he banks with the state-owned Al-Rafidain Bank, which has branches across Iraq.⁴⁷ Al-Rafidain is not the only bank with a centralized approval system that necessitates dealing directly with the head office in Baghdad. All businesspeople interviewed operated in Basra only and showed little interest in investing outside of their governorate due to the vast opportunity they see in Basra. Despite this fact, Al-Bahadili and Mohsen were aware that the political and security stability of Basra are connected to the rest of Iraq, giving them a more nationwide vision for their governorate. Having said that, both political and business elite as well as everyday citizens of Basra whom I spoke with were in favour of more decentralization, regardless of whether they wanted to establish a region or not.

It was only the political officials who spoke about the influence of the religious establishment in Najaf and their impact on the vision for Basra as a region. Dr. Abdul Latif spoke about meeting Grand Ayatollah Ali Al-Sistani who, according to Dr. Abdul Latif, told him that the decision of establishing a region is in the hands of the people. Many in the focus group spoke about holding a referendum and letting the people decide.

The first demands for a region were made by politicians, but there is now a greater push from civil society, particularly in response to poor governance. As interviews in this report demonstrated, public awareness with regards to a region is evolving. The issue is no longer simply one of obtaining better services, but a matter of rights. Identity and culture were also discussed, and some believed Basra was culturally distinct from the rest of Iraq. Others viewed regionalism through an economic lens, expressing concern about the impact of migration from neighbouring governorates Thi Qar and Maysan. Sometimes a three-governorate region, spearheaded by Basra, but with Thi Qar and Maysan is also discussed. However, the vision for this three-governorate region always centred on Basra, which would later incorporate the other two via referendums. The proponents

⁴³ Interview with Hassan Ali Al-Bahadili in Basra, May 9, 2022.

⁴⁴ Ibid.

⁴⁵ Ibid.

⁴⁶ Interview with Hatem Mohsen in Basra, May 10, 2022.

⁴⁷ Interview with Oudah Hameed Yasir in Basra, May 10, 2022.

of this strategy believe that it is easier to create a region first in Basra, and much more difficult to succeed across three governorates in one referendum.

The individuals from Basra I spoke with all displayed a familiarity with the process of attaining a region and with the concept of federalism. Of course, they represented a specific subset of society, but their knowledge and attention to the topic suggests a spirit and hunger for more autonomy in the south.

Ninawa



Ninawa's name alludes to its historic significance and its diversity. It is home to a variety of ethnic and religious groups and has been an important center throughout different time periods and civilizations. The governorate borders Syria and Turkey externally. Internally, it borders two of Iraqi Kurdistan's three governorates – Duhok and Erbil as well as Anbar and Salahuddin governorates.

Throughout Iraq's modern history, Ninawa's capital, Mosul, played an important role as one of the economic hubs of the country. Like Basra and Baghdad, Mosul was one of the three wilayat that comprised Ottoman Iraq. Mosul's economic role has been changing over the last two decades, as neighbouring Erbil grows in economic and political significance. This of course was further exacerbated by the economic and physical devastation wrought by the ISIS invasion between 2014 and 2017.

Ninawa's proximity to Iraqi Kurdistan has created other issues for the governorate, including having swathes of its territory considered disputed territories and certain districts de-facto under Kurdish administration. This has primarily impacted the Ninawa Plains, an agriculture area encompassing three districts to the east of Mosul, – Tel Kayf, Hamdaniya, and Sheikhan. The Ninawa Plains are one of the most diverse areas in Iraq, home to many Assyrians, Yazidis, and Shabak. Accordingly, Ninawa and its citizens have an important perspective to offer on federalism.

Their perspective is unique because in 2005, Ninawa was one of the three governorates in which the majority of citizens voted against adopting the constitution, thereby against incorporating

federalism itself. The other two governorates that voted against the constitution were neighbouring Anbar and Salahuddin.⁴⁸ Ninawa's vote proved crucial as it was the only one of the three governorates that did not have two thirds supermajority against, and thus the constitution was adopted.⁴⁹ A three-governorate supermajority rejection of the constitution would have blocked the ratification.⁵⁰ The vote was close in Ninawa because of its diverse population, who were divided on their views towards the shape of the new Iraqi state. Sunni Arabs, who comprised the majority of the governorate, were largely opposed to the adoption of the 2005 constitution, but members of other ethno-religious groups were not.⁵¹

In the last 17 years, four of which under the rule of ISIS, views of both federalism and democratization have changed in Ninawa, among the public and among the political elite. For example, current MP representing Ninawa, Mohammed Nouri Abd-Raba, claims that he and other Sunni politicians in Ninawa no longer opposed to the formation of regions in Iraq.⁵² Abd-Raba was formerly a member of the Ninawa provincial council in 2013 and his brother was one of the members representing the Sunni community in writing the constitution. Both brothers opposed the idea of a region initially. However, Abd-Raba views 2014 as a politically transformative year, in which many politicians changed their opinions about the shape of the Iraqi state.⁵³

This is a stark change to the position of voters and the political elite in the referendum. Former Minister of Defence and current MP Dr. Khalid Al-Obeidi, who won the majority of seats in Ninawa in the 2018 federal elections⁵⁴, explained that regionalism and even federalism remain sensitive topics in Ninawa.⁵⁵ Dr. Al-Obeidi gave the example of Osama Al-Nujaifi, a once popular politician in Ninawa, who lost a lot of that popularity when he began to float the idea of more regions like Iraqi Kurdistan, "Osama Al-Nujaifi paid the price for talking about regionalism".⁵⁶ However, even Dr. Al-Obeidi concedes that this hardline sentiment towards regionalism is lessening.

Dr. Al-Obeidi's observations proved true in the focus group discussion I conducted in Mosul. This was the largest focus group discussion I held during my fieldwork and included various participants from across Ninawa and who represented different age groups and ethnicities. These participants spoke positively about federalism, but they also understood the fears of regionalism that the Ninawa public continues to have.⁵⁷ The overwhelming sentiment in the discussion was that despite the positive attributes of federalism for Ninawa and for Iraq, many Iraqis, and particularly residents of Ninawa, view federalism as breaking up Iraq.

This sentiment is not exclusive to Ninawa and was expressed by both the focus groups and the elite interviews across the other two governorates studied. Some understood federalism as the formation of regions in Iraq, some spanning one governorate and others spanning two or three governorates. Others mistook a confederal system for a federal one, defining regions as having unconstitutional privileges and authorities. This confusion stems from the fact that Iraq does not have a simple and accessible federal structure. The KRG in Iraqi Kurdistan occupies a position below the federal government, but a level above a provincial government. It is not only the sole region in Iraq, but also has a constantly contested relationship with the federal government. Due to the changing nature of the power between the federal government and KRG, the actual powers allotted to a region and the powers the KRG sometimes exercises have confused many Iraqis.

48 Steele, "Iraqi constitution yes vote approved by UN," 2005.

49 Ibid.

50 Ibid.

51 Ibid.

52 Interview with Mohammed Nouri Abd-Raba in Baghdad, June 1, 2022.

53 Ibid.

54 Dr. Khalid Al-Obeidi decided to run in Baghdad in 2021, where he also won a seat.

55 Interview with Dr. Khalid Al-Obeidi in Baghdad, May 14, 2021.

56 Ibid.

57 Focus group discussion held with residents of Ninawa in collaboration with Iraq Future Center & Al-Mithaq Foundation in Mosul, June 3, 2022.

In the focus group discussion, some participants viewed Erbil as Mosul's chief economic rival and expressed concerns that any push for a Ninawa region would be shut down – not just by Baghdad – but by the KRG as well. At the same time, others saw Erbil, and Iraqi Kurdistan as a whole, as a model of administrative organization, which made life easier for its residents. They also understood that Ninawa was an important market for Erbil and believed that more autonomy from Baghdad would allow them to manage their economic affairs better.

The confusion surrounding Iraqi federalism, the stigma around the idea of a region, and the sensitivity towards Iraqi sovereignty were expressed by Ninawa's political elite. When asked to compare Iraq's federal structure with other states, first time MP, Dr. Whatban Al-Mansour, argued in his interview that "you cannot compare Iraq with others because our federalism is not clear".⁵⁸ Dr. Al-Mansour further elaborated that, with regards to his constituents, "if they hear 'region', they think dividing the country, but if you tell them 'dividing power', then it becomes more acceptable".⁵⁹ In this manner, Ninawa and Basra are similar in that they prioritize Iraqi unity. This change in perspective towards federalism, by both public and elite, comes from the desire to see better governance, but without threatening the division of Iraq.

From an economic perspective, the business owners I spoke with favoured federalism. Majid Abdullah, owner of Rashi Al-Aila, and Osama Arif Sadek, owner of Halaw Sadek, are both Yazidis from Bashiqa in the Ninawa Plains, who have inherited their family businesses of rashi (sesame-based spread).⁶⁰ Due to the invasion of ISIS, they both had to start from scratch in 2014 after relocating to Erbil. There, they opened new factories and now operate out of both Erbil and Ninawa after the liberation of their home governorate. Rashi factories are one of the most popular businesses in Ninawa, and many received support through international organizations including IOM and UNDP during post-war reconstruction, given their centrality to the local economy and their ability to generate employment.

Abdullah and Sadek both believe federalism from an administrative side, will be better for business. They have a different experience from the businesspeople in Basra where their work depends on resources and demand from across Iraq. The sesame for the spread is obtained from central Iraq in Babil, Diyala, Anbar, and Qadisiya governorates. It is then processed in the north and sold across Iraq. For Abdullah most of his sales come from Baghdad and for Sadek most of his sales come from Basra. Unlike the businesspeople interviewed in Basra, those in Ninawa needed to look outside of their governorate to produce their work and sell it, showing the close ties entrepreneurs can have with other governorates that other citizens may not necessarily have. They also have a different perspective on what ties different governorates together, particularly as they cannot all be as resource-rich as Basra. These factories in Ninawa offer a glimpse of how much closer Iraqis can be connected economically with a larger private sector.

Although Ninawa has only recently emerged from a devastating war, it has an appetite for reconstruction and growth that is not only exhibited by its businesspeople, but by its everyday citizens and civil society activists. The residents of Ninawa have a nuanced view of federalism, understanding how it can be beneficial to their governorate and to the whole country. This is a different Ninawa than the one that originally harboured fears of centralization and federalism in the constitution of 2005.

⁵⁸ Interview with Dr. Whatban Al-Mansour in Baghdad, July 25, 2022.

⁵⁹ Ibid.

⁶⁰ Interview with Majid Abdullah and Osama Arif Sadek in Erbil, June 6, 2022.

Sulaymaniyah



Sulaymaniyah is one of the three governorates of Iraqi Kurdistan, and yet it is often sidelined in discussions of Baghdad-KRG relations, given Erbil's place as the regional capital. While Erbil and Duhok are associated with the Kurdistan Democratic Party (KDP), Sulaymaniyah is the stronghold for the rival Patriotic Union of Kurdistan (PUK). Rivalries between the two parties culminated in the 1990s civil war, but today the governorates coexist peacefully, with one regional parliament and presidency based in Erbil.

Nevertheless, not all divisions produced by the intra-Iraqi-Kurdish civil war have been mended. Each political party still maintains its own security apparatus and intelligence service. With regards to the region's ties to Baghdad, the informal agreement is that the KDP relinquishes power in Baghdad for power within the region, while the PUK holds the Iraqi Presidency. However, with the KDP growing in strength, they have also grown in appetite and ambition and claims to the presidency have also grown. As a result, this has left both politicians and citizens in Sulaymaniyah feeling marginalized, as they once managed their own affairs and are now relegated to secondary actors within a region whose electoral weight depends, to a large degree, on them. In my interviews with political officials in Sulaymaniyah, they complained of being oppressed twice as much as other governorates. First, they are oppressed by the centralist tendencies emanating from Baghdad and, secondly, they are oppressed by the centralist tendencies emanating from Erbil within Iraqi Kurdistan. Their understanding of center-periphery relations occurs at two levels: the central government in Baghdad and the regional government in Erbil.

Srwa Abdul Wahid, an MP from the New Generation Party – one of the PUK's rivals in Sulaymaniyah – believes that there are multiple reasons for what she describes as dysfunctional federalism in Iraq.⁶¹ The first is the fact that there is only one region in the country, and its existence was imposed on Iraqis, rather than being brought about through the previously mentioned constitutional mechanisms. Had the region been established in the manner outlined in the constitution and following the ratification of the constitution, it might have been easier for everyday Iraqis to understand its structure and purpose. Other officials agreed with Abdul Wahid, stressing in particular the uneven nature of federalism in Iraq and the negative impact of having only one region.

⁶¹ Interview with Srwa Abdulwahid in Baghdad, April 25, 2022.

For example, former MP Arez Abdullah of the PUK, a former chair of the oil and gas parliamentary committee in Baghdad, said “for federalism to work, you need regions, not just one region”.⁶² Similarly, former MP, Rezan Sheikh Diler, who recently left the PUK stressed this as well, adding that there are benefits to a region, but that many people do not know of them.⁶³ Former MP, Sarkawt Shamsulddin also spoke to me about the confusing situation of Iraqi federalism, where, he too, blames the federal government in Baghdad and its relationship with Erbil.⁶⁴ In some respects, Iraqi Kurdistan is treated as other governorates, but then it conducts its own foreign policy, acting more like a region in a confederacy. Shamsulddin believes that federalism cannot be conducted in this manner and that more legislative bills need to be introduced, clarifying the role of a governorate and a region.

The problem with having only one region is that those outside of it compare its authority to a governorate and view it as being too powerful, while those within it feel they have to negotiate their every right. Therefore, in the interviews in Sulaymaniyah, many officials spoke about the need to have more regions in Iraq. They view the formation of other regions in Iraq as creating more balance, so that national level policy is not polarized, pitting Iraqi Kurdistan against everyone else.

This sentiment was also expressed in the focus group conducted with students in Sulaymaniyah.⁶⁵ The students were from the American University of Iraq – Slemani and the University of Sulaimani and represented a breadth of disciplines including law, journalism, international relations, and even engineering. Some of the students were from Sulaymaniyah and others had moved there to study, but all could see the advantages of creating other regions in Iraq. By contrast, the students and politicians in Basra, both spoke about the importance of creating a region for themselves and did not allude to more regions being formed in Iraq as a whole. This can be explained by the fact that Sulaymaniyah has more experience being in a region than Basra does.

Sulaymaniyah’s experience with a region has made its residents wary, they caution that a region is not necessarily a panacea to Iraq’s problems. Life is as difficult for residents of Sulaymaniyah as it is in the rest of Iraq, though in different ways. While Sulaymaniyah may have better services, its residents struggle with obtaining their salaries on time if they are part of the public sector. Protests have been a common occurrence in Sulaymaniyah since 2011 and are often met with violence and repression. These struggles have inspired talk of Sulaymaniyah becoming its own region.⁶⁶ This demand has culminated in an official request, sent to the Independent High Electoral Commission of Iraq in April 2021, to hold a referendum on forming a region solely for Sulaymaniyah, having collected signatures of just over 10 percent of the residents.⁶⁷ Many dismissed it as a political ploy targeted at the KDP in Erbil, but the fact that they were able to collect so many signatures is striking.

PUK officials I spoke with dismissed this development and similarly claimed that it was a political move to threaten Erbil with, not a serious demand to formally divide the region. Other officials stated that this development is born out of genuine frustrations with the situation in Iraqi Kurdistan, regardless of whether they would emotionally accept splitting Iraqi Kurdistan. The focus group reiterated the point that economic conditions are driving the threat of forming a region separate from Erbil, but that politically there is no interest to go through with it. Baghdad has been too unorganized and unable to calm down the tensions between Sulaymaniyah and Erbil. And even those who push for centralism in Baghdad have not made overtures towards Sulaymaniyah.

62 Interview with Arez Abdullah in Sulaymaniyah, June 22, 2022.

63 Interview with Rezan Sheikh Diler in Baghdad, June 19, 2022.

64 Virtual interview with Sarkawt Shamsulddin, April 7, 2022.

65 Virtual focus group discussion hosted by Institute of Regional & International Studies, September 29, 2022.

66 Connelly and Fleet, “Living Apart Together,” 2020.

67 “Sulaymaniyah region approaches implementation.. And Iraqis are waiting closely,” *Iraq News*, April 17, 2021, <https://iraqnews.info/blog/archives/41696>.

With regards to relations between the governorate of Sulaymaniyah with the federal government in Baghdad, Shamsulddin states that Sulaymaniyah does not have a direct channel to Baghdad even in matters pertaining to federal institutions, “they all report to a general directory in Erbil, which then goes to Baghdad”.⁶⁸ For Abdulwahid, she believes the major political party in Sulaymaniyah, the PUK, is just as guilty in the oppression of Sulaymaniyah as the KDP is, because both are partners in the KRG. She further blames the lack of federalism culture amongst political parties, even the Kurdish parties advocating for federalism in Iraq “Erbil wants centralization [in Iraqi Kurdistan] ... but wants federalism in Iraq”.⁶⁹ She is even skeptical of the non-Kurdish parties who want to replicate a region like Iraqi Kurdistan, claiming they want to do it for the wrong reason. According to Abdulwahid, it is to “replicate the power grab of [KDP leader] Masoud Barzani” and not for the development of the political system.⁷⁰ Abdulwahid highlights a valid concern of decentralization, one that is mentioned by researchers and academics, that decentralized politicians are not necessarily more democratic or benevolent. If anything, she raises a concern that the other Iraqi governorates, in their pursuit of regions, should be wary of.

The situation in Sulaymaniyah is more complicated than that of the other two governorates because of the dynamic of having to deal with both the regional and federal capitals. The issue of a region for Sulaymaniyah is perhaps more divisive for Kurdish nationalism than a Basra region is to Iraqi nationalism. When asking a non-Kurdish official from Ninawa on the future of Iraqi Kurdistan, Dr. Khalid Al-Obeidi responded that only Iraqi Kurdistan can decide to remain as one region or to split.⁷¹ While many non-Kurdish officials rejected the 2017 independence referendum, they nevertheless respected the place that Iraqi Kurdistan has within Iraq. This understanding can serve as a strong basis for addressing disputed territories between Baghdad and Iraqi Kurdistan and for a more functional federal state. As former federal Minister of Environment, Dr. Narmin Othman from Sulaymaniyah eloquently put it, “federalism does not mean splitting, it means to peacefully co-exist”.⁷² Dr. Othman spoke at great lengths of the struggle behind getting Iraq to democratize and accept federalism. She also spoke of her experience learning about federalism in workshops held in countries like Canada, where she discussed the issue alongside other Iraqi colleagues, including Dr. Wael Abdul Latif from Basra. Despite what she views to be “exaggerated expectations of Iraq after regime change”, she continues to believe in federalism and that despite the struggles facing Iraq today “the situation will stabilize, if not today, then the day after”.⁷³

For Sulaymaniyah’s businesspeople, the ones interviewed believe economic integration between governorates will help iron out federalism in Iraq. Asoz Rashid, CEO of iQ, a telecom company with the largest infrastructure in Sulaymaniyah, thinks it is “mundane things, like ease of trade, that will unify the country”.⁷⁴ The company is a leader in its field in Sulaymaniyah but has sights beyond the governorate and Iraqi Kurdistan. With offices in Baghdad and growing operations in the Iraqi capital, Rashid has witnessed firsthand how his company’s expansion to the rest of Iraq has impacted his employees, expanding their views beyond their governorate and region.

Rawaz Rauf, an investor and entrepreneur from Sulaymaniyah, also spoke about how his business interests extend beyond his governorate’s borders. He, too, is invested in the success of the rest of the country. He advises a brick company, Ashur Bricks, the largest single line production plant in the Middle East, and explained, “we sell bricks to Anbar, this is great. We want stability in Anbar”.⁷⁵

Interviews with the business sector in Sulaymaniyah show the potential of growing ties between governorates through the market. This was also the case for the rashi factories in Ninawa. While

68 Virtual interview with Sarkawt Shamsulddin, April 7, 2022.

69 Interview with Srwa Abdulwahid in Baghdad, April 25, 2022.

70 Ibid.

71 Interview with Dr. Khalid Al-Obeidi in Baghdad, May 14, 2021.

72 Interview with Dr. Narmin Othman in Sulaymaniyah, June 21, 2022.

73 Ibid.

74 Interview with Asoz Rashid in Sulaymaniyah, June 23, 2022.

75 Virtual interview with Rawaz Rauf, June 20, 2022.

companies in Basra were not as eager to look beyond their own governorate, that is largely attributable to the vast opportunities available within Basra itself. However, all businesspeople showed a similar awareness of the impact that politics can have on the market. Despite the differing political opinions they may have, they are chiefly concerned with how to make business easier and, oftentimes, this entails more local autonomy and better ties to outside markets, both of which are provided by federalism.

The Future of Federalism in Iraq



The discussion of federalism which is taking place in Iraq is evolving at a different pace in each governorate. In Sulaymaniyah, the discussion is coloured by the experience of being part of Iraq's only region. In Ninawa, the proximity to this region shapes both the fears of division and the hopes of economic advancement. Similarly, the discussion in Basra prioritizes Iraq's unity but sees itself as unfairly unequal to Iraqi Kurdistan, considering the governorate's financial contributions to the nation. It is important that these discussions continue, but that they do not take place in siloed environments, but rather across the governorates and Iraqi Kurdistan.

If this report has shown anything, it is that although there are important lessons to be learned from the experiences of Basra, Ninawa, and Sulaymaniyah, it is sadly clear that there is no dialogue across governorates. For example, the politicians from Basra would benefit greatly from listening to the complaints of citizens from Sulaymaniyah, especially if Basra seeks to become the capital for a three-governorate region. There is a lesson to be learned about how, even within a region, the capital of a region should engage with its partner governorates. Ninawa can serve as a model for other governorates in how a governorate should engage with a region, given its relationship with Iraqi Kurdistan. Although there are territorial disputes between Ninawa and Iraqi Kurdistan, there is also economic activity, cultural respect, and familiarity.

If relations between governorates and Iraqi Kurdistan do not improve, then there is little hope in the advancement of federalism. Sulaymaniyah is playing and can play a greater role in bridging the gap between Iraqi Kurdistan and the rest of the country. Historically and presently, Sulaymaniyah is a cultural hub and home to important universities. Along with Baghdad, it is one of the few

places that attracts students from across the country to attend university. Even in my focus group discussion, there were students from as far south as Najaf. Iraqi youth find educational opportunities in Sulaymaniyah, but there is no concerted effort to utilize this advantage. The first step in improving Iraqi federalism is improving the relationship with Iraqi Kurdistan.

The two decades following the overthrow of Saddam Hussein have been tumultuous, and so policymakers may be excused for not prioritizing federalism in difficult times. However, Iraqis are growing tired of elite internal differences and poor governance. Federalism presents a solution to both these issues and, further, it can empower different communities and protect their identities.

Federalism is also advantageous from an economic perspective. Decentralized bureaucracies means less time and effort wasted on multiple levels of government, allowing for an easier business environment. Local oversight over business regulations may grant greater protections to employees. Not to mention, clear relations between governorates and regions allow entrepreneurs to expand their markets with more knowledge and ease. There is much potential in Iraq, as Rawaz Rauf puts it, “most businesses that exist in Iraq did not exist in 2003. There was no private sector, in the timeline of history, this market power is new”.⁷⁶

Sulaymaniyah feels the effects of centralized governance from Erbil and Baghdad. Accordingly, many businesses in Sulaymaniyah spoke about their need to expand beyond Iraqi Kurdistan. Businesspeople in Ninawa are also interested in expanding beyond the governorate, both into other governorates and into Iraqi Kurdistan. Basra is currently an outlier in the sense that its businesspeople have no interest in expanding beyond the governorate, but this may not always be the case. Currently, Basra presents many opportunities for local and external investors. Basra’s financial power is a driving factor in its push for greater autonomy. Its residents are unhappy with the jarring misalignment between its economic worth and its economic development. This misalignment is visible to all Iraqis and elicits much sympathy for Basra’s desire for improved governance. Although the private sector has grown slowly, especially cross-national businesses, it has nevertheless connected Iraqis even when politics tried to push them apart. The allure of capitalism should not distract from basic social security, and federalism can ensure higher responsiveness to the needs of citizens.

⁷⁶ Ibid.

Conclusion



This report has focused on citizen and elite perceptions of federalism in three important governorates. Sulaymaniyah is an important center within Iraq's only region. Basra is the source of most of Iraq's economic wealth, but is neglected and has sought to break the mold of centralism in southern Iraq. Ninawa was an early rejector of federalism under the Iraqi constitution, a victim to terrorist occupation, and currently bears the brunt of Baghdad-Erbil disputes.

Other analysts have taken a different and valuable perspective. Some have focused on other governorates – like Anbar and Kirkuk - and many have rightfully devoted attention to Baghdad-Erbil affairs. In addition, analysts have also approached federalism from a legal angle, focusing on logistical issues that are preventing local governments from taking on more responsibility and legal battles between the federal government and governorates. Research on federalism should be holistic and this report hopes to contribute to this important discussion by providing a new perspective on an understudied set of governorates.

In conducting this research, several themes have emerged that merit highlighting. First, the status of Iraqi Kurdistan as the sole region in Iraq is confusing not only to everyday Iraqis, but to political elites. This suggests that there is room for legal clarification in addition to the need for greater constitutionalism and professionalism among political elites. Second, it is thus understandable that the concepts of federalism, decentralization, regionalism, and even democracy are dissatisfactory to Iraqis. Iraqis associate the poor governance that they have experienced to these abstract concepts that were introduced after 2003 and that are constantly deployed politically. Civil society can play an important role in clarifying concepts to the public, and indeed, there have been advancements in this especially after the October Protest Movement.

Third, where discussions of federalism do develop, expanded economic opportunities are a primary motivator for improving federalism across all three governorates. This is unsurprising given that what makes a community habitable or uninhabitable, outside of security, is economic opportunity. Sulaymaniyah and Ninawa seek greater economic ties with the rest of the country while Basra seeks to protect its economic advantage. Finally, Iraqis across the three governorates harbor misconceptions about how their co-nationals from other parts of Iraq view federalism. In some

cases, it is clear that these misconceptions are politically engineered to create a sense of insecurity and to advance either aims of centralism or isolation.

Future research can delve more deeply into any of one of these themes, examining for example how elites communicate ideas about federalism to local communities or the role of civil society in expanding discussions of federalism. Of course, there is always more research to be done on perceptions of federalism in other governorates in Iraq. What everyday citizens, businesspeople, and politicians from Basra, Ninawa, and Sulaymaniyah have shown is that there is much to discuss and to learn from one another to improve federalism for all Iraqis. The discussion of the structure of the Iraqi state is ongoing and should not be avoided because of the perception that it requires extraordinary means, like constitutional amendments, or that it imposes extraordinary costs, like Iraq's division.

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