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## Introduction: An End to ISIS?

### Published by

al-Istrabadi, Feisal and Sumit Ganguly.

The Future of ISIS: Regional and International Implications.

Brookings Institution Press, 2018.

Project MUSE. <https://muse.jhu.edu/book/59140>.



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[136.0.111.243] Project MUSE (2025-01-15 07:18 GMT)

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## *Introduction*

### An End to ISIS?

Feisal al-Istrabadi *and* Sumit Ganguly

The Islamic State in Iraq and Syria (ISIS throughout this volume) seemed to rise dramatically in 2014, taking over Iraq's second-largest city, Mosul, in four hours. A frenzy of activity and hand-wringing ensued, both amongst the ranks of policymakers in various capitals and in the media. Indeed, no major observer of the region, in or out of government, had seen this rise coming, and U.S. officials, starting with the president, had been openly dismissive of ISIS while touting what they deemed to be their far more important success against al Qaeda. Yet here was ISIS achieving what al Qaeda had never even aspired to do in the course of its existence: taking over territory through military means from two governments that had previously controlled it. Overnight, ISIS erased the internationally recognized border between Iraq and Syria and proclaimed the existence of its so-called caliphate and named its amir al-muminin—commander of the faithful—an Iraqi, Ibrahim Awad al-Badri, known by his nom de guerre, Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi.

The backdrop to these events, however, was far less dramatic. ISIS had been building for years. Particularly in Iraq, as the Sunni insurgency was

largely defeated—or at least reduced in size—in the wake of the surge of U.S. troops in 2007 and subsequently, what was then known as the Islamic State in Iraq rose to displace al Qaeda. The organization that was to become ISIS began to grow and metastasize. ISIS's leadership initially sought refuge in Syria as the regime of Bashar al-Assad began to lose its iron-fisted control over much of the country, especially in parts of the predominantly Sunni areas. In the meantime, the Baghdad government, under the leadership of Prime Minister Nuri al-Maliki, began to renege on promises made to Iraq's Sunni population that had been negotiated by General David Petraeus and Ambassador Ryan Crocker during the surge, promises to which Baghdad had agreed.

As the United States withdrew its forces from Iraq at the end of 2011, many in the Sunni community were seething with anger at Maliki, and a genuine sense of Sunni disenfranchisement began to take root. This sense of disenfranchisement became the vehicle of the initially slow infiltration of ISIS from across the Syrian frontier back into Iraq, especially in Anbar Governorate, as Maliki sent troops violently to disperse what had largely been peaceable demonstrations. It was this infiltration that set the groundwork for the dramatic rise of ISIS from Mosul southward in June 2014. By then, however, ISIS had controlled significant territory in Syria and had controlled Raqqa, its nominal capital, for two years. To borrow a phrase from a different context, the surprise to the policymaking class in the United States and the region occasioned by the “sudden” rise of ISIS in 2014 seems to have been occasioned by yet another failure of imagination. Tensions in Iraq were sufficiently high by the beginning of 2013 that one of the authors of this introduction predicted the reignition of a civil war.<sup>1</sup> Even if the particulars of ISIS's rise might not have been precisely predictable, that there would be a palpable and significant response to provocation of the Sunnis was eminently predictable.

This volume fills a niche not hitherto occupied by other publications on ISIS: the lessons learned and pitfalls to be avoided in the future. The express intention of the book is to deal with ISIS as a strategic issue going forward, from the perspectives of the regional powers as well as the United States and its engagement in the region. The book is primarily intended for policymakers and policy analysts. Equally, however, in that it brings

together internationally renowned experts from the academy, most of whom have significant real-world experience, its analysis is also targeted to other academics and their students.

The book is divided into five parts, each consisting of two chapters. Part I, which includes this introduction, looks at ideologies and externalities. Part II examines intelligence failures and ponders whether the rise of ISIS in so spectacular a fashion, especially in Iraq in 2014, betokens an inability on the part of U.S. intelligence services to assess the real threat ISIS posed at a discrete moment in history. Part III examines issues relating to local actors, focusing especially on Syria and Afghanistan. Part IV assesses the often divergent agendas of the powers combating ISIS in Syria and Iraq. Part V concludes with an examination of U.S. interests in the fight against ISIS.

A final note on nomenclature: The extent of the territory ISIS claimed was dramatic. The English translation of the second “S” in ISIS as “Syria” fails adequately to convey the original Arabic. In the context of this terrorist organization, the use of the word “Sham” in Arabic does not merely denote modern-day Syria. Instead, as any native speaker of Arabic understands, *al-Dawlah al-Islamiyyah fil al-Iraq wa al-Sham* refers to *Bilad al-Sham*—that is, Greater Syria. Thus ISIS’s claim is for dominion over a large swath of territory that encompasses all of modern-day Iraq, Syria, Lebanon, Jordan, Israel, and Palestine. It was thus a matter of negotiation between the editors of this volume and the publisher as to whether the second “S” should be more accurately translated as Levant or Syria. In the end, it was agreed that Syria is the more commonly used translation.

### Chapter Summaries

After this introduction, Nukhet Sandal considers the vexed and elusive issue of ISIS’s ideology and governance using the public theology framework. Too many commentators on ISIS glibly assert that it attempts to return Islam to its past, failing to note how thoroughly modern a phenomenon it actually is, especially in its utter totalitarianism, but also in

its engagement with modern media. Sandal divides her inquiry into four analytical dimensions: substantive, spiritual, spatial, and temporal. She begins by rejecting the trope that ISIS is merely a terrorist organization, noting that, at the very least, it can and should be considered a revolutionary and revanchist pseudo- or emerging state (irrespective of its ultimate fate of having lost the territory it once controlled). Indeed, she notes that it sees itself as the “ultimate political unit for the Muslims” and behaves like a state to the extent that it provides services such as health care and other public services.

Sandal dismisses the argument over whether ISIS is Islamic or un-Islamic. She notes that, analytically, it suffices to note that it acts in the name of religion—as other groups from other religions also do—and that it is able to rally followers and adherents. She convincingly traces the development of ISIS from its roots in Salafi jihadism through al Qaeda. Still, she argues that the issue of whether to place ISIS within or outside Islam should not be taken up by policymakers and politicians. Rather, she argues that it should be left to theologians and scholars of Islam. She notes, however, the rise of ISIS as a phenomenon occurring in light of interventions in Islamic countries and the need, therefore, for policymakers to consider such second-order consequences when setting policy. She concludes by noting that a principal factor contributing to the rise of such organizations as ISIS and its fellow travelers is the lack of good governance in states where such groups do occur. To Sandal, it is axiomatic that promotion of good governance and building capacity should constitute an important part of the fight against such groups arising in the future.

Erik J. Dahl begins the consideration of intelligence failures in Part II. He notes, to begin with, that some have argued that there were no intelligence failures in the lead-up to June 2014. These voices assert that warnings were given, but that senior administration officials simply failed to heed them. Although there may be some truth to this line of argument, Dahl observes that senior intelligence officials have conceded that they did indeed underestimate ISIS’s strength and its ability to challenge the post-2003 dispensation in Iraq. Dahl himself argues that the intelligence community (IC) did fail properly to assess the threat that ISIS constituted. Dahl’s chapter adds insight to the scholarly literature about

these failures, which, as he notes, has too often ignored them. He does so in part by analyzing the statements of public officials about what went amiss and examines a controversy about the management of intelligence by the U.S. Central Command (CENTCOM). Disturbingly, he concludes that the failures attendant to the failure to appreciate the danger actually posed by ISIS in 2014 are not isolated but are indicative of a larger set of challenges as the IC assesses the dangers posed by nonstate actors.

Dahl traces the failures that culminated in the losses of territory in June 2014 back to February 2011, ten months before the United States withdrew its forces from Iraq. At that time the director of national intelligence publicly testified that, while al Qaeda in Iraq would continue to be a security problem, he believed it would be unable to control “territory from which to launch attacks.” Others, most notably Defense Intelligence Agency Director Michael Flynn, did eventually warn of rising risks, but the warnings from other administration officials were general and contained such pap as Deputy Assistant Secretary of State Brett McGurk’s statement in November 2013 that “the next year may be pivotal.” Dahl argues that there were two principal failures. They are (1) that the United States lacked a physical presence in Iraq to assess adequately the virtue of the U.S. withdrawal, and (2) that what assets were present on the ground were focused on military operations and were simply unavailable to contribute to an understanding of the greater threat that was gathering. He concludes his chapter by noting that the ultimate failure to predict the rise of ISIS may well be structural, to the extent that it is extremely difficult to understand and forecast “intangible events” such as the rise of social movements or regional instability.

Part II concludes with James J. Wirtz’s consideration of the issue. He asks what it means to say that the failure to predict the rapid rise of ISIS was an intelligence failure; like Dahl, he notes that the IC did warn generally of a deteriorating situation. Wirtz notes the inherent tension between, on the one hand, the need for intelligence analysts to be at a remove from policymakers and thus to ensure the objectivity of their analyses. On the other is the imperative for the IC to be able to provide “actionable intelligence” to those same policymakers. In the context of the rise of ISIS in 2014 he argues that it would have required the ability

of an analyst to connect de-Baathification by the U.S. administrator in Iraq in 2003 with the rise of ISIS a decade later—in effect having to predict the rise of ISIS by recognizing “the impetus it received from U.S. policy.” Indeed, given the manner in which briefings are conducted, he observes that an analyst would only make this connection if he were “directly asked this question by public officials,” something he says “defies credulity.”

Significantly, Wirtz argues that, although officials were warning of al Qaeda–like threats, ISIS in fact represents a qualitatively different type of threat. This new threat involves taking and holding territory and declaring emirates that could provide safe haven for its operatives, all while wearing down the United States and weakening its resolve to fight. Among the new tactics developed by ISIS was to take children from captive territories and train them in ISIS’s ideology and combat methods as a way of increasing its numbers. These tactics made ISIS not a “normal” clandestine actor, in Wirtz’s view, and made detection difficult. Its use of social media and the Internet for recruiting also made its actions extremely difficult to track. Like Dahl, Wirtz concludes that this confluence of events may well recur in the future with respect to other, similar actors, making the “intelligence failure” with respect to ISIS a possible “harbinger of things to come.”

Part III is an examination of local actors. Kevin Martin assesses Syria and Iraq, placing the events that occurred there in their historical and regional contexts, particularly the various regional conflicts. He argues that, because organizations such as ISIS did not arise *ex nihilo*, preventing the rise of similar organizations will also have to consider the historical and regional contexts. In Syria he identifies a number of ongoing problems that will have an impact on future attempts to restore peace. Perhaps most disturbing is the regime’s current practice of “demographic reengineering”—that is, limiting the return of certain refugee populations to particular areas. Exacerbating the problems in Syria are the number of armed militias, both internal militias and those from Lebanon, Iraq, and Iran, that are taking part in the fighting. The fact that so many different groups are fighting the Syrian regime—many supported by regional states—has benefited the government, as none seems capable

of genuinely challenging it in areas where it is in control. That is also true of the cacophonous political opposition.

Martin sees ISIS as “very much the product of Iraq-specific historical experiences,” including decades of personalized tyranny, militarism, sectarianism, and foreign intervention. Iraq, like Syria, has internal and regional militias supporting the government, including the popular mobilization units (PMUs), many of which are supported by Iran. Iran aside, Martin notes that Iraq and Syria have moved much closer since 2011, including by sharing intelligence information. Iraq, too, faces myriad Sunni insurgent groups of varying significance and with various degrees of support from the region. Both Iraq and Syria must balance power among the diverse groups in the country and fend off regional interference.

Amin Tarzi’s chapter discusses a group often overlooked in the literature on ISIS and is this volume’s only specific consideration of Afghanistan and Pakistan. Tarzi notes that several disgruntled groups there began pledging allegiance to ISIS in 2013 and 2014, leading to a formal announcement of Islamic State–Khurasan Province (ISKP) in 2015. The causes of their disgruntlement ranged from personal grievances to theological disputes, though others were simply “awed” by the evident success ISIS achieved in both Syria and Iraq. Like ISIS, ISKP seeks the erasure of international boundaries. Khurasan, in its conception, encompasses Afghanistan, Pakistan, the Central Asian republics, parts or all of Iran, and even parts or all of India. According to Tarzi, ISKP has successfully recruited sympathizers from the Federally Administered Tribal Areas (FATA) in Pakistan, as well as from among Afghans, and by 2015 U.S. commanders had noted that the group was “operationally emergent” in Afghanistan. Tarzi warns that, as Taliban members become disenchanted with that organization, ISKP may well come to fill the vacuum; in the event, it already had 3,000 members by 2016, though estimates at this writing (in 2017) are that they number some 2,000.

Just as Martin does for Syria and Iraq, Tarzi underscores the importance of understanding the indigenous factors that gave rise to ISKP by exploring the mythologies surrounding Khurasan and the troubled history of Afghanistan over the past four decades. As in the Middle East



proper, various groups contest the ground in Afghanistan, such as the Taliban, al Qaeda, and ISKP. Interestingly, he notes that instances of sectarian violence in Afghanistan have been relatively few. Indeed, the Taliban has rejected ISKP's targeting of Shia, but the familiar alignment of regional players will take its toll in Afghanistan, too. Tarzi suggests intriguingly that, if the Kabul government loses its grip on whatever territory it now controls, Iran might well calculate that the Taliban are its least threatening alternative. He cautions that, as ISIS loses territory in Iraq, its followers might seek refuge amongst ISKP fighters in Afghanistan. Much of the solution lies in the hands of Pakistan, which has failed to secure the vacuum in the FATA, where ISKP germinated. Improving relations between Kabul and Islamabad would also assist in keeping ISKP marginalized, though better relations have been elusive in the post-2001 era.

Part IV examines the U.S. and regional powers. Hussein Banai begins his chapter with a discussion of the U.S.-led effort against ISIS in Syria and Iraq. He notes that the United States created a sixty-eight-member coalition to combat the group, though some prominent countries are excluded from this neocoalition of the (ostensibly) willing. Those excluded include Russia, China, Iran, and the Syrian government itself. Of course, both Russia and Iran have intervened, the latter through elite units of Iran's Revolutionary Guards, which have provided ground troops alongside their Iraqi counterparts. (It might be added that, operationally, the United States may have been effectively providing air cover for Iranian troops in Iraq, a truly bizarre set of affairs, if true.) Banai identifies the five pillars of the coalition's strategy as: military; stopping recruitment and flow of foreign fighters; cutting off funding sources to ISIS; humanitarian assistance and stabilizing liberated areas; and countering ISIS's propaganda. He evaluates the coalition's success in the areas as generally positive, though he says that attempts to stabilize newly liberated cities and towns have had mixed results. This latter conclusion is, of course, worrying, as stabilization will be a *sine qua non* for winning the peace, as it were.

Banai notes that a major weakness of the coalition is that many Sunni states regard ISIS as at base a check, however much of an unpleasant one, on Iran and its regional hegemonic aspirations. Similarly, Turkey has its

own objectives in the fight against ISIS, particularly respecting Kurdish aspirations in the region. He quotes prior scholarship to the effect that these divergent regional responses to ISIS should be evaluated according to the “jolts” that the Middle East has received, including the 2003 war and the reform movements that began in 2011. In the event, he places the blame for the rise of ISIS on regional state failure and “institutional ineptitude.”

Reminiscent of Sandal’s prescription for avoiding a recurrence of ISIS, Banai advocates renewed emphasis on state-building in the region, even while noting the unpopularity of such efforts. He acknowledges that such endeavors cost billions of dollars, but counters that the failure to engage in them has resulted in great human costs also, including death and destruction throughout the region. He concludes by recommending that an international commission be established to explore the reasons behind the rise of ISIS and to make policy recommendations designed to prevent its ability to thrive. He also recommends the establishment of a “regional trusteeship” among some of the leading regional players to promote cooperation between them.

In his chapter, Feisal al-Istrabadi writes that several factors have limited the ability of the United States to defeat ISIS, especially in Iraq. He argues that one of those is the failure of the United States to articulate or intermediate a vision amongst Iraqis for what would constitute the post-ISIS dispensation. While it is self-evident that the all-Iraqi forces have been fighting against ISIS, there is no vision of what it is they have been fighting for. He also argues that the current administration has inherited a complex and, at times, incoherent alliance structure that hampers the ability of the United States to articulate a convincing narrative of its goals in fighting ISIS. Each of its major regional allies has its own interests, and many of them regard the fight against ISIS as secondary to other national interests. Thus the United States is allied with Iraq in the fight against ISIS there, but Iraq is allied with Iran both in Iraq (meaning the United States is *de facto* allied with Iran) and Syria, where the United States has been nominally supporting groups fighting Iran’s ally, Bashar al-Assad. In Syria, where the United States has never had a positive policy, Russia has stepped in,

first cautiously to ensure that Assad did not fall, then more vigorously with the evident intention of supporting his effort to recapture as much territory as reasonably possible. Istrabadi concludes that this morass of competing interests has made a coherent U.S. policy in either Iraq or Syria exceptionally difficult.

Istrabadi argues that the continued presence of ISIS threatens U.S. interests and that its defeat once and for all is essential to the preservation of those interests. He cautions against the possibility of future incarnations of ISIS-like organizations rising if the political outcome in Iraq and Syria post-ISIS does not result in genuine power-sharing and a sense of enfranchisement on the part of a broad mass of the respective populations. He argues the United States ought to resist the temptation to disengage once the battle is won; it must instead continue to use its influence in favor of a decent and mutually acceptable settlement. Combating corruption and reconciliation must top the agenda, along with political reform. Istrabadi agrees with Banai that state institutions must be reconstituted, but he notes specifically the need to reform the armed and security services so that professional cadres, rather than political hacks, are promoted and integrated as the best protection against ethno-confessional strife. Although he acknowledges that the United States cannot dictate these terms in either country, Istrabadi believes that the United States ought to use its considerable influence—particularly in Iraq—in this direction.

Part V, on U.S. interests, concludes this book. Risa Brooks begins her chapter by noting that an overarching imperative of U.S. policy since the September 11 attacks has been to deny terrorist organizations sanctuary from which they can plot attacks on the United States. Although she accepts this effort as legitimate, she also cautions against overestimating the threat that ISIS constitutes in carrying out “complex attacks” within the United States. She distinguishes between “lone-wolf” attacks and “complex attacks” by noting that the latter involve networks of operatives, aim at targets that are hardened by security defenses, involve phased or simultaneous attacks or a campaign of clustered attacks, and employ lethal and technically sophisticated weapons. Holding territory, as ISIS did in Iraq and Syria, promotes a group’s ability to carry out complex attacks,

since camps facilitate building training facilities and the cultivation of “specialized expertise,” such as engineering skills. Still, the remoteness of the territory ISIS controls means that its ability to launch complex attacks is attenuated. Brooks notes that the spatial separation can be overcome, as was done on September 11, but planning for those attacks took years, and it is far less likely that ISIS-like groups could infiltrate the United States in the post-2001 security environment. Moreover, she notes the lack of “community sanctuaries” in the United States, where such plotters could hide.

Brooks concludes her analysis by pointing out that the threat of ISIS is “more qualified” than it is “sometimes characterized.” Importantly, she says that her analysis has two policy implications. First, law enforcement agencies should be careful not to employ counterproductive strategies in dealing with local Muslim populations that have demonstrated their willingness to expose suspected extremists. Second, regarding U.S. policy in the Middle East, she suggests that the U.S. provision of air support to local militaries shows “promise,” as distinct from maintaining a large U.S. footprint in the region.

Peter Krause ends this book. He begins his analysis with a good news/bad news paradigm. The good news in this view is that ISIS does not threaten the most crucial U.S. regional interests, namely the rise of a regional hegemon or the proliferation of nuclear weapons. The bad news is that it does constitute a threat to other U.S. interests, such as the stability of regional allies and the prevention of terrorist attacks. Krause identifies the central difficulty in fighting ISIS as the fact that it is in effect a three-headed monster. It is at once a state that, at its peak, controlled territory the size of Indiana; a transnational insurgency that seeks to spread chaos and overrun established regimes; and a revolutionary movement that works to “reshape societies and spread an extreme ideology.” To fail to fight it on any one of these fronts, in Krause’s view, means a long and frustrating “future of tactical victories and strategic defeats.” Still, he maintains that there is a paradox in the threat-to-interest calculation that ISIS poses to the United States. The most significant U.S. interests are the ones that ISIS is least capable of harming (regional hegemony, nuclear proliferation), while what he identifies as secondary interests are the

ones ISIS is most capable of harming (democracy promotion and regional peace and stability).

Krause posits a strategy for defeating ISIS that begins with defeating the forces of sectarianism and polarization. (It could be noted parenthetically that, in fact, far from defeating sectrarianism, the United States has embraced one side of the sectarian divide, rather than finding ways of bridging it.) Krause supports a policy of rolling back ISIS's territorial acquisitions in the region. As other contributors to this book have alluded, especially Martin, Banai, and Istrabadi, Krause agrees that good governance would constitute an important front in the fight against ISIS, especially, one presumes, as an effective ideology. Finally, Krause argues that, to defeat ISIS, it will be necessary to match "needs with ends," calling therefore for an end to announcing lofty policy goals without devising the means to achieve them.

Two interrelated themes emerge from virtually every chapter in this book, and they are quite timely viewed from the perspective of the first year and a half of the Trump administration. The first is that U.S. policy has focused on military confrontations in its fight against radical Islamic militant movements in the Middle East, particularly in Iraq. Thus, for instance, the United States surged its forces in Iraq in 2006 and 2007 to confront al Qaeda, but once the spike in violence subsided, U.S. forces went home. The Bush administration negotiated an agreement to withdraw all U.S. forces from the country by the end of 2011, and the Obama administration was in no mood to extend the presence of its forces there. (In fairness, neither did Prime Minister Maliki, who sensed he could wrest domination of the country without the interference of U.S. forces.)

The military withdrawal itself had several ramifications. Intelligence sharing between the sides declined perilously. Equally significant, the engagement of U.S. diplomats in Iraq substantially decreased, particularly during the Obama administration. Critical irritants between the competing political camps were dismissed as internal politics and of no consequence to U.S. policy in the region, even as Maliki began issuing arrest warrants for his political rivals and surrounding their houses with tanks. In the end, al Qaeda gave way to the rise of ISIS and the need for yet another buildup of U.S. forces in the region.

These considerations, then, lead to the second overarching theme that emerges from this book: the need for sustained U.S. diplomatic engagement in confronting the underlying causes that give rise to organizations such as ISIS. Organizations such as ISIS have arisen in various countries throughout the Middle East and elsewhere in part owing to a breakdown of ordinary politics in those countries. In Syria, for instance, the despotic regime of Bashar al-Assad failed to engage with critics or adequately respond to reasonable demands of demonstrators for reform. It chose, instead, to fire on unarmed civilians. Although the United States lacked the requisite influence in Damascus to mediate between Assad and his critics, the United States had such an ability in Iraq but simply chose not to use its good offices. Where the United States failed to engage in diplomacy, it was forced to rely on a military response instead.

These lessons should not be lost on a new administration still finding its sea legs. The announced policy of increasing reliance on the U.S. military capability at the expense of diplomacy augurs ill for vital U.S. interests. As the president has surrounded himself by retired and active-duty generals, experienced U.S. diplomats are leaving the State Department in droves, as the agency's budget suffers dramatic cuts hitherto unseen. One of the lessons of Iraq, for instance, should have been that the military surge would have been inefficacious by itself had U.S. officials not engaged in diplomacy with the belligerents and brokered a political solution to the grievances of the parties. It is because those solutions broke down that ISIS emerged.

At this writing, ISIS has suffered devastating military defeats, losing control of virtually all the territory it once controlled in Iraq and Syria. Yet even in these two countries, military operations continue to root out cells of the organization. It is almost certain that such cells will continue to exist into the indefinite future, and that is to say nothing of franchises of ISIS in Africa and parts of Asia, including Afghanistan and South Asia. For the United States to continue to rely primarily (or even exclusively) on its military options means that new life will be continually breathed into these groups. To deprive such groups of the oxygen they need to exist, America's diplomats will need to be engaged, again, to help mediate the politics away from extremism toward creating a modus

vivendi between elites. Otherwise, the peoples of the region—and American service men and women—will be condemned to repeat the cycle of the past decade and a half.

### Note

- 1 “Iraq seems now to be perched on yet another Fearonian precipice. The Sunna, perhaps convinced their power in Baghdad has waned permanently, are poised to unleash yet another round of violence. . . . They are no doubt calculating, as Maliki rounds up the representatives they voted for, that in another five years, he will have been able to consolidate power even more effectively, making now the relatively optimal time to re-ignite their insurgency.” Feisal Amin Rasoul al-Istrabadi, “Sectarian Visions of the Iraqi State: Irreconcilable Differences?,” in *Social Difference and Constitutionalism in Pan-Asia*, edited by Susan H. Williams (Cambridge University Press, 2014), pp. 225–26. This analysis was written in 2013 and published in February 2014.