

**A FRAGILE UNITY:** After Military  
Gains, Iraqis Look to Leaders for a  
Better Future

**Focus Group Findings**

FEBRUARY 2017





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# Iraq Public Opinion Research

## Key Focus Group Findings

- Since NDI's last round of public opinion research in Spring 2016, perceptions of the **Iraqi Army** have improved markedly. Success against ISIS brings a sense of unity and shift in support for the army, which is perceived as becoming more diverse and inclusive.
- Focus group participants credit **Prime Minister Haider al-Abadi** for fighting ISIS successfully, rebuilding the army, and effectively managing relations with foreign countries. He is criticized for being less able to combat corruption and is perceived as beholden to his political party and former Prime Minister Nouri al-Maliki.
- Participants report a range of factors that created the conditions that allowed **ISIS** to be initially viewed as a credible alternative to the government. Among those were a sense of marginalization and oppression of Sunnis by the Nouri al-Maliki government, the repressive tactics of the security forces surrounding protests in 2012 and 2013, and ISIS's manipulation of religion.
- **Popular Mobilization Units (PMUs)** share credit for battlefield success, but support for involvement in the political process is mixed.
- Participants mostly rejected hypothetical changes to Ninewa's status, from turning it into a semi-autonomous area to dividing the province along sectarian lines or even linking it up with other Sunni provinces to form a new Sunni region. Instead, they feel **decentralization** will only make the country weaker and more fractured, with many Sunnis saying they prefer a stronger and more effective central government.
- Ongoing **security, corruption, and economic concerns** are still prevalent, with participants voicing concern about unexploded bombs and ISIS sleeper cells as well as corruption in the public sector, lack of jobs, basic service delivery and unpaid government salaries.
- Participants express frustration toward current **political leaders**, and are unable to identify national-level Sunni leaders to support.
- **Political parties**, not the people, need to reconcile, according to respondents. This rejection of societal reconciliation was echoed by participants who stated that the parties are self-serving and take advantage of sectarian tensions to bolster support.
- Opinions are mixed about the future of the province of **Ninewa** and who should lead it. Many feel that until security is fully restored, the province should not participate in elections.
- Government is perceived as doing little in terms of **IDPs, reconstruction, and compensation**, and that the burden for rebuilding damaged infrastructure and providing resources to those affected by ISIS is falling on citizens. Focus group participants were more likely to look to the international community to rebuild.

*The focus groups conducted in February 2017 were part of public opinion research which will also include a national survey with a 2,000 sample size across the country and 200-person oversamples in each Mosul, Anbar and Salahaddin. The national survey is being fielded in March and April 2017.*



# Iraq Public Opinion Research

## Shared Points of Compromise and Possible Policy Solutions

1. **The Iraqi Army.** The Iraqi Army has emerged as a potent symbol of cross sectarian pride. The liberation of large swathes of territory from ISIS brings a tempered optimism and a greater sense of national unity—a dramatic change from the past three years. Prompted to say the first word that came to his mind, one participant responded: “Honor and pride.”

### POLICY OPTIONS:

- **Introducing compulsory military service.** Supporters of this policy option argue that: 1) compulsory military service would contribute to further strengthening the unity of the army, as all sects and components would be included; 2) a united and motivated army would be better positioned to protect the country against future violent extremist groups; and 3) youth, many of whom are currently unemployed, would become “real men” by being given life direction and being kept out of trouble—including gangs, insurgency.
- **Eradicating corruption in the ranks of the security forces.** Supporters of this policy option acknowledge the efforts to date and credit military leaders for the improved internal atmosphere and results on the ground. They demand removing the remaining “ghost employees” and improving the oversight of operations in newly liberated areas in order to eliminate bribes demanded for clearing boobytraps and they demand a halt to freeing of arrested suspects of terrorism in exchange of bribes.
- **Continued professionalization of the Iraqi army.** Focus group participants demand merit-based promotions, elimination of sectarian privileges, and respected and inspiring leaders.

2. **Popular Mobilization Units (PMUs).** Views toward the PMUs have also improved considerably, including among the Sunni population who previously believed these militias only looked out for Shia interests and feared the PMUs. They acknowledge the PMUs are mostly Shia, but are increasingly comprised of other sects and minorities. Support for the PMUs, however, is far from unanimous. Some in Ninewa recall news stories of PMU members committing murder or reprisal violence. Others note that the PMUs improved their behavior after accusations of widespread theft following the liberation of Tikrit. Respondents, however, generally feel these are isolated incidents, while not lessening the recent achievements of the security forces.

### POLICY OPTION:

- **PMUs to be integrated in the Iraqi Army.** Supporters of this policy would feel reassured to know that Sunni and Shia would be part of one official military body paying allegiance only to the Iraqi state and moving away from perceptions of sectarianism and foreign influence that would potentially lead to conflict and fragmentation down the road.

3. **Post-ISIS Governance in Ninewa.** Even before Ninewa province and Mosul are fully liberated, Iraqis express widespread views about what should happen next in Ninewa. Many of those living in Ninewa or who fled the province feel that it is not ready to participate in elections. They say that ISIS must first be removed and the province stabilized before they go to the polls. They acknowledge that they may not vote when many of the other provinces go to the polls in September (unless all elections are postponed).

### POLICY OPTIONS:

- **Ad-interim Ninewa Governor.** Drawing from the focus groups findings, in the upcoming survey, NDI will test a range of policy options including: 1) a military governor appointed by the prime minister; 2) a civilian governor appointed by the prime minister; 3) a civilian governor elected by the provincial council; and 4) the currently elected governor

- **The structure of the province.** To gauge the support for various policy proposals put forward by Iraqi leaders, NDI will test the following options: 1) Ninewa becomes its own semi-autonomous region like the KRG; 2) Ninewa links up with other Sunni provinces to form a larger semi-autonomous region; 3) joins the KRG; 4) is divided along ethnic and sectarian lines into different provinces; and 5) remains as it currently is.
  - **Providing security in Ninewa and other liberated areas.** In the upcoming survey, NDI will test citizens' preference for ensuring security in areas liberated from, or currently occupied by ISIS, such as Anbar, Diyala, Ninewa, and Salahaddin. The options include: 1) the Iraqi army; 2) Peshmerga; 3) PKK or YPG; 4) the Iraqi police; 5) Hashd al-Shaabi; 6) Hashd al-Shaari; and 7) Hashd al-Watani.
4. **Reconstruction and support for IDPs.** Although many IDPs feel they have been treated reasonably well by other citizens, they feel that the government is not providing sufficient, if any, resources. They also feel the government is doing little to reconstruct buildings, schools, and hospitals that were destroyed by ISIS. Many living in these recently liberated areas say they feel abandoned and forced to fend for themselves. They roundly reject a small hypothetical tax on public salaries to contribute to a compensation fund, feeling that politicians created this problem and that the burden should be on the government to pay for it, not average government workers. Respondents agree that reconstruction is key to post-ISIS stability but also fear that reconstruction will become an opportunity for corruption. Across the board, citizens demand oversight of the budget for reconstruction by including checks on selecting contractors, allocating funding, and value for money spending.

#### POLICY OPTION:

- **Build confidence in institutions to rebuild the liberated areas.** In the upcoming poll, NDI will test citizens' trust in institutions that would have a meaningful role in stabilization and reconstruction, including: 1) central government; 2) local government; 3) tribes; and other entities.
5. **National reconciliation and transitional justice.** Both Sunni and Shia squarely put the blame on political parties for sectarian tensions in the country. They feel there are too many parties, that the parties are self-serving, and that they take advantage of sectarian tensions to bolster support. Even if these Iraqis largely reject the need for societal reconciliation, and although sectarian attitudes continue to creep into their conversations, they acknowledge that a broad range of groups need to be included in Iraq's decision-making structures. They often repeat that only "those with Iraqi blood on their hands" should be excluded from any reconciliation plans. Most feel that former Baathists should be included and that their exclusion from Iraq's government after the U.S. invasion is partially to blame for ISIS's rise in the first place.

#### POLICY OPTIONS:

- **Dealing with ISIS.** NDI will test Iraqis' opinions on what should be done to those who committed violent acts on behalf of ISIS to gauge traction for the following measures: 1) prosecute all accused ISIS detainees; 2) offer amnesty to individuals not found guilty of serious crimes such as murder, rape, or mutilation; 3) require those found guilty to provide financial compensation to victims; and 4) grant amnesty to those who come forward and admit their wrongdoings.
- **Overseeing the process of prosecuting ISIS members and helping victims of their crimes.** In the upcoming poll, NDI will test public support for cases to be managed by: 1) the federal court; 2) a special ISIS-related court; 3) military tribunals; 4) local justice panels; 5) tribes; and 6) the United Nations and international community.
- **Dealing with the victims of ISIS.** Drawing from focus groups findings and public demands of representatives of victims, NDI will test the public's support for a range of individual, collective, material, and symbolic compensation including: 1) financial compensation; 2) psychological support; 3) recognizing the Yezidi genocide; 4) a monument to those who died fighting ISIS; 5) establish a victims' support organization; 6)



record and make public the stories of all ISIS victims; 7) assist victims of sexual violence to reintegrate into their communities; and 8) protect legal rights of children born as a result of sexual violence.

- **Preventing ISIS or other extremist organizations from re-emerging.** NDI will test citizen buy-in for a number of potential strategies to prevent a re-emergence of an insurgency, including: 1) creating tougher security measures to prevent the emergence of sleeper cells in liberated areas; 2) de-radicalizing Imams in mosques; 3) launching a national dialogue that brings all sects together to decide the future of Iraq; 4) creating a national program to de-radicalize youth living under ISIS; 5) fighting corruption; 6) revising the curriculum in schools to emphasize diversity and coexistence; 7) giving more power to Prime Minister Abadi; 8) holding referendums to determine status of disputed territories; 9) creating more jobs and opportunities for youth; 10) making all armed groups illegal other than the Iraqi army, police, and Peshmerga; 11) creating cross-sectarian coalitions between political parties; and 12) creating a new cross-sectarian political party.
- **Ways to achieve reconciliation in Iraq.** Drawing from NDI's public opinion research and various reconciliation documents proposed by political leaders, the Institute will test the following options: 1) more cooperation among the political parties; 2) decentralizing power to local governments so that they rely less on the central government; 3) integrating the PMUs into the Iraqi Army; 4) reducing influence of other countries; 5) ending sectarian quotas for government positions and jobs; or 6) holding a national dialogue on reconciliation that includes politicians, religious and tribal leaders, and CSOs.
- **Who should play a role in a national dialogue to discuss the country's future after defeating ISIS?** In its upcoming poll, NDI will test Iraqi attitudes toward various groups that could be part of a national dialogue—an initiative called for by prominent politicians across the spectrum: 1) representatives of foreign countries; 2) former Ba'athists; 3) former ISIS fighters who have not attacked Iraqi security forces or civilians; 4) the Kurdistan Regional Government or KRG; 5) major political parties; 6) tribal leaders; 7) religious leaders; 8) ethnic components; 9) Hashd al-Shaabi; 10) civil society groups; 11) former ISIS fighters guilty of killing or wounding Iraqi security forces or civilians; and 12) women and youth.

## Effective Use of Foreign Aid in post-ISIS Iraq

NDI public opinion research demonstrates that Iraqis value the aid provided by the international community, not only as a capital inflow, but also a catalyst in shaping democratic norms and standards of conduct in public office.

### PUMP-PRIMING GRANTS

After liberation from ISIS, the next challenge would be balancing reconstruction efforts with the need to create public goods and opportunities for the entire country.

1. **Support for urbanization.** Better public infrastructure is needed before urban areas can generate increased revenue. However, neither internal public nor private Iraqi capital are in a position to take on such a challenge in an effective and efficient manner. New urban centers that are energy efficient and safe could subsequently attract investment in public goods and turn into educational, administrative, military, health, or industrial regional hubs. A young and skilled work force would be drawn into these urban centers and would develop new social networks away from their tribes and clans to create the fabric of true cross-sectarian communities. In the long term, this could contribute to building a shared national identity.
2. **Incentivising pioneer investment.** There is a high public interest in encouraging reputable firms to invest in Iraq—especially when few would naturally not choose Iraq for security and economic reasons. Pioneer investment (e.g.: solar power) would attract others and would eventually create specialized clusters. To incentivise pioneering companies, their investment should be matched by public funding which would 1) reward the investor for the public benefit (i.e.: subsidies, tax exemptions); and 2) bear some of the risks (e.g.: security).
3. **Connecting isolated provinces** to regional centers, the nation's capital, and the world through investing in transportation infrastructure and information technology.



# Iraq Public Opinion Research

## Focus Group Summary Report

In February 2017, the National Democratic Institute (NDI) conducted a new round of focus group research in Iraq, revealing a tentative sense of national unity forged by recent successes on the battlefield against the Islamic State in Iraq and Syria (ISIS). As Iraq's security forces continue to liberate territory from ISIS, the country has arrived at a critical junction. In one direction stands a political process representative of citizens' needs and more inclusive of Iraq's diverse communities; in the other, a broken nation beset by sectarianism, corruption, and competing interests. Iraq's political leaders can leverage the tailwind created by a successful military campaign to influence the direction of the country.

The Iraqi Army appears to have emerged as a potent symbol of cross-sectarian pride, and Prime Minister Haider al-Abadi a popular leader, credited with successfully fighting ISIS, rebuilding a shattered army, and effectively managing relations with both foreign countries and Iraq's Popular Mobilization Units (PMUs).<sup>1</sup> Viewed favorably in contrast to former Prime Minister Nouri al-Maliki, he is nonetheless criticized as weak and unable to implement broad reforms, particularly anti-corruption measures. Military gains have not been met by political reforms, however, dampening this tempered optimism; Iraqis across the country express frustration with a political class that has been unable to address rampant corruption and unemployment and improve basic services.

Even before Ninewa province and Mosul are fully liberated, the focus group participants present divergent views about what should happen next with Ninewa. Many of those living in Ninewa or who fled Ninewa feel that the province is not ready to participate in elections. They say that ISIS must first be removed and the province stabilized before they go to the polls. Most participants expressed their preference for a strong and inclusive central government, rather than a semi-autonomous region, joining the Iraqi Kurdistan Region, or joining a newly-established Sunni region.

The harrowing stories emerging from the 12 focus groups open a rare window into the governance challenges the country will have to address to prevent a resumption of violence. Citizens from across the political landscape describe a range of factors that created an environment in which citizens initially viewed ISIS as a credible alternative to then-Prime Minister al-Maliki's government, including corruption, sectarianism, poor service delivery, and a dearth of employment opportunities.

Both Sunni and Shia squarely put the blame on political parties for sectarian tensions in the country, viewing parties as both the principal antagonists and beneficiaries of the failure to root out corruption or mitigate sectarianism. They feel there are too many parties, that the parties are self-serving, and that they take advantage of sectarian tensions to bolster support. Even if these Iraqis largely reject the need for societal reconciliation, though sectarian attitudes continue to creep into their conversations, they acknowledge that a broad range of groups needs to be included in Iraq's decision-making structures. They often repeat that only "those with Iraqi blood on their hands" should be excluded from any reconciliation plans.



## Select Quotes from Focus Group Participants

### LIFE UNDER ISIS

- Male resident of Salahaddin, Sunni: “They started to brainwash people by saying the Army is sectarian and the PMUs as well, and they will come and kill you and rape your women. They were saying that is their religion.”
- Female resident of Basra, Shiite: “The [2012 and 2013] protests are the reason ISIS came to Iraq and, if they [the government] listened to the people, they wouldn’t have reached this chaos.” A woman in an IDP camp concludes, “ISIS did what they did because our government was busy fighting for power and politics.”
- Male resident of Ninewa, Sunni: “In the beginning, they were good, but after that we found out about their ugly faces. After ISIS entered the city, they said that everything is okay, [and that] we will not be killed. After one day, they slaughtered a man...he was in the Army, the poor man, and they left him for the dogs to eat.”
- Female resident of Ninewa, Sunni: “More than one person was killed who provided information to the Army. They [ISIS] used to hang them, but people still provided information from inside Mosul, including me.”

### REBUILDING & RECONCILIATION

- Male resident of Anbar, Sunni: “We didn’t see any government official come to us to ask about what we need, what we are eating, what we are drinking, what we are doing, in the last few years where were you displaced, what about your homes? No one reached us, not one official. Do they know us only in election times to make me elect them?”
- Female IDP living in Ninewa refugee camp, Sunni: “You were talking about the compensation, which is a must. But how can they compensate the lost souls? We can’t compensate it. They are not houses or cars.”
- Female resident of Anbar, Sunni: “We are tired of this [reconciliation]. Every president comes to say this is good; we are tired of this thing, there is no safety, no job, no salaries. When [political leaders] reconcile with each other, people will be reconciled.”
- Female resident of Baghdad, Sunni: “Not all IDPs get help. There are areas that are very poor and have nothing and the government doesn’t even know that they exist.”

### LOOKING AHEAD TO A POST-ISIS IRAQ

- Female resident of Erbil, Sunni: “[The army] is fighting and resisting to get rid of ISIL and terrorism. We hope... we can liberate Mosul. We want the Sunni, Shia and Christians to help each other because all of us are brothers. The people now are aware of this, we are united people and we have the same future.”
- Male resident of Salahaddin, Sunni: “They [Baathists] must participate in the political process. They have a right to do that. When they don’t, one will be left out and problems will occur. With all their suffering from the eradication law, a lot of them joined ISIS because of that.”
- Female IDP from Ninewa living in Erbil, Sunni: “Sunni, Shia, Arabs, and Kurds are all fighting together for a unified purpose, which is defeating terrorism.”
- Female resident of Salahaddin, Sunni: “If [Abadi] wants to reunite Iraq, then he needs to build Iraq.”

### VIEWS ON THE IRAQI ARMY:

- Male resident of Baghdad, Shiite: “Now the people... are fighting are Sunni, Shia, Christians, and others. I mean there is no discrimination. [Hashd al-Shaabi] is including everyone, also the army is the same, it united the people.”
- Male resident of Salahaddin, Sunni: “The last two years were great. We started to notice that there are Sunnis in the Army. Before that, there weren’t any Sunni soldiers in the Army.”
- Male resident of Basra, Shiite: “Compulsory service must return. When youngsters reach a certain age, they

have to join to develop a strong personality for himself and for the country. If that strong army existed, it can defeat any threat like ISIS.”

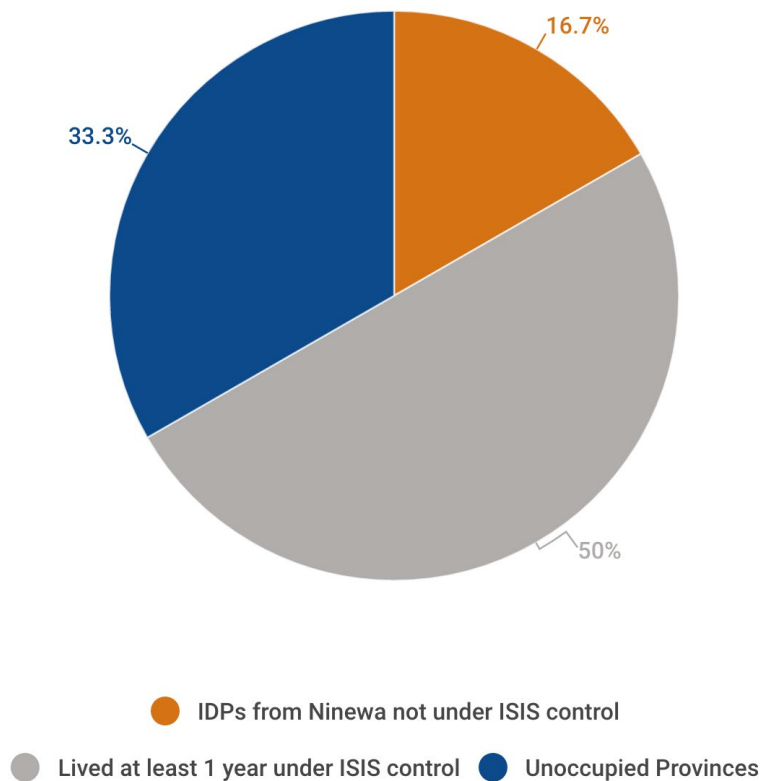
#### VIEWS ON PRIME MINISTER HAIDER AL-ABADI:

- Male resident of Erbil, Sunni: “he took over a destroyed country and arose with it and made it a better country and in the time where we said they don’t allow him to do his job, he managed to change the perspective of the nearby countries about Iraq where he gained the friendship of America which was the opposite of what Al-Maliki did in addition to gain other countries so that means his policy is better than Al-Maliki’s.”
- Male resident of Salahaddin, Sunni: “Al-Abadi received his position when the government was destroyed. Thanks to him, we have an army and police. He started to rebuild all these institutions.”
- Male resident of Anbar, Sunni: “he started to work with bad infrastructure and no budget. And also with a destroyed government. He started to re- build houses and reconstruct.” Despite significant budgetary restraints, al-Abadi also benefits from maintaining an active profile, according to NDI’s research.

### Focus Group Methodology & Composition

NDI conducted 12 focus groups, two each in Baghdad, Basra, Salahaddin, Anbar, Erbil, and in the Khazer M1 refugee camp in Ninewa. In Erbil, participants were all IDPs from the Ninewa province. In the Khazer M1 refugee camp, Salahaddin, and Anbar all participants lived under ISIS rule for at least one year. Each group was demographically homogenous (e.g., only women, Sunni, ages 20-40) and each separate group in Basra and Baghdad held homogenous political views. Due to the research objectives, nine of the 12 groups comprised of Sunni participants, the remaining three were Shiite.

#### Focus Group Participants:





# Iraq Public Opinion Research

## Full Focus Group Report

A new round of national focus group research, conducted by the National Democratic Institute (NDI) with funding from the U.K. Foreign and Commonwealth Office and the National Endowment for Democracy, reveals a tentative sense of national unity forged by recent successes on the battlefield against the Islamic State in Iraq and Syria (ISIS). With the Independent Institute for Administrative and Civil Society Studies (IIACSS), international research firm Greenberg Quinlan Rosner conducted 12 focus groups from February 6 to 15—two each in Anbar, Baghdad, Basra, Erbil, and Salahaddin, and in the Khazer M1 refugee camp in Ninewa. In Erbil, participants were all internally displaced persons (IDPs) from Ninewa province. In the Khazer M1 refugee camp, Salahaddin, and Anbar all participants lived under ISIS rule for at least one year. Each group was demographically homogenous (e.g., only women, Sunni, ages 20 to 40) and each separate group in Basra and Baghdad held homogenous political views. Due to the research objectives, nine of the 12 groups were comprised of Sunni participants; the remaining three were Shia.<sup>1</sup>

As territory occupied by the terrorist group is liberated, support for the Iraqi Army has undergone a dramatic shift. The Army appears to have emerged as a potent symbol of cross-sectarian pride. Military gains have not been met by political reforms, however, dampening this tempered optimism. Iraqis across the country still express frustration with a political class that has been unable to address rampant corruption and unemployment and improve basic services.

Indeed, Iraqis view the country's political parties as both the principal antagonists—and beneficiaries—of the failure to root out corruption or mitigate sectarianism. As both provincial council and parliamentary elections approach, these Iraqis feel that political parties do not represent their interests or care about their priorities. This widespread disaffection with the political process bleeds into citizens' lack of trust that the government can responsibly manage reconstruction in liberated areas. One of the few politicians that enjoys cross-sectarian support is Prime Minister Haider al-Abadi.

For the moment, al-Abadi appears to be the country's most popular leader, credited with successfully fighting ISIS, rebuilding a shattered army, and effectively managing relations with both foreign countries and Iraq's Popular Mobilization Units (PMUs).<sup>2</sup> Viewed favorably in contrast to former Prime Minister Nouri al-Maliki, he is nonetheless criticized as unable to implement broad reforms, particularly anti-corruption measures. This inaction is linked to perceptions that he is beholden to competing interests within his party. For al-Abadi to transform his apparent surging support into a long-term mandate, he will need to take bold action to rebuild shattered towns and cities, fight corruption, and improve the economy—all the while managing a precarious security situation.

NDI's research is also revealing of the horrors of daily life under ISIS. More than two years after ISIS first seized Mosul, most Iraqis point to the repressive tactics of then-Prime Minister al-Maliki and a corrupt and overtly sectarian security force as the chief factors contributing to the group's rise. Although ISIS may have initially given Mosul's citizens cause for hope—removing checkpoints and improving services—these first-hand accounts demonstrate that life quickly deteriorated into a nightmare of violence, fear, and intimidation. Sunnis express gratitude and support for both the Iraqi Army and PMUs, but liberation and stabilization present starkly different challenges, and there is lingering wariness of ISIS splinter cells. As Iraq's security forces continue to liberate territory from ISIS, the country is at a crossroads. In one direction stands a political process representative of citizens' needs and inclusive of Iraq's diverse communities; in the other, a broken nation beset by sectarianism, corruption, and competing interests. For Iraq's political leaders, the time for decisive action has arrived.

### **“We felt like time stopped:” Iraqis grapple with the aftermath of ISIS rule and reflect on what factors enabled it**

As Iraq's security forces liberate ISIS-held territory, the harrowing stories that emerge open a rare window into the governance challenges the country will have to address to prevent a resumption of violence. Citizens from across the political landscape

<sup>1</sup> Specifications for each group can be found in Appendix A. All findings are qualitative and inherently not statistically representative. An upcoming survey will test these insights empirically.

<sup>2</sup> The Popular Mobilization Units (PMUs) is an umbrella organization of approximately 40 disparate armed groups, primarily comprised of Shiite wings, in addition to some Christian, Sunni Muslim, Shabak, Turkmen, Yezidi, and other groups. PMUs rose to prominence in 2014 following a call-to-action from Grand Ayatollah Ali Al-Sistani to respond to ISIS's sweeping military gains across the country.



describe a range of factors that created an environment in which citizens initially viewed ISIS as a credible alternative to the government, including corruption, sectarianism, poor service delivery, and a dearth of employment opportunities.

Although some citizens blame “traitors” for the rise of ISIS, more than two years after the occupation of Mosul, many citizens across the country point to the repressive tactics of the government—particularly its response to Sunni protests in 2012 and 2013. “They [the government] harmed the protestors,” a citizen in Anbar notes. “ISIS took advantage of the unemployed young men. They brainwashed them and recruited them. The government didn’t contain the situation and calm the young men down. Instead, the government ignored them, which led to more demands and instigation. As a result, ISIS took advantage of the situation and toppled the province.” A Basra female echoes this sentiment, saying: “The protests are the reason ISIS came to Iraq and, if they [the government] had listened to the people, it wouldn’t have reached this chaos.” A woman in an IDP camp concludes, “ISIS did what it did because our government was busy fighting for power and politics.”

Many focus group participants are also critical of the role of Iraqi security forces during that period. “When it’s hot and you have the air-conditioning on in your car, you may not roll down the window [at a checkpoint], but then, a very young man at a security checkpoint will curse you in front of your wife,” a Salahaddin respondent reports. “If you say something, they will find a thousand ways to turn the situation against you and, if you don’t pay money, they won’t let you go. This type of pressure created hatred and ISIS came as liberators from the government so the people said: ‘That’s it!’” Others feel that ISIS shrewdly manipulated sectarian fears, making convincing arguments that the Shia were taking both the religion and the country in the wrong direction. A man in Salahaddin says: “They started to brainwash people by saying that the Army is sectarian and the PMUs as well, and they will come, kill you, and rape your women. They were saying that is their religion.”

Remarkable as it may now seem, respondents report that, at first, ISIS was welcomed into many Sunni communities. “At the beginning, they were very good. The people of Mosul loved them, and they were comfortable with them because they weren’t extremists with us,” an IDP from Ninewa explains. Participants disagree on whether or not people in these areas had much of a choice between joining ISIS and resisting. A woman in the Ninewa camp says, “No one was forced to join them.” But another responds, “Some people were threatened. They had to join them.” They do feel that many were and still are, trapped in ISIS-held areas against their will.

Focus group participants report that ISIS was adept at leveraging anti-government sentiments to garner support. “ISIS formed the image of the defender for those oppressed Sunni people,” another IDP from Ninewa adds. “They joined ISIS and welcomed them because ISIS told them that we will defend you, get you your rights, and make it up for you against the Army and the government, in addition to the religious [propaganda] that ISIS was producing.”

This support, however, was short lived. “In the beginning, they were good, but after that, we found out about their ugly faces,” a Ninewa resident says. “After ISIS entered the city, they said that everything is okay [and that] we will not be killed,” another Ninewa resident explains. “After one day, they slaughtered a man...he was in the Army, the poor man, and they left him for the dogs to eat.” As ISIS’s rule became increasingly oppressive, citizens note that poor Iraqis who did not have the resources to escape bore the brunt of the ISIS violence. “In that time, we felt like time stopped,” a Ninewa resident notes. “The city of Mosul, including me, we were all waiting in line for execution. It was just a matter of time,” another adds.

Despite the horrors of daily life, acts of resistance also populate residents’ accounts. “More than one person was killed who provided information to the Army. They [ISIS] used to hang them, but people still provided information from inside Mosul, including me,” a Ninewa resident reports. “If ISIS caught you with a SIM card and you have information on it, they would kill you and hang you...Regardless of this punishment, people kept sending information and they removed the fear from their hearts.” Another resident echoes this sentiment, saying “They [ISIS] reached the level of executing people over a SIM card.”

As the country emerges from this dramatic period of violence, Iraq’s political leaders must address the core grievances that led to ISIS’s rise. “People helped them [ISIS] and joined them because they didn’t see anything good from the government. They were hoping that the newcomers would do good things,” a Baghdad resident observes. NDI’s research suggests that Iraq’s political class has a rare, and critical, opportunity to unite the country. “ISIS made the people know who their real enemy is,” another Baghdad citizen explains. “Before there were sects—Sunni and Shia. [Sunnis] were expecting the Shia to attack...but [now] the Shia are liberating Sunni lands and the Sunnis are helping the Shia.”



## Success against ISIS brings sense of unity and shift in support for Iraqi Army

The liberation of large swaths of territory from ISIS brings a tempered optimism and a greater sense of national unity. “Sunni, Shia, Arabs, and Kurds are all fighting together for a unified purpose, which is defeating terrorism,” an IDP from Ninewa living in Erbil says. Driven by successes on the battlefield and a renewed aura of professionalism, citizen perceptions toward the Iraqi Army have improved significantly. “If it wasn’t for them, we wouldn’t have the security we have right now,” a woman in Salahaddin notes. “Where were we before? When they came, they liberated cities, and we are able to sit in our homes safely.”

This change in opinion toward the Army is all the more remarkable given perceptions that the security force’s heavy-handed tactics in Sunni areas were a powerful contributor to ISIS’s initial success in these provinces. “People in Mosul [were] ready to cooperate with Satan himself instead of the Army,” an IDP from Ninewa reports. “When ISIS entered Mosul, they saw that the people were ready to welcome them to get rid of such an army.” Indeed, in a 2015 nationwide survey conducted by NDI, a majority of Sunni and Kurds saw the Army as comprised mainly of Shia. This shift in opinion is also driven, in part, by perceptions that the composition of the Army has become more diverse. “The last two years were great,” an Iraqi living in Salahaddin explains. “We started to notice that there are Sunnis in the Army. Before that, there weren’t any Sunni soldiers in the Army.”

As Iraqis continue to look to the country’s political leaders to forge a vision for reconciliation, the perception that the Army is fighting on behalf of all Iraqis provides a powerful symbol around which to bolster a sense of national identity. One IDP from Ninewa living in Erbil says, “The liberation that happened in Mosul wasn’t expected before. [The country is moving in the right direction] as Sunni, Shia, Arabs, and Kurds are participating and helping each other to liberate Mosul.” Linked to this change in opinion is continued support for the reactivation of compulsory military service. “Compulsory service must return,” a Basra male explains. “When youngsters reach a certain age, they have to join to develop a strong personality for themselves and for the country. If that strong army existed, it could defeat any threat like ISIS.”

Despite this renewed pride in the Iraqi Army, not everyone views it as a professional fighting force. In Anbar, some complain that the Army only removes bombs after extracting bribes from citizens. Corruption emerges as a key issue that will need to be addressed. “There are a lot of fake employees who only get salaries,” a woman in Baghdad says. “My cousin is one of them.” Echoing this sentiment, an IDP from Ninewa explains: “I am not saying that the entire Army is corrupt... [but] how can a lieutenant in the Army have a \$5,000 car and fancy real estate?” Many respondents credit Prime Minister Haider al-Abadi and former Defense Minister Khalid al-Obeidi<sup>3</sup> with initiating reforms to root out corruption, but they continue to see corruption as an endemic problem.

## PMUs share credit for battlefield success, but support for involvement in the political process is mixed

Views toward the PMUs have also improved considerably, including among Sunnis who previously felt these forces only protected Shia interests and expressed fear towards them. Perceptions of PMUs in liberated areas are largely positive, with participants calling them “heroes,” “martyrs,” and “fighters for Iraq.” They acknowledge that the PMUs are mostly Shia, but note that are increasingly including other sects and minorities. Despite ISIS’s efforts to portray the PMUs as revenge-minded Shia militias, many Sunni focus group participants now believe this perception may have been wrong, even if they had held this attitude initially. A man in Salahaddin says, “We had the impression that when they came from Baghdad and beyond, as Shia people, when they saw me, they would kill me. But when they came using many different names, they liberated us without harming us. Actually, they were very good.”

Fear of PMUs, often propagated through social media, now appears to have been exaggerated. “We were afraid that there would be killing and slaughtering,” a Ninewa IDP notes. “We had those ideas in our heads...in Mosul, no such things happened. We only heard about [such things], but nothing really happened.” Still, support for the PMUs is far

<sup>3</sup> Former Defense Minister Khalid al-Obeidi was removed from office in 2016 over allegations of corruption.

from unanimous. Some in Ninewa recall news stories of PMU members committing murder or reprisal violence. Others note that the PMUs improved their behavior after accusations of widespread theft following the liberation of Tikrit. For the most part, participants characterize reported acts of violence as isolated incidents, which should not diminish the recent achievements of the security forces.

Attitudes toward the Army and PMUs and the liberation of key cities, such as Fallujah, Tikrit, Ramadi, Sinjar, and parts of Mosul, lead many to feel that Iraq is heading in the right direction, despite lingering concerns. A woman in Baghdad says, “The repairs are starting to appear. Mosul is being liberated bit by bit. We can say that Anbar is starting to get better. . . unlike the previous period when Iraq was demolished and ruined, it is now getting better.” Interestingly, several participants look back fondly to the pre-ISIS period as a time when there was at least basic services and some semblance of a functioning economy. (However, NDI research from the time did not reflect such a rosy picture of the period.)

Despite these views, respondents are mixed about whether PMUs should be actively engaged in Iraq’s political process—and most think the armed groups, including the PMUs, should be fully integrated into the Army. “They [PMUs] should be merged with the Army because then Shia and Sunnis will be together. They will be united. There will be unity,” a Ninewa IDP says. “Why didn’t they [PMUs] join the Army in the beginning?” a resident of Salahaddin asks. “That’s what made people a little skeptical by saying ‘they brought them from Iran’ and such things.” The post-liberation behavior of the Army and PMUs will, in large part, decide whether Iraqis continue to express confidence in them; should they stumble in managing a range of challenges related to stabilization, vetting, and security, this high level of support could quickly dissipate.

Some Iraqis see no issues with PMU leaders becoming more engaged in politics, with one citizen in Salahaddin saying, “If they have the patriotic spirit, and they already defended Iraq and liberated it, then why not?” Many others, however, fear that such political involvement will sully their reputations as defenders of Iraqis and promote sectarianism. “It’s going to be a Shia vs. Sunni thing,” an IDP from Ninewa fears. “A thing like this would add pressure,” a Basra man explains. “Either you elect me or else, because I’m a person who has military weight.”

## Ongoing security, corruption, and economic concerns still prevalent

Despite the military successes, concerns about security, corruption, and economic livelihood are as strong as ever, providing a reminder that any goodwill achieved by the liberation of territory could be fleeting. In recently liberated areas, participants still worry about unexploded bombs and ISIS sleeper cells and feel such threats will be a lingering problem. A woman in a Ninewa refugee camp says, “It is correct that they liberated the east side of [Mosul], but there are still sleeper cells in the city. They are still there.” Participants in Baghdad and Basra relatively far away from the front lines similarly worry about security, citing the continued terrorist attacks in Baghdad. Some add that check points are removed, but then return after fresh attacks.

Beyond security, corruption—especially among political elites—is also top of mind. Focus group participants say elected officials, at both the local and national levels, are the drivers of corruption and largely to blame for squandering Iraq’s vast resources. As a result, participants from across the country are almost unanimously critical of the government and, even more so, political parties. Frustration over corruption and lack of government responsiveness can be seen in the cross-sectarian support for Muqtada al-Sadr-led protests against corruption. Blamed for a range of ills, from the rise of ISIS to the slow pace of reconstruction and structural deficiencies within the Army, corruption stands, as one senior political leader recently put it, as “the new Da’esh.” The ability of Iraq’s political leaders to address this issue may not only affect the potential reemergence of extremist groups—but also the very future of the country.

Many still complain about the lack of jobs, unpaid government salaries, and lack of basic services. Such complaints are especially prominent in liberated areas where participants say that the economy is barely functioning, there is no government assistance for the unemployed, and no obvious signs of compensation for those impacted by ISIS. As the research indicates, ISIS thrived because of the poor economic conditions and lack of government assistance in Sunni areas. While profusely grateful for the liberation of territory, these participants still feel as if the government is not addressing their needs.

## Al-Abadi viewed favorably, but decisive action needed to grow support

Views expressed in the focus groups indicate that Prime Minister al-Abadi continues to be one of the few popular leaders in Iraq. Along with the security forces, he receives credit for the liberation of previously held ISIS territories. More than that, he is credited with rehabilitating security institutions perceived as having been politicized under then-Prime Minister al-Maliki. “Al-Abadi received his position when the government was destroyed,” a man in Salahaddin says. “Thanks to him, we have an army and police. He started to rebuild all these institutions.”

Unprompted, many respondents drew a stark contrast between the current and the former prime ministers and say that the current prime minister is doing a more adept job at managing relations with various powers. An IDP living in Erbil says, “What I like about him is he doesn’t have problems with the nearby countries. Saudi Arabia, the Gulf countries, and even the Kurdistan region had their share of problems with al-Maliki, but al-Abadi was able to reconcile relations between Iraq and the nearby countries.”

Additionally, al-Abadi appears to get credit for behaving in a non-sectarian way, unlike most other politicians who use sect and ethnicity to galvanize their own support. Citizens express sympathy for the challenges he inherited. “He started to work with bad infrastructure and no budget,” an Iraqi man in Anbar notes. “And also with a destroyed government. He started to rebuild houses and reconstruct.” Despite significant budgetary restraints, al-Abadi also benefits from maintaining an active profile, according to NDI’s research. “As soon as the Army liberates an area, he visits it. He is doing good work,” another Anbar male explains.

Perceptions that al-Abadi is less sectarian and more unifying than many of Iraq’s other leaders, in part, drives support for a second term and, in some cases, for more power and authority. Others say they support a second term for al-Abadi because there are no other leaders from which to choose. This feeling is particularly apparent among Sunnis, who struggle to name a national-level political leader they trust—let alone one that they feel can represent their interests.

Despite this wellspring of support, al-Abadi faces a myriad of challenges that could impede his ability to transform battlefield success into long-term popularity. Many of the respondents who welcome the change from what they perceive as the authoritarian tendencies of al-Maliki are also critical of al-Abadi’s seeming inability to solve many of the country’s ailments. This paradox both contributes to—and is a result of—perceptions that the prime minister is beset by more powerful actors, including religious authorities, PMU leaders, and forces within his own party.

Thus, while respondents in Baghdad and Salahaddin praised the prime minister’s anti-corruption initiative (called “From Where Did You Get That?”), others expressed frustration with his inability to implement corruption reforms or legislation important to Sunnis, such as the Amnesty Law. Though participants mostly blamed Sunni leaders for the ousting of former Defense Minister Khalid al-Obeidi, an IDP from Ninewa asks, “How can a prime minister allow a man that loves his country. . . to be taken out of his job like that in a time when we needed a competent minister of defense?” Such setbacks have led many to conclude that, though preferable to other political leaders, al-Abadi is “weak” and not “determined.” “In a visit to Karbala, he said: ‘I will sacrifice myself to fight corruption,’” a Ninewa IDP explains. “But he is living in an environment ruled not by whales, but dragons! So he can’t do anything.”

For many Iraqis, the specter of al-Maliki—and his leadership of the Da’wa party—looms large. A woman in Salahaddin says, “Al-Abadi is doing what al-Maliki orders him to do. He doesn’t have confidence.” Another says, “It is like someone has written him a paper, and he is reading off that paper.” Such attitudes have led many to conclude that al-Abadi, and the country, would be better off if the prime minister left the party. “Al-Da’wa is using him to do things,” a male in Salahaddin says. “If al-Abadi can get out of this party. . . I would respect him a lot more,” another adds.

As elections approach, the prime minister is faced with a political landscape fraught with complex challenges and difficult decisions. For many respondents, however, the message is clear. “Take control and expose the corrupt. End unemployment because it is the reason why crimes are happening,” a man in Salahaddin says. “We want unity in the Iraqi government,” an IDP from Ninewa explains. “We want a unified Iraq under one flag. We don’t want [just] any group of people [like an ISIS] to be able to raise a flag in Iraq every now and then.”

## Frustration toward current political leaders brings opening for change

With elections on the horizon, parties and candidates who are able to inspire the public's perception of a more unified Iraq while addressing voters' core concerns will likely gain significant support, even against Iraq's traditional politicians that use sectarian appeals to motivate their base supporters. Taking a strong stand against corruption, improving the weak economy, and addressing unemployment and poor basic services would place a candidate in an advantageous position given the deep frustration with current parties and leaders.

Adopting an "anti-establishment" sentiment, consistent with the global trend away from mainstream politics, leads both Shia and Sunni to approve of Sadr's protests against government corruption and lack of responsiveness to the public's concerns. Participants feel Sadr, the only other Iraqi leader besides al-Abadi with broad appeal among participants in our focus groups, is closer to the people. He benefits from not sounding like a "typical" politician and never having held formal office. A woman in Salahaddin says, "When you hear his talks, you can tell that he has a sense of patriotism. He says that he is neither Sunni nor Shia." Some Sunnis are suspicious of him and feel they do not know what he would do in power, but they still praise him for fighting for people's interests and being a voice against corruption.

Sunni participants are frustrated with their political options as they struggle to identify any Sunni leaders they trust. Several Sunni participants hold positive views toward former Defense Minister al-Obeidi. His advocates say he was removed because he was aggressively speaking out against corruption, especially within the Council of Representatives. In some ways, the ousted defense minister has been elevated to the status of a martyr in anti-corruption efforts—a powerful symbol for many in the Sunni community.

For some, weak and ineffective political representation is seen as contributing to the rise of ISIS. "There are two reasons why ISIS entered the Sunni areas," a woman from Basra says. "They [Sunni leaders] are politically weak and, in the government and parliament, they had a weak stand." Focus group comments pointed to a continued leadership vacuum for many Sunnis. They view most Sunni leaders as having been ineffective in tackling corruption and detached from the struggles of their daily lives.

A lack of constituency outreach compounds this disillusionment with political leaders. "We didn't see any government official in the past few years to come to us to ask about what we need, what we are eating, what we are drinking, what we are doing, where are we displaced, what about your homes?" a man in Anbar comments. "No one reached out to us, not one official. Do they know us only in election times? To make me elect them?" For others returning to their homes, this sense of detachment is palpable. "The province of Anbar doesn't have a government," another Anbar resident comments. "Someone went back and he found no one there...he found it empty. Everyone is in Baghdad."

## Political parties need to reconcile, not the people

Both Sunni and Shia squarely put the blame on political parties for sectarian tensions in the country. They feel that there are too many parties, that the parties are self-serving, and that they take advantage of sectarian tensions to bolster support. Most focus group participants scoff at the need for national reconciliation among Shia, Sunnis, and Kurds. "Lies!" a man in Salahaddin says. "[This] benefits the ones who are responsible for reconciliation because there will be a budget for reconciliation." They recall a time, not long ago, when they claim that all Iraqis interacted regularly and lived together and tend to overlook the repressive environment under Saddam Hussein that caused this "peace." They talk about cross-sectarian business relations and mixed families. More recently, they point to their welcoming attitude toward IDPs now living in Shia-dominant provinces as evidence of their willingness to help other Iraqis.

In contrast, participants see parties as increasing tensions and bickering over government positions. They say MPs on party lists only feel obligated to party leaders and not to the Iraqi people. They associate Iraq's largest party, Da'wa with the divisive policies that facilitated ISIS's entrance and its attraction to some Sunni Iraqis. There is little awareness of any leaders' plans for reconciliation and quite a bit of fatigue for the word itself. "We only hear of it, but nothing has happened," a man in Salahaddin comments. Echoing this sentiment, a woman in Anbar says, "We are tired of this [reconciliation]. Every president comes to say this is good; we are tired of this thing, there is no safety, no job, no salaries.

When [political leaders] reconcile with each other, people will be reconciled.”

Many focus group participants also blame sectarianism on the 2005 Constitution drafted soon after the U.S. invasion of Iraq and the quotas included in the Constitution to ensure that different sects received positions within government. “The same faces remain in place,” an IDP from Ninewa living in Erbil says. “For example, the Minister of Interior became the Minister of Trade and then the Minister of Finance became the Minister of Telecommunications, which means the ministers are not elected based on their competency and specialization.” Even the Sunni minority, who would likely stand to lose leadership positions if removed, say the quotas ensure that unqualified people receive government positions as opposed to more qualified people who are experts in each portfolio.

Even if these Iraqis largely reject the need for societal reconciliation, and though sectarian attitudes continue to creep into their conversations, participants acknowledge that a broad range of groups needs to be included in Iraq’s decision-making structures. They often repeat that only “those with Iraqi blood on their hands” should be excluded from any reconciliation plans. Most feel that former Baathists should be included and that their exclusion from Iraq’s government after the U.S. invasion is partially to blame for ISIS’s rise in the first place. “If they want real reconciliation, then all kinds of Iraqis should join,” a man in Salahaddin says. “When they don’t, one will be left out and problems will occur.” A man from Anbar who lived under ISIS rule says, “Yes, they [Baathists] must participate in the political process. They have a right to do that. With all their suffering from the [de-Baathification] law, a lot of them joined ISIS because of that.” Despite what might be perceived as a greater willingness to engage with a broad array of political forces, respondents clearly draw the line at talking to ISIS. “We don’t want any reconciliation with anything related to ISIS,” an IDP from Ninewa living in Erbil concludes.

## The future of Ninewa, and who should lead it

Even before Ninewa province and Mosul are fully liberated, Iraqis participating in the focus groups present divergent views about the future of governance in Ninewa. Many of those living in Ninewa or who escaped Ninewa feel that the province is not ready to participate in elections. They say that ISIS must, first, be removed, and the province stabilized before they go to the polls. They acknowledge that a delay means that they may not vote when many of the other provinces would go to the polls in September. Instead, many participants say they would approve of an appointed civilian or military representative to govern the province until security is restored.

These participants mostly reject various hypothetical changes to Ninewa’s status, from turning it into a semi-autonomous area to dividing the province along sectarian lines or even linking it up with other Sunni provinces to form a new Sunni region, similar to the Kurdistan Regional Government (KRG).<sup>4</sup> Instead, they feel that decentralization will only make the country weaker and more fractured, while many Sunni say they prefer a stronger and more effective central government.

Most Sunni participants do not place any special trust in leaders from their own sect to treat them any better than the current central government. A man in Ninewa says, “Because our previous experience has shown, with all due respect, that most of the people who work in [these areas] are corrupt, and if we form a Sunni region, then we will be ruled by the same thieves.” Some living in Ninewa say they are too different from other Sunni-majority locales to rationalize a sect-based region.

Interestingly, this sentiment against decentralization is widespread throughout all the focus groups and parallels previous research findings—decentralization is generally not welcomed or viewed as a solution to sectarian tensions. Participants hold muted or negative views toward decentralization, even though it means that local government would have more decision-making power and a larger budget to distribute as it sees fit. Like those in Ninewa, many focus group participants elsewhere feel that local government is a major source of corruption and that a stronger central government is needed to tackle the country’s challenges. To them, decentralization means weakness.

A few participants from Ninewa do look favorably upon the KRG, either because they have Kurdish family members or feel conditions are better there. As a consequence, they are more open to joining the Kurdish region. An IDP living in Erbil says, “Just like we love Ninewa, we love Kurdistan too. Because they are welcoming the displaced people.” Another adds, “We don’t really care if [Ninewa] joined the KRG as long as we have the security and safety. When the people go back to



their homes, they should feel the safety not the fear.”

## Government doing little in terms of IDPs, reconstruction, and compensation

Although focus group participants living in areas with IDPs feel they are treating refugees well, many feel that the government is not providing sufficient, if any, resources. Nor do they feel that the government is showing any commitment to reconstruction or providing compensation to those most impacted by ISIS. A woman living in Baghdad says, “Not all IDPs get help. There are areas that are very poor and have nothing, and the government doesn’t even know that they exist.”

Many blame the government for the lack of resources available to IDPs. They feel the burden is, instead, falling on citizens to take IDPs in, give them housing, and feed them. A Shiite man from Baghdad says “We arranged a house for them, and everyone was donating: gas, cooker, cooler, etc.” Another man in Baghdad says: “The people are donating to help them with living expenses.”

They also feel the government is doing little to reconstruct buildings, schools, and hospitals that were destroyed by ISIS. Many living in recently liberated areas say they mostly feel abandoned and forced to fend for themselves. A man in Anbar says, “The reconstructions, if there are any, are private. Not something related to the government...and the people who don’t have money, they are just waiting and watching their destroyed homes.”

Others feel the tribes are best positioned to lead the reconstruction effort—and are doing so in some cases, but often lack funds or need loans. A woman in Salahaddin says, “Financially, the tribes can’t do it, but if they were supported financially by the government, then the tribes are the best choice because they know their area better than anybody else.” There exists greater suspicion of tribes in Ninewa and Anbar, however. “[Tribes] are the same as the government. We want the international community to be responsible for reconstruction,” a resident of a Ninewa camp comments. “Tribes are not useful in this matter,” a man in Anbar says. For some respondents in Anbar, tribes are source of conflict and tension—not the trusted entity identified by others.

But mostly, focus group participants say they rely on the international aid organizations as they are better providers for IDPs and the reconstruction effort. Most of them feel that the international organizations are not corrupt and are not siphoning money off into their pockets. A man in Anbar says, “The other countries do the job fairly, and they won’t waste the money.” This reliance on foreign aid organizations creates a bit of a paradox since so many feel that foreign governments already have too much influence in the country and blame them for much of Iraq’s violence and divisions. Overall views toward the United States remain quite negative, as more than a few blame the U.S. for building sectarian divisions into the Constitution and making Iraq more divided. Others go as far as explaining ISIS’s success in the country as a result of support from the U.S. and other foreign governments bent on destroying the country. Only one or two acknowledged the U.S.’s substantial role in helping defeat ISIS.

Participants cannot recall knowing anyone who lost family members or property because of ISIS actually receiving compensation beyond one or two initial payments. Most say that, if they received anything at all, it was far less than they lost. Yet, most participants believe that those most affected by ISIS deserve compensation, paid for by the government in Baghdad. They roundly reject a small hypothetical tax on public salaries as a way to create a compensation fund, feeling that politicians created this problem and the burden should be on the government to pay for it, not average government workers.

Many go a step beyond the need for financial compensation and say most people who lived under ISIS need “psychological compensation,” as well. Many participants living in or near liberated areas feel that the country recently went through a terrible trauma and that political, religious, and tribal leaders need to keep this fact in mind. One woman living in a Ninewa refugee camp says, “You were talking about the compensation, which is a must. But, how can they compensate the lost souls? We can’t compensate it. They are not houses or cars.”

<sup>4</sup> KRG is the official ruling body of the predominantly Kurdish, semi-autonomous region of northern Iraq.

## Appendix: Focus Group Specifications

Group	Date	Location	Gender	Age	Ethnoreligion	ISIS control	Political leaning
1	Feb. 6	Erbil	Female	20-40	Sunni	IDPs from Ninewa living in Erbil	N/A
2	Feb. 6	Erbil	Male	30-50	Sunni	IDPs from Ninewa living in Erbil	N/A
3	Feb. 8	Ninewa Camp	Female	30-50	Sunni	Lived at least 1 year under ISIS	N/A
4	Feb. 8	Ninewa Camp	Male	20-40	Sunni	Lived at least 1 year under ISIS	N/A
5	Feb. 10	Anbar	Female	20-40	Sunni	Lived at least 1 year under ISIS	N/A
6	Feb. 10	Anbar	Male	30-50	Sunni	Lived at least 1 year under ISIS	N/A
7	Feb. 12	Saladin	Female	30-50	Sunni	Lived at least 1 year under ISIS	N/A
8	Feb. 12	Saladin	Male	20-40	Sunni	Lived at least 1 year under ISIS	N/A
9	Feb. 14	Baghdad	Female	30-40	Sunni	N/A	Favorable rating of Abadi
10	Feb. 15	Baghdad	Male	20-35	Shia	N/A	Favorable rating of Sadr AND unfavorable Abadi
11	Feb.10	Basra	Female	20-35	Shia	N/A	Favorable rating of Hakim AND unfavorable Abadi
12	Feb.11	Basra	Male	30-50	Shia	N/A	Favorable rating of Badr Organization AND Abadi