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## **IRAQ HAS BEEN EATEN UP BY ITS POLITICAL ELITE**

- 16.05.2016

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Financial Times, 15 May 2016

After the jihadis of Isis stormed back into Iraq in mid-2014, the US, with the eventual consent of Iran, elbowed out Nouri al-Maliki and replaced him as prime minister with Haider al-Abadi.

The idea was to regroup an Iraq divided on sectarian and ethnic lines against the jihadist menace, and in particular to mend the breach between the countrys politically dominant Shia majority and its disaffected Sunni minority, pushed out of power after the US-led invasion of 2003 and systematically marginalised by Mr Malikis sectarian policies.

Now, as a popular rebellion against an inept and corrupt political class gathers strength, and Isis bombings against Shia targets in Baghdad intensify with the clear aim of reigniting sectarian war, not just the future of Mr Abadi and his government looks to be in question but the survival of Iraq as a unitary state.

On April 30, popular impatience at the inability of oil-rich Iraqs self-serving political elite to provide basic services such as electricity and water, let alone basic security, broke all bounds.

Hundreds of protesters stormed parliament in Baghdads Green Zone, the fortified cocoon housing politicians and diplomats, slapping, jostling and chasing a cross-section of MPs. This was an expression of public rage at their purported leaders, whether Shia, Sunni or Kurd, pursuing factional advantage instead of public good, and treating Iraqs institutions as booty in a zero-sum game.

The outburst came after parliament had serially thwarted Mr Abadis attempt to assemble a more technocratic government of non-partisan experts in charge of finance, utilities and the oil ministry.

Among those blocking the prime ministers efforts to reunite Iraq and make it work was Mr Maliki,

and his faction of their Shia Islamist Dawa party, whose sectarian policies had so alienated the Sunni and Kurdish minorities with which Iraq's Shia majority was supposed to share power once US forces left Iraq in 2011.

The protests, which have spread from the capital across the predominantly Shia south, are led by Muqtada al-Sadr, the young Shia cleric who launched insurrections against the US-led occupation from 2004. Now he paints himself as an Iraqi nationalist outside the sectarian spoils system known locally as *muhasasa*, the heart of a failing state based more on the looting of resources than the sharing of power.

Yet insofar as the protests represent a potentially national, grass-roots response to the breakdown of governance, they are not just a challenge to the political elite but to the jihadis of Isis who are feeding on state failure to sustain their cross-border caliphate in Iraq and Syria. They come, moreover, at a time when Baghdad has rallied, with US and Iranian support, to retake territory from Isis, with the intent of eventually recapturing Mosul, the northern city Isis took from a demoralised Iraqi army in 2014.

An FT investigation shows how the jihadis raise money and spend it, from running a sprawling oil operation to taxing civilians and arms dealing

A third challenge to Mr Abadi and Iraq's survival as a plural entity is the growing power of Iran-backed Shia militias, such as the Badr Organization or the Asaib Ahl al-Haq, stitched into a national network parallel to the army by Qassem Soleimani, the Iranian revolutionary guard commander, who came in for his share of insults during last month's storming of parliament.

No wonder, then, that Isis has stepped up its murderous assaults on Shia civilians. The jihadis look as though they are trying to reprise Iraq's collapse into sectarian carnage 10 years ago, after al-Qaeda in Iraq, the Isis precursor, bombed a revered Shia shrine.

Mr Abadi has made recognisable efforts to reconstruct some sort of national consensus, but the damage done by Mr Maliki's persecution of the Sunni and refusal to work with the Kurds — which opened Iraq's gates to the Isis jihadi comeback — may prove to be too great for a state that has been eaten and hollowed out inside.

Ordinary Iraqis have tried before to revive their institutions; voters in 2010, for instance, braved the bombers to oust more than two-thirds of sitting MPs — to little avail.

As a region in meltdown marks the centenary on May 16 of Sykes-Picot, the secret Anglo-French pact during the first world war to carve up the sinking Ottoman Empire's Arab territories, which would assemble disparate elements of Mesopotamia into the Iraqi nation-state, Iraq confronts the

twin spectre of state failure and partition.

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