The Promotion of Secularization as a Counterterrorism Strategy to Religious Terrorism: A Case Study of Iraq

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Abstract

The increasing importance of establishing an Islamic state (a Caliphate) among religious terrorist groups has drawn the attention of academics and policymakers towards the benefits and pitfalls of the promotion of secularization as a counterterrorism strategy. Based on the historical experiences of secularization and religionization in Iraq and its societal structures, combined with a literature review of recent developments in the region, this article discusses to what extent and how secularization may promote and/or frustrate religious terrorism in present day Iraq. It concludes that, apart from some radical elements, there seems to be ideological and political space in Iraq to consider taking a direction to a more secular system. This could reduce political tensions and subsequently frustrate religious terrorism. Implementing it in a proper model in which major religious groups feel equally represented, however, may prove to be very challenging.

Introduction

Since the decline of ideologies such as anarchism, anticolonialism, nationalism and revolutionary politics as the bases of terrorism, religious extremism and faith have become the most prevailing origin of widespread terrorism and terrorist attacks of the contemporary era (Rapoport, 2002; Walls, 2017). Religious terrorist groups such as IS (Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant), Al Qaeda and Boko-Haram roughly share the same goal of establishing a state-like entity governed by Shari'a law (Oosterveld et al., 2017; Bin Laden, Lawrence &

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Howarth, 2005). They are considered to be the deadliest of all kinds of terrorism to date.[2] The promotion of secularization - the process of privatization of religious belief and institutional differentiation between religion and the state - has been considered a promising counterterrorism strategy for preventing radicalization and religious terrorism in vulnerable religious countries like Iraq and Afghanistan (Riesebrodt, 2014). The promotion of secularization as a counterterrorism strategy encompasses a range of policies and measures including replacing the sectarian state with a secular one, and establishing secular schools and education. Some authors and governments consider secularization as a promising counterterrorism strategy and argue that "*only a secular state can offer a coherent response to the problem of extremism, especially the kind grounded in religious belief* "(Longstaff, 2015: 11). Others, however, are inclined towards the idea that secularization strategies are at best creating more regional micro identities and cultural division in a society and at worst fueling radicalization and violent extremism (Cronin and Ludes 2004; Stevens, 2009; Zia, 2014; Al-Ghannouchi, 2000; Armstrong, 2014).

In this article we discuss to what extent and how the promotion of secularization as a counterterrorism strategy may fuel and/or frustrate processes of radicalization and religious terrorism in Iraq. The methodology used is a literature review of academic publications, policy documents and relevant contributions in popular media. The article is divided into four sections. The first section summarizes the meaning and principles of key concepts such as 'religious terrorism', 'radicalization', 'secularization' and 'counterterrorism strategies'. It also determines the conceptual framework in which these concepts will be discussed. The second section discusses the arguments of both adherents and opponents of the promotion of secularization as a counterterrorism strategy. The third section briefly describes the (post)conflict context of Iraq and contextualizes the sociopolitical and religious context in the country. Section four provides an analysis whether or not, and the extent to which, the

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[2] According to the Global Terrorism Index, religious extremism has become the main driver of terrorism in recent years. The report recorded 18,000 deaths in 2013, a rise of 60% on the previous year. The majority (66%) of these were attributable to just four groups: Islamic State (Isis) in Iraq and Syria, Boko Haram in Nigeria, the Taliban in Afghanistan and al-Qaeda (Institute for Economics and Peace 2014).

promotion of secularization may either fuel or frustrate radicalization and religious terrorism in Iraq. The article concludes that, in principle, the promotion of secularization may positively influence countering religious extremism and religious terrorism in Iraq. At the same time it can lead to counterproductive effects, in particular when the implementation strategy is not well thought through. If these strategies are implemented by foreign countries – or even just if this perception exists amongst the Iraqi population – the promotion of secularization as a counterterrorism strategy in Iraq is not likely to succeed.

Definitions, Processes of Radicalization and the Nature of Religious Terrorism

Definitions

Similar to unsettled discussions on the definition of terrorism in general, current literature on religious terrorism lacks consensus on a definition (Tucker, 2001). In line with the US Department of Defence and the European Union, religious terrorism is in this article, however, defined as *the calculated use of unlawful violence or the threat of violence inculcate fear with the purpose of influencing or coercing governments and/or populations towards saliently religious goals* (Mannik, 2009).[3] Typically, religiously motivated terrorism is propelled by an extreme sense of ideological enthusiasm complemented by a set of activities that reveal the high dedication of a group of people to their own school of thought and belief system (Obi and Ukaulor, 2016).[4] Acknowledging that many different religiously inspired terrorist groups existed or exist,[5] we will in the context of this article specifically focus on Islamic inspired terrorism. Van de Voorde (2011) – relating it to the term 'jihad' - describes this form of religious terrorism as follows: "[It]… *is based upon an extremist understanding of a necessary cosmic battle between good and evil, in which killing is a sacramental act. It*

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[3] This article does not aim to present a precise legal definition of religious terrorism and the presented meaning is merely for clarifying the general nature of this term (Mannik, 2009).

[4] In this article, with respect to the case study of Iraq, the term of "religious terrorism" refers to "Islamic terrorism".

[5] For example, terrorism by (Japanese) Aum Shinrikyo, (Hindu) Saffron, (Jewish) Irgun, or (Christian) Ku Klux Klan (KKK).

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also relies heavily on the demonization of any and all enemies of Islam, who are viewed as the ultimate source of evil. Jihadism has produced the utmost form of Islamic fundamentalist violence. According to true believers, violence is required to annihilate the enemies of Islam; it is a duty incumbent upon every able Muslim, and holy war against non-Muslims therefore becomes unavoidable. Religious rhetoric is used by jihadists in order to explicitly permit the use of violence, which makes terrorist acts sacred and holy and leads to deified terrorism, arguably the most dangerous form of all."[6]

The next key term in this paper which has over the years undergone many different historical transformations and deserves to be defined is 'secularization'. Some scholars define secularization as the institutional differentiation and division of the spheres of influence of religious institutions, like church or mosque, and state; others define it as the privatization and marginalization of religious belief and practice; and others yet, as the decline and eventual absence and disappearance of religion from the public (Fokas, 2012). Acknowledging the existence of these many descriptions, secularization will in the context of this article be understood to be a *transformation of a society from close identification and affiliation with religious institutions whereby religious organizations experience diminished social influence especially in the field of state and governance* (Pérez-Agote, 2014; Chaves, 1994). It is also important to bear in mind that secularization in this context not only addresses the laws and structure of the government, but also refers to a tendency to accept such a transformation among the general population. In the process of secularization, as a societal process, people tend to consider religion as a private matter with a highly limited scope of authority (Bader, 2010; Pérez-Agote, 2014).

In sum, we will consider the promotion of secularization as a counterterrorism strategy in Republic of Iraq and explore whether this strategy fuels and/or frustrates religious extremism or the process of radicalization and religious terrorism in that country.

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[6] Van de Voorde, Cecile. "Jihad". In Jeffrey Ian Ross (Ed.). Religion and Violence. An Encyclopedia of Faith and Conflict from Antiquity to the Present. pp. 402-394 Vol. 2. Armonk, N.Y., M.E .Sharpe, 2011.

Processes of Radicalization

There are various models in criminology, sociology, psychology, security studies and political science that explain radicalization.[7] Most authors subscribe to the idea that radicalization is a process with multi-level stages (Christmann, 2012). Marc Sageman, for example, presented a four-stage process which includes moral outrage, specific interpretation of the world, resonation with personal experiences and mobilization through networks (Sageman, 2007). Wiktorowicz (2004), by studying the al-Muhajiroun, a radical Islamic group, offers that four major processes persuade individuals to be involved in radical Islamic groups: 1.) cognitive opening 2.) religious pursuit 3.) frame alignment and 4.) socialization. On a similar account Doosje et. al. (2016) argue that individuals typically follow three phases during a radicalization process: 1.) *The sensitivity phase* in which individuals search for significance and struggle with personal uncertainty, disappointment and fraternal relative deprivation. The mentioned factors can originate from a sense of humiliation, personal failure, feelings of injustice, experiences of discrimination, engagement in criminal activities, or poor career prospect in general (Webber, Klein, Kruglanski, Brizi, & Merari, 2017).[8] 2.) *The Group membership phase* in which the individual who has already been inspired by religious ideology may join a radical group from which (s)he experiences positive rewards. Typically, this phase involves feelings of belonging, being part of something bigger and embracing a radical belief system or narrative (Webber et al., 2017)[9] And 3.) *The action phase:* in this final step, individuals, inspired by the radical ideology they hold dear, turn to use violence against other groups. New individuals of the group engage in activities that highlight their

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[7] For an extensive overview, see: Dzhekova, R., Stoynova, N., Kojouharov, A., Mancheva, M., Anagnostou, D., & Tsenkov, E. (2016). Understanding radicalisation. Review of literature. Center for the Study of Democracy, Sofia.

[8] Radical Islamic terrorist groups such as IS are well-equipped to foster or restore feelings of significance by providing recruits with a sense of respect, loyalty, justice, belonging, heroism and the notion to fight and die for a holy goal (holy war). Furthermore, they can reduce the uncertainty and feeling of injustice by providing clear norms and values (Doosje et al., 2016).

[9] Supplying unmet need of in-group belongingness and interpersonal attachments, as a basic strong human desire, besides imbuement with an image of an evil out-group create a strong loyalty and allegiance among new members that justifies engaging in violence against other groups (Leary& Baumeister, 2017; Doosje et al., 2016).

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commitment to their new belief system. Through this process, they reveal and prove their new identities to the leaders and older members of the radical group (Smith, 2018). In a more structural and detailed way, De Coensel (2018) formulated the radicalization process in an eight-phased funnel model, comprising 33 characterizing elements divided into five categories: 1.) Pre-radicalization, 2.) Awareness and grievances, 3.) Solution-Seeking, 4.) Interest, 5.) Targeting, 6.) Indoctrination, 7.) Implementation and 8.) Post-Implementation. Similar to the other authors referred to above, De Coensel's model considers radicalization as a gradual process which is "*subjected to a number of factors which is often set in motion by grievances and feelings of injustice, salvaged by seeking refuge in an alternative set of ideas and worldview, fueled by group processes, leading to changed attitudes toward violence and possibly, but not necessarily, ending in a violent act.*" (Ibid, p: 117)

Although processes of radicalization in diverse regions and countries typically share the phases referred to above, it is important to stress that each area also has its unique features. Causes and processes of radicalization in secular and democratic western countries, for example, may be different from causes and processes in religious and authoritarian states in South Asia or the Middle East. To exemplify, the quest for personal significance is considered as a common motivational core of radicalization in western countries (Webber et al., 2017), however, based on the cultural-historical background of Iraq, entrance to heaven and dedication to a charismatic leader play a more significant role in radicalization processes among Iraqi young people (Varvelli, 2016). Consequently, differentiation between local radicalization and general radicalization based on societal structures of the region is an incontestable prerequisite to accurately analyze a suggested counterterrorism strategy in a given region.

The Nature of Religious Terrorism

Religious terrorism, although containing common factors and characteristics of general terrorism in various aspects, requires to be distinguished analytically from other forms of terrorism in order to better contemplate its mechanism, goals and its interactions with

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Islamic radicalization. Some scholars like Walter Laqueur argue that nationalism is the core essence of religious terrorism and that it, as such, can be categorized as Right-winged Terrorism (Laqueur, 2000).[10] Another similar argument is that religious terrorists' purposes are not purely religious. Respectively, the religion in essence is "*really politics under a different name*" (Jameson, 2002). Mark Sedgwick (2004) adopts a different approach and argues that although the ultimate goal of religious terrorism is religiously formulated, the immediate objectives are purely political and sometimes financial (Sedgwick, 2004; Buker, 2017). Some other scholars posit that religious terrorist attacks are to be differentiated from other forms of terrorism, as these acts of violence are often based on internal aspects of religion such as scriptures, sacred texts, traditions and historic examples which are not present in general secular terrorism (Rapoport, 1990). Finally, Bruce Hoffman asserts that religious terrorism, in contrast to secular terrorism, has a transcendental dimension and assumes violence as a sacramental act or divine duty that is executed in response to some theological demand or imperative (Hoffman, 1999). He has characterized the nature of religiously motivated terrorism as having three special elements which can be found in almost all religious terrorist groups:

(1) The perpetrators must use religious belief and scriptures to explain or justify their violence against people. (Hoffman, 1995).[11]

(2) The perpetrators consider apocalyptic images of destruction as a required and essential part of their holy mission (Hoffman, 1999).

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[10] Nevertheless, many other scholars cast a shadow of doubt on this claim and propound that the mentioned theory cannot explain radical movements like Aum Shinrikyo, which are aimed at ruining the world rather than to assert nationalist claims (Gregg, 2014).

[11] They have the conviction that their activities are sacramental and constitute a divine duty that should be carried out as a response to a theological requirement or God's order. For example, the fatwa of Osama bin Laden in February 1998 can arguably be interpreted as such: "*In compliance with God's order, we issue the following fatwa to all Muslims: The ruling to kill the Americans and their allies, civilians and military is an individual duty for every Muslim who can do it in any country in which it is possible to do it, in order to liberate the al-Aqsa Mosque and the holy mosque (Mecca) from their grip, and in order for their armies to move out of all the lands of Islam, defeated and unable to threaten any Muslim. This is in accordance with the words of Almighty God.*" (Rashid, 2004)

(3) Clerical figures can be seen in leadership positions (Hoffman, 2006 & 1999; Odhiambo, 2014).

These unsettled debates in literature regarding the nature of religious terrorism can be clarified by looking not just at the presence of religious texts, traditions, symbols and scripture, but also by concentrating on uniquely religious purposes for which these radical groups and people are striving and fighting (Gregg, 2014). Regardless of using scripture or presence of religious symbols, typically we can find some uniquely religious goals in the nature of religious terrorism. The creation of a "religious government" (restoration of the *Caliphate*) and "religious cleansing" are two cardinal common religious goals which can explain the nature of religious terrorism.[12] These goals are most commonly associated with radical Islamic groups that typically strive to reestablish a fully independent state governed by Shari'a law (Islamic law). By way of illustration, the entire strategy of IS was formulated on uncompromising religious approaches regarding millenarianism and establishment of an enduring worldwide caliphate (Oosterveld et al., 2017). Somewhat similarly, Al-Qaeda in Iraq and Afghanistan called for the restoration of the Caliphate (Islamic state) as the indispensable objective to unite and protect Muslims world over (Bin Laden, Lawrence & Howarth, 2005). Like-minded groups, such as Al-Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula, Hizb ut-Tahrir, Muslim Brotherhood in Egypt and Jordan, Al-Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb and Jemiyyah Islamia in Southeast Asia share these goals and determined the restoration of the Caliphate as one of their ultimate objectives (Pavlova, 2007; Furnish, 2002; Byman & Wittes, 2014; Gregg, 2014; Abed-Kotob, 1995). Furthermore, these radical Islamic groups aim to eradicate infidels (groups from other religions or with different interpretations of Islamic faith) from their religiously pure state through religious cleansing process (Steindal, 2016; Gregg, 2014; Hoffman, 1995). The establishment of the Caliphate and such religious cleansing are highly

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[12] It should in this regard, and in response to Laqueur's statement referred to above, be noted that religious terrorist groups that create state-like entities, such as IS, are not necessarily 'nationalist'. Indeed, paradoxical as it may be if they refer to themselves as a 'state' (like IS), in their perspective there is no nation, no border, no nationality (The Tony Blair Institute for Global Change, 2015; Newton, 2016).

important due to the symbolic significance it represents (Gregg, 2014). Accordingly, any counterterrorism strategy should consider these goals in its context and measures.

The Promotion of Secularization as a Counterterrorism Strategy

With respect to the submitted definition of secularization and the nature of religious terrorism, a secular state is the opposite of the main goals and motivations of religious terrorism. Indeed, if the apocalyptic historical dream of religious terrorism is the establishment of a religiously pure state, processes of secularization aim to diminish the social influence of religion in governance and to create a religiously diverse – if religious at all – society (Bruce, 2017). Whether or not attempts to promote secularization in Islamic countries is a fruitful counterterrorism strategy or if it mainly has counterproductive effects has been a topic of heated debate between adherents and opponents.

Adherents of the Promotion of Secularization as a Counterterrorism Strategy

The adherents of the promotion of secularization generally regard the cycles of pre-radicalization to radicalization and religious terrorism as the undesirable fruits of declining secularism in non-liberalized religious communities like Iraq. They further assert that the clue to solving the problem of religious terrorism lies in secularization processes in diverse aspects, including changes in state and legal codes, education and curriculum in schools and cultural norms.

Simon Longstaff, executive director of the Ethics Centre, by referring to the widespread religious terrorism in Afghanistan, posits that: "*Da'esh (ISIS, ISIL, Islamic State, call them what you will) are embarked upon an Islamic "crusade" to create a new Caliphate… The only solution was to banish religion to the private realm and organize the state along secular lines… it is only a secular state that can offer a coherent response to the problem of extremism, especially the kind grounded in religious belief… only secularism can save us from extremism*" (Longstaff, 2015: 5-11). Somewhat similarly, Akbar Ganji, an Islamic

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reformist, by presenting the new conception of "Secular Islam," propounds that "*secularization of Islam and Muslims' societies is the most important antidote for Islamic terrorism*" (Ganji, 2015: 2). Furthermore, scholars such as Kyle W. Orton (2015) and Amatzia Baram (2014)[13] argued that IS in Iraq arose from stopping secularization after the fall of the Ba'ath regime and increasing the religiosity of politics and society in sectarian states. Orton blames the Faith Campaign of 1991[14] and argues: "*the Islamic State (IS) was not created by removing Saddam Hussein's regime [secular regime]; it is the afterlife of that regime [sectarian regime]*" (Orton, 2015: 15).

Regardless of western scholars, secularization as a counterterrorism strategy also has its own supporters among Iraqi political authorities and officials. For instance, the National Democratic Party, which was revived after the 2003 invasion of Iraq, is a secular political party that aims to secularize Iraq and presents social democracy and non-sectarianism as a means of eradication of terrorism (Batatu, 1978, Rahima al-Abbud, 2012,). What's more, Sayyid Ayad Jamal al-Din, a social reformist and member of the Iraqi Parliament from 2005 to 2010, argues that the core reason for the rise of terrorism is political Islam and secularizing Iraq will help reduce the threat of religious terrorism (MEMRI, 2006; Shirazi, 2017). Similarly, Ahmad Chalabi, Ayad Allawi, and Adnan Pachachi, who were in the Iraqi Governing Council established by US, support the same idea (Chatriwala, 2010). Finally, we can find some NGOs like the Global Secular Humanist Movement, founded by humanist and former refugee Faisal Saeed Al-Mutar, which aim to promote secularization in Iraq as a cure to religious terrorism of IS and Al-Qaeda (Some Young Arabs, 2016).[15]

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[13] For more information about his opinion about the roots of IS in Iraq, please see: Baram, A. (2014). Saddam Husayn and Islam, 1968-2003: Ba'thi Iraq from Secularism to Faith. Woodrow Wilson Center Press.

[14] This campaign conducted by the Iraqi Ba'ath Party in order to pursue a more social-conservative and overtly Islamist agenda - including activities and policies like closing night clubs – put more emphasis on religiously oriented curricula and granted more freedom to Islamic groups (Baram, 2011).

[15] Another NGO is ibn Warraq's Institute for the Secularization of Islamic Society which has been promoting ideals of rationalism, secularism, democracy, and human rights within Islamic society (for additional information, please see: www.secularislam.org).

Opponents of the Promotion of Secularization as a Counterterrorism Strategy

However, other experts are doubtful about the veracity of the mentioned claims about the problem-solving formula of secularization and propound that the main problem with the aforementioned argument is its ignorance about the unique societal-historical structures of Islamic countries.

These scholars argue, firstly, that many Islamic groups consider Islam as an inherently political religion and have the conviction that debates between religion and secularization are between two competing worldviews which will probably not vanish anytime soon (Wu, 2007; Dalacoura, 2014). Wœver (2008), for example, criticizes western counterterrorism strategies that rely on the promotion of secularization in Iraq and Afghanistan and argues: "*there is a significant risk of contributing to a vicious circle of mutual fear and conflict escalation if the West continues its self-assured – even self-righteous – promotion of secularism as a doctrine, raised above politics, as a precondition for politics, as the path to a peaceful, free and successful society*" (Wœver, 2008).

Secondly, it is argued that the focal point for contemporary conflicts in the Middle East is the idea of separation (secularism) and current terrorist attacks are organized to combat this doctrine (Habermas, 2006; Asad, 2006; Wœver, 2008; Berg-Sørensen, 2004). How can secularization frustrate religious terrorism, while ironically it is likely to foster the circumstances conducive to more terrorism? To shed more light on the issue, the opponents of secularization set forth the fact that usually Islamic radical groups, like IS and Al-Qaeda, consider any US/western policies or even presence of these in their religious countries as a threat to their religion.[16]

Thirdly, empirical arguments can be used to counter the idea that secularization counters religious radicalization and/or terrorism. Sageman (2004), for example, found that only 18 percent of Islamist extremists have had an Islamic religious primary or secondary

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[16] For instance, Bin Laden regarded the presence of the U.S on Saudi soil as threatening and humiliating to Islam and announced that the war against the U.S was essential for cleansing infidel elements out of the land of Islam (Gregg, 2014).

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education. In contrast, 82 percent went to secular schools. These data undermine the view that Islamic extremism can be best viewed as resulting from brainwashing by teachers in madrassas as part of normal primary or secondary education (Silke, 2008).

Finally, another group of opponents like Zia, Al-Ghannouchi, Armstrong and Shadi Hamid[17] elaborate on the fact that in an Islamic society, the role of religion and religious traditions are visibly prominent and it permeates all aspects of daily life including cultural values, education in schools, legal codes, social norms and personal morality. Accordingly, secularization is not only ill-advised and potentially counter-productive by way of its contradictions with deep-rooted religious aspects of people's lives, but also compels extremists to consider fights against secularization as a fight against annihilation (Zia, 2014; Al-Ghannouchi, 2000; Millwala, 2013; Palmer, 2004; Hamid, 2016; Armstrong, 2014).

Historical Experiences of Secularization in Iraq

According to Skinner's method of contextual reading (1969) it is not possible to understand and analyze any societal-political concept without taking into account its historical context and societal structures. It is the same with religious terrorism and secularization in Iraq. Although it is not possible to fully explain the historical and political circumstances of Iraq in this article, a brief contextual paragraph about historical experiences of secularization in Iraq will help analyzing the pros and cons of secularization in this country.

Although Islam by far has been the most common religion throughout the history of Iraq, Iraq has over the past centuries experienced different periods and levels of secularization (Johnson, 2004).[18] The first secular schools were established by Midhat Pasha in the mid 19th century. By early the early 1900's, a new generation of leaders who had graduated from these

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[17] For instance, Karen Armstrong, an expert on world religions, asserts that: "*secularism did not seem like a good value... It seemed lethal and evil*" (quoted in Palmer, 2004).

[18] According to 2010 Iraqi government statistics, 97% of Iraq's population (32.6 million) is Muslim (The Independent Advisory Group on Country Information, 2016). For more statistics regarding the religious demography of Iraq, please consult: "International Religious Freedoms Report for 2014, Iraq, Section 1: Religious Demography, 14 October 2015, http://www.state.gov/j/drl/rls/irf/2014/nea/238456.htm"

secular schools emerged in a lively political scene in Iraq. They played a pivotal role in moving Iraq forward in terms of secularism and constitutionalism (Johnson, 2004) and can partly explain why the Iraqi constitution of 1925 – similar to many other Middle Eastern states which were established after the 1916 Sykes–Picot Agreement - prohibited the establishment of a religious state in Iraq, in spite of the fact that Article 13 of that very same constitution considers Islam as a legitimate source of legislation. The 'heydays' of secularism in Iraq were arguably during the ruling of the Ba'ath regime (1968 and 2003), which under the leadership of Saddam Hussein would form a state with a high tendency to the secular principles and also with anti-religious attitudes.[19] Some scholars argue that the backbone doctrine of the Ba'ath party was a militant secularism made of a national-socialist tyranny aimed to eradicate any religious influence from public sphere. Accordingly, the Ba'ath regime started a civil war against Islam and Islamists accompanied by an infinite series of mass killings, and the torture of Muslims, especially its Shia branch, which is the majority in Iraq (Baram, 2011, Helfont, 2014, Magister, 2003).

The brutality of Saddam Hussein's regime – already when Hussein was still in power - led Iraqis to slowly turn back to their religion and refuse any schools of thought associated with secularism. Subsequently, Islamic groups gained strength in parallel with the weakening of the secularist counterparts (Schmidt, 2009). The increased popularity of religion-based political organizations like the Da'wa party in the 2005 elections and the failure of the secular Iraqi National List in those same elections are illustrative in this regard (Makiya, 2010). Furthermore, the *marjiʿyya* (clerical authority), which can be considered the most powerful non-state actor in Iraq, considers secularization as a real threat to Shia clerical authority. By changing political trajectories and using its influence among the general population it has over the past years tried to keep the status quo of a post-secular state (Al-Qarawee, 2018).

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[19] In speeches and interviews, Saddam Hussein generally stressed to restrict the role of religion in politics: "*We have to oppose the institutionalization of religion in the state and the society and to oppose the movement of the revolution into religion. We should return to the roots of our religion but not introduce it into politics*" (quoted in Cline, 2000).

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Delving more into the issue, Iraq is a multi-party state and there are various political parties which are commonly grouped by ideology and/or ethnic affiliation. In contemporary Iraq, religious political parties like the Coalition Provisional Authority (CPA), the Governing Council, the Iraqi Islamic Party and the Supreme Council of the Islamic Revolution in Iraq (SCIRI) play a pivotal role in contriving public policies and strategies (Fuller, 2003; Smock, 2003; Schmidt, 2009). Respectively, as elucidated above, in a largely conservative and religious political community, this has left the impression that secularization is establishing a pernicious western philosophy which is incompatible with Islam (in other words: is generally perceived to be the antithesis of religion). For instance, in 2010, when a candidate for Iraq's parliament explained the agenda of his political party and differentiated religion from state, the interviewer promptly asked whether his party was secular or not. Surprisingly, he bitterly responded "*No! We believe in God!*" (Al-Amin, 2016). At the same time, the above should not be overgeneralized and is not representative for the contemporary political atmosphere in Iraq. The Civil Democratic Alliance and the Al-Iraqiya Alliance, for example, are secular political parties that have in the past tried to promote secularization. In 2010, Ayad Allawi, the head of Al-Iraqiya, propounded that: "*the trend in Iraq is moving away from sectarianism, towards secularism…the way forward for Iraq is definitely secular-rooted*" (quoted in Chatriwala, 2010). Currently, however, both parties are not of much relevance in Iraqi politics.[20]

Overall, the secular political landscape in Iraq has been weakened and fragmented after the fall of the secular Ba'ath regime and Islamic *political* groups have generally regained power. Particularly problematic is that one of the most important drivers for the spectacular growth in religiously inspired terrorism and violence in Iraq is the political support of this kind of terrorism by the major Sunni and Shia political groups or local leaders. Indeed, Sunni tribes cooperated with IS (Islamic State) and promoted religious terrorism to compete in what

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[20] Both the aforementioned parties were dissolved or split into other political parties because of their ill-conceived steps and highly marginalized role in the political atmosphere (Middle East Report, 2012; International Crisis Group, 2012; Revolvy, n.d.)

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they regarded to be a zero-sum game for gaining political power and the control over political institutions (Beauchamp, 2015). It is no secret that IS has been recruiting Sunni fighters by exploiting the constant political conflict and tension between Sunni and Shia. On the other hand, in 2013, Shia groups could gain the control over the police forces and used this to autocratically hinder Sunni protestors requesting more representation in the government (Ibid). Each side seems fearful about its constitutional rights – and, more instrumentally, arguably also about losing well paid positions in government[21] - when government is ruled by 'the other side'. In such a situation, secularization of government institutions could arguably be considered an improvement, as it could reduce tensions from both sides to dominate government.

Promotion of Secularization as a Counterterrorism Strategy in Iraq: Assessing the Merits

Various studies show that rather than ideological factors, it is the real or perceived sense of injustice with regards to joblessness, poverty and other socio-economic factors that fuels radicalization processes and creates the impetus for violent extremism (United States Institute of Peace, 2016; Guthrie, 2018, Rudaw, 2019). These feelings of injustice typically originate from (perceived) discrimination in political representation, incapability of the state to provide fundamental (human) rights and widespread corruption and poor governance (Ibid). As discussed in paragraph 2.2, the aforementioned factors can push vulnerable individuals towards the first phases of a radicalization process in which they would look for solutions, for meaning in life and belonging to a group. Hence, any preventative counterterrorism strategy, including the promotion of secularization, will only be successful if it can properly address the aforementioned factors.

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[21] According to Abdul-Latif, a former minister and a former deputy in Iraq, "*the total take home salary of a minister or a Parliament member per month is 12.9 million Iraqi dinars (US$10,800).... The whole amount is tax-free…. After retirement, an 80 percent pension is paid.*" (Najm, 2010)

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In contemporary Iraq, push factors for radicalization are mostly related to poverty, marginalization, feelings of injustice and dedication to charismatic leaders (Guthrie, 2018). Taking into account Iraq's historical experience of secularization and its societal structures, this paragraph will identify key constraints and opportunities of the promotion of secularization as a counterterrorism strategy to religious terrorism in different levels of (Iraqi) society. The paragraph discusses to what extent, and how, the promotion of secularization as a counterterrorism strategy, may fuel and/or frustrate processes of radicalization and religious terrorism in Iraq.

The Promotion of Secularization: Perspectives of the General Population

It is not easy to identify the views of the general Iraqi population with regards to secularization. On the one hand, the limited political support for secular political parties in contemporary Iraq gives rise to the idea that the general population is not very supportive of initiatives to come to more secularization. On the other hand, it is interesting to note that a nationally representative survey carried out in Iraq between 2004 and 2013 reports that in 2007 72% of Shia followers preferred recognition of Iraq, and not religion, as the basis for identity. In 2013, both Sunni and Shia followers indicated to prefer political authorities who are committed to the national interests over politicians who have strong religious beliefs by at least a factor of 4 to 1 (Moaddel, 2014). The same survey indicated that the percentage of Sunnis who support a secular state increased from 60% in 2004 to more than 81% in 2013.[22] The values for the Kurds were similar to the Sunnis; 69% in 2004 and 75% in 2013. Support for secular politics among the Shia has an inverted U-shape between 2004 and 2013. It went up from 44% in 2004 to 63% in 2011, and then – supposedly because of Sunni cooperation with IS - dropped to 34% in 2013 (Moaddel, 2014).

In addition, more recently the perceived juxtaposition of high rates of corruption, deficiency and sectarian government has led to regular demands for a secular government by

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[22] Similarly, 2005 polls by Zogby International indicate that roughly three-quarters of Iraq's Sunnis favor a secular state (Otterman, 2005).

both Shia and Sunnis in anti-corruption demonstrations that took place in 2016 at Baghdad's Tahrir Square (Al-Amin, 2016). This manifests opportunities for successful secularization. Surprisingly, some firebrand clerics like Muqtada al-Sadr could be found among the 2016 demonstrators (ibid.). Furthermore, various other surveys such as World Values Surveys/European Values Surveys (1995-2007) and Arab Barometer II and III (2012-2014) confirm growing popular support for secularization until the rise of IS in 2014. (Hoffman, 2012; Norris, 2013; Moaddel; 2014). Unfortunately more recent, 'post-IS landscape' surveys are not available. Notwithstanding the very significant religious and ethnic tensions that have since come to surface in Iraq, based on the available historical surveys, it can be argued that secularization itself may as a societal-political policy be acceptable by the Iraqi general population.

The Promotion of Secularization: Perspectives of Leadership

Typically, the general population, particularly in societies with strong ethnic-religious identities, act based on the norms and values of the groups with whom they identify themselves. Charismatic leaders of these groups can mobilize a mass following, sometimes even against the will of individuals of groups themselves. Respectively, a comprehensive analysis about the potential of secularization in Iraq is contingent on exploring the perspective of the religious-political leadership of Iraq's most relevant religious groups. Although there are a plentitude of active ethnic-religious organizations and groups in Iraq, we have limited our analysis to the actors who play the most significant role in (promoting and/or facilitating) religious terrorism. These are:

1. Sunni leadership (5.2.1), whereby we differentiate

- (a) the Sunni non-radical leadership, and
- (b.) leadership of religious terrorist organizations (IS and Al-Qaeda), and
- (c.) the Kurdish leadership.

2. The Shia leadership (5.2.2).

Sunni religious/political leadership

With respect to the spheres of religion and politics, we should problematize or relativize the differentiation between clergy and the political leadership. Generally, clerics play a significant role in society at large and in the political realm more specifically. They have both legitimacy and popularity to mobilize the general population for a specific cause and can therefore significantly influence local, national and even international politics. With regards to the Sunni religious/political leadership it is important to differentiate between non-radical, radical and Kurdish leadership.

A) Sunni non-radical leadership

Historically, moderate Sunni clerics have been consistently trying to develop the identity label of 'Iraq's Arab Sunnis' under the control of a united leadership which is merged with clergy (Rabkin, 2018). However, they have never been able to form a political leadership which can mobilize all diverse Sunni groups, parallel to their Shia counterpart religious-political leadership (al-Marashi, 2018). Since the label of "Iraqi Arab Sunniness" has never been translated to the real political realm, the leadership is limited to preaching through Friday prayers and occasional political statements of some institutions such as the Fiqh Council (Rabkin, 2018).

Sunni non-radical leadership has traditionally accepted state neutrality (as the result of secularization) and the separation between Shariʿa law and the state (Naim, 2008). Regardless of the more fundamentalist and Salafist branches which will be explored separately, Sunni moderate leadership has often promoted Sufi-oriented and mystical-nonpolitical sermons with a concentration on the individual duties to live a good and charitable life and to adhere to God's commands. Illustrative in this regard – as mentioned above – is that Sunnis have been secularizing central and southern of Iraq during Sunni-led Ba'athist governments (Baram, 2011).

Non-radical Sunni leadership, and the Sunni population in general, have been dealt a dismal hand in the past decade. After losing the political control of Iraq they have behaved as

an insecure minority which has led to a sense of dejection and being treated unfairly (Weiss & Hassan, 2016). After the fall of the Ba'ath regime, Shia sects found an opportunity to retaliate, not only by adopting a policy to radically religionize politics and society in sectarian states, but also by taking de-Baathification of Iraq's government and dismissing anyone who had any Baath party affiliation. (Pavel, 2012). Since the majority of Iraqi Baathists were Sunnis, the mentioned policy almost exclusively influenced the Sunni leadership and population (Pavel, 2012; Orton, 2015). As a result, Sunni clerics and politicians have had limited opportunities to influence power by democratic means and respectively secularization of contemporary Iraq is a remedy which could possibly soothe any feelings of injustice.

Another equally noteworthy point is that the aforementioned adherence of a Shia sectarian government ruling the country among non-radical Sunni leaders and clerics make them highly vulnerable to promote extremism and radicalization through orations and statements. As long as a Shia majority controls the government, and as long as Sunnis are not feeling represented and disenfranchised by the Shia-led government, IS has the potential to disperse its radical Sunni message through non-radical Sunni clerics (Robinson, Connable, Thaler & Scotten, 2018; Beauchamp, 2015). The violence of 2014 by IS, which was accompanied by the approval of many Sunni religious leaders, illustrates this point (Rabkin, 2018). Furthermore, Sunni clerics and political institutions often view the struggle in Iraq and Syria as one between Sunnis and an Iranian-led (Shia)coalition, and have been considering IS as a necessary tool to counterbalance or deter Shia hegemony (Weiss & Hassan, 2016). For instance, well-known Sunni cleric Abdul Malik Al-Saadi in 2014 pointed out the equivalencies between IS and Shia militias while praising Sunni insurgents – including IS-fighters – as 'mujahdeen' (holy warriors) (Today, 2014). Taking the above into account, the promotion of secularization has to potential to reduce these tensions. Indeed, the establishment of a fully secular state could possibly play a pivotal role in strengthening the role of moderate Sunni religious leaders, thereby possibly frustrating radicalization amongst Sunnis. Its influence is not limited to reducing the political tension between Shia and Sunni groups. As discussed above, one of the main root causes of radicalization in Iraq is the

widespread sense of injustice among the Iraqis with regards to the lack of political representation. In a secular state, the elected or appointed governmental officials are not perceived as a representative of a special religious group, but a representative of the people. This may prevent frustrated individuals from entering the first phases of the radicalization process by neutralizing the sense of political discrimination and downplaying group membership.

Finally, secularization may create a different narrative in the society. Rather than promoting division, it may in theory encourage inclusion and collective national identity. Indeed, for a long time, Iraq has been dealing with a disturbed collective identity which mainly originates from intractable ethnic and sectarian fragmentation (Can, 2018; Kirmanc, 2013). A secular and inclusive narrative can be promoted through the educational system, by means of cultural activities and may even permeate in politics, thereby internalizing secularism within Iraq. As such it has the potential to act as a counter-narrative against IS's religious antagonistic mobilization of Sunni Iraqis.

B) Leadership of radical terrorist organizations (IS and Al-Qaeda)

Since the main goal of both IS and Al-Qaeda is to establish a purely Islamic state (a Caliphate) governed by Sharia law, it is almost axiomatic that the core idea of secularization is totally incompatible with the views of their leadership. The leadership of these terrorist groups consists of both radical clerics and ex-Ba'athists who saw IS as an optimal platform in retaliation for what they had already experienced through de-Baathification period (Moubayed, 2015). Indeed, one-third of Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi's top 25 commanders were former Ba'athists (Giesbers, 2018). From the standpoint of IS's members, there is a logical conjunction between secularization on one hand and anti-Islamist hostility, materialism and moral decadence on the other hand. As it is was reflected in the Fatwas (religious orders) by former Al Qaeda leader Osama bin Laden and former leader of IS in Iraq Abu Musab al-Zarqawi, terrorist attacks are in the name of opposing secularization, whilst blaming western

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policies for having introduced this anti-Islamic conception in the Muslim world (Oosterveld et al., 2017).

Iraqi radical Sunni clerics, by taking advantage of the inauspicious legacy of the de-Baathification process and already growing radicalization in Iraq, could from 2014 on successfully establish centralized leadership with hierarchical control over a vast Sunni audience and networked structure (Glenn, 2015; Giesbers, 2018). They replaced Sufi-oriented sermons with radical narratives in order to promote and justify violence against out-groups (Rabkin, 2018). Not only is there an obvious inherent incongruence between their ideology to establish an Islamic state and secularism, but they also believe that their faith is threatened by western policies (that generally promote secularization). For instance, in 1996 Osama bin Laden declared that American Middle East policies constituted "*a clear declaration of war against God, his messenger and Muslims*" (Bin Laden, 1998; Bin Laden, Lawrence & Howarth, 2005). When Mark Juergensmeyer interviewed a great number of imprisoned representatives of radical militant Islamic groups in the 1990s, he unsurprisingly found that the majority of them hold the same conviction and the recurring statement in their interviews was: '*We are already at war*' (Juergensmeyer, 2016). Somewhat similarly, we can find the same response to the promotion of secularization by western countries in the fatwa of al-Zarqawi, former leader of IS in Iraq (Gohel, 2017).[23] Taking such perspectives of radical extremists into account, Wilson warns that the promotion of secularization at best has a null effect and at worst could be counterproductive: "*fundamentalists are authoritarian, secularism threatens fundamentalists and threat activates more aggressive attitudes among authoritarians*" (Wilson, 2014:19). Respectively, Armstrong - by referring to the reaction of fundamentalists to the implemented secularization policies in the Middle East - posits that: "*when secularization has been applied by force, it has provoked a fundamentalist reaction – and history shows that fundamentalist movements which come under attack invariably grow*

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[23] For additional information about these Fatwas, please consult: Bin, L. O., Lawrence, B. B., & Howarth, J. (2005). Messages to the World: The Statements of Osama Bin Laden. And also Rashid, A. (2004). Jihad: The rise of militant Islam in Central Asia. Toronto: CNIB.

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even more extreme. The fruits of this error are on display across the Middle East: when we look with horror upon the travesty of Isis, we would be wise to acknowledge that its barbaric violence may be, at least in part, the offspring of policies guided by our disdain" (Armstrong, 2014). Following this line of reasoning, any policies that are (perceived to be) dictated to promote secularization will lead to more extremism and fundamentalism. Or, to put it in the words of Wœver (2008), will lead to more radicals "*piloting planes into skyscrapers, more dissemination of videos of mass killing and more suicide bombers*" (Wœver, 2008).

C) Kurdish leadership

Although Kurds are often contrasted with Iraq's Sunni and Shia, they are actually not a separate religious sect within Islam, but an ethnic group. According to a 2011 survey conducted by Pew Research Center, around 98% of them identified themselves as Sunnis (Mohamed, 2014). Different from other ethnic and tribal groups in Iraq, Kurdish leadership is not so much focused on religion. Indeed, its political aspirations for independence have overshadowed thinking along sectarian categories of Sunni and Shia (al-Marashi, 2018). Kemal Kirkuki, a Kurdish politician who also commands Peshmerga forces in the fight against IS, expressed a telling comment in 2017: "*We hope Iraq becomes three independent countries; Kurdistan, Shiitestan and Sunnistan.*" (Plebani, 2017)

Although in Kurdistan, like other parts of Iraq, radical Sunni groups have been active Since the fall of the Ba'ath regime, both Islamists and secular parties have had a similar understanding of Kurdish expectations, aspirations and political targets: the issue of independence of Kurdistan (Ali, 2015). This has kept Shia-Sunni tensions under the radar (Aqrawi-Whitcomb, 2015). Not only have various religious groups including Jewish, Christian, Muslim, Zoroastrian and Yezidi traditionally been accepted in Kurdistan, but since 2012 public schools have also adopted a religious neutrality policy which has paved the way for providing a safe haven for religious diversity. Respectively, as Aqrawi-Whitcomb (2015) argues, secularism can be considered as "*the natural byproduct of diverse cohabitation in Kurdish areas for over two thousand years*".

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Shia leadership

In contrast to moderate Sunni, Shia group's line of thinking historically holds the conviction that Islam's essence, in its cultural and political fabric, is not able, neither doctrinally nor institutionally, to accept secularization of the state including education and politics (Al-Qarawee, 2018). Shia political thought advocates a guardianship-based political system, which relies upon a just and high-ranking religious jurist (Faqih) to assume the leadership of the state in the absence of an infallible Imam (spiritual and political successor to the Islamic prophet). Within the framework of the Shia political doctrine, there is an intrinsic connection between Islam and politics and one of the main goals of establishing a state is to implement and enforce Shari'a law (Vaezi, 2004). This, indeed, makes the promotion of secularization incongruous with Shia ideology. On top, secularization can jeopardize the political status of Shia in the current Iraqi government.

Hence, it is obvious that there are serious ideological and *realpolitikal* elements that make Shia leadership hostile to the promotion of secularization. Respectively, we can find various historical examples of Shia opposition movements and groups established by Shia leaders critiquing secularization of politics and education. For instance, Clerics of the Islamic Task Organization founded in 1961, the Followers established in 1962, al-Dawah al Islamiah in the late 1950s and Mujahidin (Holy Warriors) in the early 1960s (Cline, 2000) have over the years argued that religion was suffering serious erosion as secularism gained strength in Iraq (Marr, 2018; Cline, 2000). [24]

It should, furthermore, be stressed that secularization would most likely have direct counterproductive effects on already extremist groups and if this strategy would aim to establish secular schools or education in Shia regions. Indeed, the secular regimes of Iraq began a major drive to extend secular education in the 1920s and 1930s (Cline, 2000). The

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[24] For additional information about the interpretation of Shia leaders on secularization, please see: Cline, L. E. (2000). The Prospects of the Shia Insurgency Movement in Iraq. Journal of Conflict Studies, 20(2); Schmidt, S. (2009). The role of religion in politics the case of Shia Islamism in Iraq. Nordic Journal of Religion and Society, 22(2), 123-43; Al-Qarawee, H. H. (2018). The 'formal'Marjaʿ: Shiʿi clerical authority and the state in post-2003 Iraq. British Journal of Middle Eastern Studies, 1-17 and Wœver, O. (2008). World conflict over religion: Secularism as a flawed solution. In Constituting Communities (pp. 208-235). Palgrave Macmillan, London.

peak of policy of secularizing education was the Ba'ath regime which had established secular schools in Shia regions like Najaf and Karbala in order to weaken Shia seminary schools and reduce the influence of Shia ulama (clerics) among the general population (Kadhim, 2013). Respectively, Shia leaders actively fought against the formation of secular schools and discouraged parents from sending their children to these schools (Nakash, 2003).[25] Based on this historical experience, Shia clerics are arguably highly suspicious of establishing secular education and may react aggressively in response.

Notwithstanding the above, there are also factors that may create an inclination to accept secularization among Shia in Iraq. For example, historically, Shia-ran regions have over the past decades experienced widespread financial crises and endemic corruption. On this note, as already referred to above, it is important to keep in mind that there have been regular anti-corruption demonstrations in Baghdad's Tahrir Square (2015) or Basra (2018) by both Sunni and Shia groups calling for secularization, including Shia clerics like Muqtada al-Sadr (Al-Amin, 2016, Silavi, 2018). Additionally, since Shia were the main victims of religious terrorism committed by radical Sunnis, they could arguably consider secularization of politics as a preventative strategy for growing religious violence among Sunnis which also can guarantee their safely in post-IS landscape. This claim can be evidenced by the political plan of the recent Alliance Towards Reforms, an Iraqi electoral coalition with a majority of the Shia Islamist Sadrist Party, for establishing a fully secular state in order to resolve the conflict between Shia and Sunni (Robin, 2018).[26] As referred to in paragraph 5.2.1 with

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[25] Interestingly, there is no evidence of a similar campaign among Sunni clerics for opposing secular schools (Nakash, 2003).

[26] For instance, cleric Muqtada al-Sadr, the leader of Sadrist Party and also the Alliance Towards Reforms argues: "*If we enter into an alliance with the Shiites, people say it is a sectarian alliance. And if we enter an alliance with the Sunnis, people accuse me of Wahhabism [an extreme form of Sunni Islam], Baathism [support for Saddam Hussein's former Sunni-majority party, now outlawed in Iraq] or loyalty to Saudi Arabia. If we enter into an alliance with the civil society stream, they say we are Communists. When we enter into an alliance with parties close to Iran, they accuse us of being Iranian loyalists and when we get closer to Arab parties, they say we are secret agents for them. I will participate in elections for the sake of Iraq, to support moderate people and to expel extremists, to achieve reform and to end corruption and nepotism.*" (quoted in Habib, 2018) Similarly, Jassim al-Halfi, a politician and member of Alliance Towards Reforms, states: "*The alliance's aim is to change*

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regards to non-radical Sunnis, a process of secularization may also amongst Shia neutralize perceptions of political discrimination or senses of injustice. Again, in theory it has the potential to prevent Shia groups from entering the first phases of radicalization by providing them with an alternative narrative.

Given the above, secularization in politics may be accepted by some Shia leaders as it could rebalance the political power of Shia and Sunni parties in Iraq and subsequently reduce the religious violence arising from political conflict between aforementioned religious groups. However, it should be stressed that secularization would most likely have directly counterproductive effects on more conservative Shia groups if this strategy includes establishing secular schools or education in Shia regions.

Promoting Secularization: How to do it?

The above analysis demonstrates that, apart from radical actors, there in principle seems to be ideological and political space for a more secular system in Iraq. Our analysis suggests that secularization is not necessarily considered an alien 'Western originated' concept and there is no reason to believe it is prima-facie rejected. As discussed above, Iraq already experienced various secularization processes in history which have made Iraqis familiar with the concept, (limited) survey results suggest the general population prefers recognition of one Iraq in politics over religious identity politics, and recently there have been regular demands for a secular government by both Shia and Sunnis in anti-corruption demonstrations. The million-dollar question is, however, how to actively promote and/or implement a policy of secularization in the challenging Iraqi political and religious landscape? Secularization is a complicated and multi-faceted socio-political processes and any activities to promote such a development needs a careful design as it may lead to productive, but also counterproductive effects.

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the balance of power and to weaken sectarian parties and corrupt people, as well as mobilize that portion of the population that is interested in changing the status quo."(Ibid)

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When it comes to the nitty gritty details of implementating any policy in this regard, there are some tangible 'lessons learned'. Firstly, as is evidenced in various surveys,[27] contemporary Iraqis are highly suspicious of secularization efforts by foreign countries. Respectively, Wing and Varol (2006) criticized US's mid 2000's secularization policies in Iraq and argued: "*today, the United States is trying to do in Iraq what Atatürk did in Turkey less than ninety years ago. Unfortunately, the United States' attempts are not likely to be as successful, because a nation is more likely to reject reforms imposed on it by outside forces*" (Wing & Varol, 2006). Similarly, Karen Armstrong pointed out to the photographs of torture of Iraqi prisoners in Abu Ghraib prison and contended that "*we (western countries) come in with all our talk about how lofty our ideals are and then they see those photographs (of Abu Ghraib prison). What are they to think?*" (quoted in Palmer, 2004: 14). Similar critique has been expressed with regard to secularization initiatives in other countries with a Muslim majority, such as Afghanistan. Arbabzadah, an Afghan journalist and cultural critic, for instance, stated: "*Ask the people you know who send their girls and women to schools, exactly what have you achieved with this? Is it not the case that these schools that they have built for us so that we Muslims send our girls to them have had a negative impact on morality and honour? By building so-called educational institutions, the foreigners are encouraging our girls to become whores.*" (Arbabzadah, 2011; 3) Accordingly, secularization processes should ideally be formulated, suggested and implemented by the Iraqi people themselves. It cannot be externally forced upon them.

A process of secularization in Iraq should therefore ideally be a gradual, internal and organic process. External actors that want to facilitate such a process, may consider investing in safeguarding that pluriform media exist, which allows the population to take into account different narratives. Complex as it may be, secularization may also be promoted by supporting

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[27] A multitude of – unfortunately all relatively old - surveys can confirm the unpopularity of western countries' policies among Iraqi people. See for example: a May 2004 poll which was sponsored by the US-led Coalition Provisional Authority, an August 2005 poll conducted for the British Defense Ministry, two polls of Program on International Policy Attitudes (PIPA) in January and September 2006, a poll of the US Defense Department in 2007 and Moaddel's survey (2004-2013). See: O'Hanlon & Campbell, 2009 & 2004; Robathan; 2005; Program on International Policy Attitudes, 2006.

the recent protests in Iraq which included both Sunni and Shia groups, demanding a non-corrupt, functioning and non-sectarian government. Furthermore, establishing and or supporting high quality secular schools and curricula might also be beneficial. Such activities too, however, demand much tact and could possibly also negatively backfire. For instance, establishing secular schools for the al-Jumaili tribe (a (former) ally of IS) in Anbar Province[28] provoked radical members of this tribe to respond aggressively.[29] Conversely, using such approaches in Baghdad or Basra might be more promising as there seems to be more support for secularism among Shia and Sunnis in these cities.

Conclusion

The benefits and pitfalls of the promotion of secularization as a counterterrorism strategy to religious terrorism in the Middle East have long been debated by academics and policymakers. This article discussed to what extent and how the promotion of secularization as a counterterrorism strategy may fuel and/or frustrate processes of radicalization and religious terrorism in Iraq. It discusses both the possible benefits and pitfalls of the promotion of secularization and does not try to present it as an unquestionable prescription to counter radicalization and religious terrorism in Iraq.

Iraq has over the past centuries experienced different periods and levels of secularization. Not surprisingly, there seems to be much support for secularization of the political sphere by the religious minority groups. It may, however, also be accepted by a majority of the Kurds, non-radical Sunni groups and non-radical Shia, as it can reduce existing political tensions and is seen as a possible solution to the endemic corruption in the country. A process of secularization may frustrate religious radicalization and terrorism in

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[28] Anbar Province was a terrorist's heaven for many years. Tribal loyalties, unpatrolled borders and places for rest, resupply and train made this province an ideal location for IS and Al-Qaeda (Katzman, 2008).
[29] The US at some point considered designing the Anbar Awakening project (for expelling Al-Qaeda elements from Anbar) (Phillips, 2009). For additional information, please see Phillips, A. (2009). The Anbar Awakening: Can It Be Exported to Afghanistan?. Security Challenges, 5(3), 27-46.

Iraq as it may provide people with a counter-narrative to sectarian fragmentation - one of the main causes of radicalization in Iraq - by encouraging inclusion and facilitates the creation of a collective national identity. In other words, in principle, apart from some radical elements, there seems to be ideological and political space in Iraq to consider taking a direction to a more secular system.

However, possible acceptance by the general population, politicians and the religious clergy of secularization of the state, certainly does not equal that these actors will actively support – pro-active western supported or initiated - promotion of secularization. Although the promotion of secularization arguably has the potential to eradicate political support for religious terrorism and processes of radicalization, implementing it in a proper model in which major religious groups feel equally represented is one of the most important challenges. Indeed, for western policy makers interested in the promotion of secularization as a counterterrorism strategy in Iraq – or for that matter, Iraqi policy makers in need of western support – the biggest challenge is how to formulate and implement a strategy that aims to promote secularization, without it being perceived as western mingling in Middle East politics.

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