



## **Extremism and Ethnicity – Reloaded: The Cases of Iraq and Syria**

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### **Abstract**

The issue of ethnic nationalism and its inbuilt trend to break up traditional nation-states 1) by transcending their borders via postulations of desired unity between ethnic groups based on considerations of identity and culture (including religion), and 2) by imploding national unity through a mixture of group affiliation, space, and minority-majority conflicts has been growing globally since the end of the Cold War in 1989-91. Some assert this has come as “natural” development since the world after the bipolar conflict of the second half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century had to become more multi-polar and multi-faceted, and thus to break up into smaller units; some have seen this as the “age of fragmentation” of “mature” nation states in the context of globalization; and others again as the “post-national” return of the early interface between ethno-cultural and nationalist movements which were at the origin of modern nation states. Be it as it be, today the new ethno-mobilization trend affects geopolitical regions as different as those of China, Russia, Europe, Africa and the Middle East.

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## 1. Introduction

In the past few years, under special conditions and within specific contexts this trend has also fostered a common trajectory that consists of increasingly binding ethnicity and extremism together: for example in the ways particular movements and groups such as the so-called Islamic State (IS, ISIS) legitimize themselves, and operate. There are also parts of other militant groups like for example regional aspects of Hindu extremism or radical ethnic autonomization movements in various parts of Africa which work in similar ways.

This paper 1) analyzes some common characteristics at the interface between extremism and ethnicity by departing from the case of IS/ISIS in Iraq and Syria, but does not confine the specifics of this crucial interface to that given case; 2) identifies the need for institutional regulations that integrate political and juridical aspects as desideratum for solution-building; 3) points towards the significance of regional and local autonomization of ethnic groups in order to avoid and fight extremist trends; and 4) proposes the European model of the Ethno-territorial autonomy of the Northern Italian model province “South Tyrol-Alto Adige” as a point of reference to find contextually relevant solutions for the growingly important interface between extremism and ethnicity.

The argument of this seven-part conflict management assessment is that fighting extremism will require concrete institutional, juridical and regulatory solutions for ethnically problematic areas in disputed zones of current global intervention, strategy and politics. Such areas are particularly those where different ethnicities closely live together or are mixed within an area, region or state dominated by an ethnic majority. Such areas are increasing in number since the global population is increasingly mobile, together with globalized travel and migration. In this situation, to manage existing conflicts and to anticipate potential upcoming ones includes the creation of inter- and multi-disciplinary task forces specializing in the interface between ethnicity, socio-political mobilization and mobility, territorial economic stratification and traditional religion, the latter understood as “culture of the place”.

Analyzing the model of the territorial autonomy of the Autonomous Province of South Tyrol in Northern Italy, considered one of the best proven models of ethnic pacification in Europe since the 1970s, this paper shows that addressing key aspects of the globally growing extremism problem is possible through the juridical and institutional regulation of ethnic rights for given pluri- and multi-ethnic areas. Integrative conflict management may require special status for such areas. One way is to implement territorial autonomies for ethnic minorities in local and regional contexts in favor of the benefit of the greater whole. Such autonomies have to be installed in ways that benefit all of their citizens, including the members of the ethnic majority living on the ground where other majorities abound or have

the relative majority. The paradox of every successful solution lies in the fact that the special status of ethnic conflict areas will be given because of an existing or potential, factual or perceived ethnic minority problem, but that the status in its institutional regulation does not have to benefit the minority alone. Territorial autonomies should be created *because* of the minority problem, but *not* exclusively *for* it. Only in such a perspective they can help to run dry extremist trends by providing “relational” justice through “deep” equality - including positive discrimination of certain groups in need of particular tutelage - aiming at fostering long-term stability.

All this does not necessarily mean that such solutions have to be permanent. They can also just serve as bridges to build a joint future of opposed groups over a given timeframe by legally and institutionally structuring their cohabitation. The situation with extremist movements in Iraq and Syria currently in the eye of global attention could be one timely case of application. In the years ahead, this and similar cases could become practical tests for the validity of the South Tyrol model of territorial autonomization and its transferability to the multiplying ethno-political conflict areas in today’s global strategic landscape. In short, institutional regulation of ethnic rights may be beneficial for fighting extremism in different areas of the world, but has to be adapted on a case-to-case basis to differing contexts and socio-historic constellations.

## **2. The ISIS lesson: Is Ethnicity Key?**

The fight against the so-called Islamic State seems to be a rollercoaster – and the lessons have still to be learned. After the recapture of Tikrit at the start of April 2015 it seemed that the so-called “Islamic State in Iraq and Syria”, or just “Islamic State”, had lost large parts of its oil fields and was in retreat on most fronts according to internal reports of the German Secret Service (*Bundesnachrichtendienst*) of April 8, 2015 (Fitsanakis 2015). But after the fall of Ramadi and the conquest of Palmyra in the second half of May of the same year, the situation once again worsened, proving once again the remarkable capacities of the militia’s military, economic and strategic leadership.

The recapture of Ramadi by Iraqi troops at the end of December 2015 (Lister 2015) was considered by some as a potential “turning point” in the conflict, for example by the editorial board of the New York Times (The New York Times Editorial Board 2015). But that was most probably a premature assessment. In 2016, IS seems to be far from being routed from vast territories both in Iraq and Syria. One main reason for its extraordinary resilience is its ethnic fundament in the conquered areas. Given that good part of the successes of the extremists seems to be the effect of ethnic divisions particularly in Iraq,

some intermediate lessons of the case can and should be formulated despite the ongoing fight that will probably take years to be brought to an end, as most military experts assert.

*First*, among the lessons of the furious rise of ISIS and its conquest of vast areas is the importance of ethnic factors. According to basically all observers, the exceptionally rapid conquests of ISIS in Iraq would not have been possible without the support of local Sunni tribes who felt - and feel - repressed by the national Shiite majority. Despite prior underlying conflict between Sunni tribes and early organizations of ISIS since the days of dictator Saddam Hussein and in particular, more openly, since 2006 (Gerges 2015), one starting point for massive pro-extremist mobilization was the perceived exclusion from power by the government of Nuri al-Maliki (2006-14) which led many regional Sunni leaders to the conviction that the Maliki administration was an ethno-religious dictatorship by the Shias, where the only means to survive for the Sunnis was to fight.

As the Subject Matter Expert (SME) Elicitation Summary Pentagon Report on ISIS of January 2015 for the period July-November 2014 (Pentagon 2015) asserts, after the ousting of Saddam Hussein, the subsequent implementation of a democratically approved government and the eventual withdrawal of Western troops until December 2014:

“Power in Iraq was primarily held by Shia-backed factions. Iran in particular held great sway over events in Baghdad. While the Kurds represented a relatively smaller group within the population, their level of unity and organization made them a very effective bloc within the Iraqi power structure. The Sunnis, however, were not united, and were subject to actions by other factions born of fear of Sunnis returning to power... ‘We (the U.S.) threw them (the Sunni tribes) under a bus. We didn’t deliver them any kind of protection or political autonomy or self-determination in any way. We gave them back to the tender mercies of Maliki, and we know how that ended up. And they have all rushed back to the skirts of ISI(S) in a sense...’” (Pentagon 2015)

Islamic radicalization in the name of an alleged ancient “purity” thus was not the origin. Instead it was a consequence, not least to create a platform for unifying the different Sunni tribes on a common ground, mindful of their strongly differing personal relationships with the leaders of IS who are believed in the majority to be representatives of the old Sunni-dominated regime of Saddam Hussein (Sly 2015). Their ability on the battlefield has been demonstrated in the strategic counter-offensives on Ramadi and the conquest of the al-Thirtar dam in April, in the midst of the offensive of the Iraqi army.

The participation of Shiite militias in the recapture of Sunni core areas including Tikrit in March 2015—equipped with Iranian weapons and with the massive participation of Iranian “counselors” alongside the regular Iraqi army—further contributed to give the conflict elements of an ethnic and religious confrontation between Shiites and Sunnis. Moreover, the withdrawal of some Shiite militia from the front of Tikrit in protest against Western airstrike support underscored that the conflict keeps a (probably unintended, but in any case counter-productive) flavor of potentially not being about the Iraqi nation in the first place, but about predominance of ethnic and religious groups over each other.

Consequently, the Iran-supported Iraqi army offensive since 2015 was read by many as being about Shiite dominance over Sunnis, not about reconquering and unifying a functional state against fanatics. Some of the fiercest supporters of ISIS are believed to be Sunni ethnic tribes of anti-governmental inclination partly even in conflict with each other, while others oppose ISIS not only out of ideological, but also because of tribal reasons, and are systematically massacred for their opposition. This was the case with the Sunni Albu Nimr tribe in November 2014 (Stout 2014) or the 127 members of Sunni tribes murdered in April 2015 (Alalam 2015) in Al-Quaim in Al-Anbar province at the border to Syria during the Iraqi offensive.

The importance of ethnicity is further underscored by the fact that of the 31 groups that are allegedly supporting ISIS according to the Intel Centre Report of March 31, 2015, at least half have their origins in ethnic group and independence issues (Intel Centre Report 2015). According to Stanford University’s “Mapping Militant Organizations” Group, of the roughly 25,000-30,000 ISIS fighters believed to be battling in Syria and Iraq, around a third allegedly came to join the group because of previous or ongoing fights related to ethnic nationalisms (Stanford University Mapping Militant Organizations Group 2015), most of them associated in one way or another with Muslim issues. The report of the Chinese government of March 10, 2015, that extremist members of the Xinjiang province Uighur Muslim minority are allegedly fight in Iraq and Syria with ISIS (Jiang 2015) is just one hint to the fact that ISIS success has its roots not merely in the radicalization of religion. Rather—and more realistically—it is at the increasingly important interface between ethnic nationalism and a strategic relationship it cultivates with religion, within what has in the meantime become a broad but still loosely connected international movement, that ISIS was able to access and to a certain extent to win over potential members.

Whether China’s statement was propaganda or not, what has contributed to ISIS’s rise is not “religion”, with its (in principle) universal implications, but “religion combined with ethnicity”, that is, with group relations in concrete contexts and in a specific political and

socio-historic situation on the ground. It is exactly the intersection, where ethnic nationalism meets with religious fundamentalism, that both elements are pushed by each other to the point where they become radicalized, sometimes to the extent of being nearly indistinguishable from each other.

Summing up these factors, most observers agree with the analysis of the BBC's Middle East expert Fawaz A. Gerges that

“the key to weakening IS lies in working closely with local Sunni communities that it has co-opted.” (Gerges 2015)

The question though is, what “working closely” concretely means: Diplomacy, “soft power” and “sympathy” politics like in Afghanistan? Importing access to and patterns of Western economy in order to develop individualism? Most aspects of such strategies widely failed in non-urban Iraq, and they are likely to fail again.

*A first lesson?*

If it is plausible that

“we need to understand the intangible things that make ISIS so dangerous... understanding the contextual background that lies behind the actions taking place can help to provide a more holistic view on the current situation”. (Pentagon 2015)

But this will not be possible without addressing the interrelation between ethnicity and religion under the concrete contextual conditions of the areas where they meet, and where they produce radicalism of a new, until recently still unthinkable brutality. Without addressing the interface between ethnicity and religion more closely and concretely, and building practical solutions to mitigate its conflict potential, a lasting and sustainable pacification will not be possible in Iraq and Syria—not even after the probable military and political victory over the ISIS extremist's army.

### 3. The Challenge: Institutional Arrangements That Accompany Political Participation

ISIS is just the tip of the iceberg when it comes to the rise of the political intersection between ethnic and religious factors. Ethnicity and ethnic nationalism continue to be decisive factors in global conflicts. As was presented at the 20<sup>th</sup> Association for the Study of Nationalities (ASN) World Convention at Columbia University's Harriman Institute on April 23-25, 2015, ethnic nationalisms will continue to be major shaping forces of conflicts and the respective processes around the world seeking political solutions, including the fight against ISIS and the subsequent and crucially necessary reconciliation process between Sunnis and Shiites (ASN 2015).

However, the ethnic problem in Iraq is not limited to the Sunni-Shia divide, but more multifaceted and complex. Iraq features not just two ethnic and religious groups, but around twenty, as well as hundreds of tribes partly related and partly opposed to each other, with some groups living close together and sometimes even into each other as is the case in the greater Mosul area. This close proximity challenges conflict solution and policy approaches to become even more multidimensional and inclusive. If, as Singapore National University's Walker Connor has pointed out following Max Weber, a community is not merely an economic or political construct, but rather a matter of group psychology,

“a vivid sense of sameness or oneness of kind, which, from the perspective of the group, sets it off from all other groups in a most vital way, (and) this sense or consciousness of kind is derived from a *myth* of common descent (where) members of a nation *feel* or intuitively sense that they are related to one another,” (Connor 1984)

then most of the more than a dozen ethnic minorities living on Iraqi soil will have difficulties to ‘feel’ to be full part of an Iraqi nation dominated by centralistic mechanisms and the Shia majority who – in accordance with democratic rules - controls them. Huang Wei has pointed out that there is an intricate relationship between state-building and the rise of separatist ethno-nationalism:

“(There are) dynamics between state-building and ethno-nationalism... State-building, which intends to assure and expand its power, provides opportunity for ethno-nationalism to grow, and even more, for ethnic political movements to occur. The shift in the state policy affects the cognitive framework of the minority people, provides sustainable resource to the movement, and offers space for social movement organizations to surface. (In this sense), state-building produces some unintended results.” (Huang Wei 2005)



This is exactly one aspect of what happened after the ousting of Saddam Hussein, the attempt of the West, other democracies and international bodies like the UN to build a “new Iraq” by betting on individualistic democracy, and the unintended result of a rather unilateral seizure of power by the Shiite majority under the al-Maliki government who didn’t take sufficiently into account the rights and needs of other ethnic groups, in particular the Sunnis. The failure of the al-Maliki government to integrate other ethnic groups and to reconcile tribes and central government in the framework of state-building has in the meantime been generally recognized by the majority of international analyses as one key factor in the rise of ISIS.

In response, there have been varying approaches of the West to address the ethnicity issue—with rather poor results so far. The West historically mainly attempted to stress the ideas of individualism, citizenship and equal personal rights of all citizens under the rule of law guaranteed by the state, independent of ethnic affiliation, for pacifying tribal and group conflicts—thus consciously and unconsciously transferring its own model of individualistic democracy to a widely different context like Iraq. Such an approach might be successful in urban areas to some extent. But it is too weak to overcome century-old tribal, ethnic and religious animosities in the areas outside the big centers. Here, the *institutionalization of group rights* in addition to individual rights has to be taken into consideration. This is something that has not been considered sufficiently, let alone practically implemented, in the past. Why?

One problem in the failure of ethnic reconciliation in Iraq was and remains to the present day that the democratic powers of the West have one of their blind spots exactly in how to implement, institutionalize, and legally protect group rights, i.e. ethnicity. This is because modern Western democracy—on its own soil, in the foundations of its culture, and in the heart of its civil religion—is all about overcoming group logics and interests, as well as group histories and affiliations, for the sake of forward-oriented individuality, equality and freedom. As Patrick J. Buchanan rightly already commented years ago,

“The larger issue here is the enduring power of ethno-nationalism—the drive of ethnic minorities—to break free and create their own (structures and spaces), where their faith, culture and language are predominant.... (But) (the Western) elite regard(s) (ethnic nationalism) an irrelevancy, an obsession only of the politically retarded.” (Buchanan 2009)



While the whole story is much more complex and multifaceted than this, the “natural” aspiration of the modern Western democracies to overcome group rights in favor of individual rights is without doubt one of the greatest assets achieved in the history of mankind. But in Iraq, it is paradoxically also a part of the problem, because modern democracy has an almost instinctive – and perfectly understandable - reluctance to institutionalize ethnic rights as basic parts of the constitution and as pillars of the functioning of the state.

Without doubt, overall claims that the West treats group rights as irrelevancy would be too strong. Among many examples, the Western peacebuilding project in Kosovo proves the opposite, but also the emerging calls in the West for specific group rights for migrant and refugee minorities at least as transitory elements of integration. Nevertheless, the direction of the overall development of key Western areas continues towards an always stronger role of individual rights, for example in the perspective of the Continental European Union’s (without the UK) goal of an „ever closer union“ (Steinberg 1993) between both its member states and citizens (European University Institute s.a.) as programmatically envisaged in the „Solemn declaration on European Union“ of 1983 (European Council 1983; cf. Dinan 2010). Such a transnational unification is, by its very nature, flexible and feasible in sustainable ways only if individual rights are strengthened, aligned and extended throughout the member states, while in turn group rights – be them national, area-specific or ethnic – are necessarily to be reduced when greater union beyond borders, languages, habits and cultures shall be achieved. In the U.S., individual rights must play a much more explicit role than group rights for the simple fact that otherwise an in essence immigrant society composed by groups stemming from cultures and ethnicities all over the world would not be able to be kept together peacefully.

The conviction of the West that ethnic nationalism is essentially a thing of the past that has to be overcome by modern free nations towards individualism is therefore understandable and part of its inbuilt modernization project. But while in principle right and progressive, it *also* has its shortcomings under certain settings and viewpoints. The respective problems are not only, but also not least due to the (again, perfectly understandable and in principle positive) removal of ethnic issues from the Western social and (as far as possible) political agenda in favor of individual rights. The large territories for which thousands of soldiers have bled and died in Iraq, the longest war in U.S. history after Afghanistan, have been lost within just a few months to open democracies worst enemy *also* because of the notorious incapacity of modern individual-centered democracies to deal with ancient tribal logics (and thus ethnicity issues) in more effective ways.

Indeed, it may be a side note of history, but ethno-nationalism has been without doubt one of the few blind spots of the more recent democratic international policy. And it remains an under-developed field of expertise among its elites. The reason is that the whole modern democratic mindset, as well as its founding mythology, is about overcoming ethnic provenance and affiliation in order to build nations made of basically all the ethnic groups that exist in the world, and thus necessarily individuality-centered. Modern democracy is an experiment, a first in history, in overcoming ethnic and cultural heritage, an experiment of a society that conceives itself as a “united humanity.” This has made - with good reasons - Western leadership somewhat hesitant to help ethnic groups develop autonomies within existing nation states, and in post-dictatorial Iraq it has contributed, together with the remembrance of Saddam Hussein’s Sunni-centered regime and the trend to avoid its return, to the negligence of Sunni interests by Western leaders.

One example of Western problems when dealing with ethno-nationalism was the emblematic essay by Catholic University Washington’s Jerry Z. Muller, “Us and Them” of 2008 (Muller 2008) hailed by some Western critics and experts as the “new article x” for the multipolar global era ridden by transnational ethno-cultural and ethno-religious conflicts. According to Muller the best solution for ethnic conflicts, particularly in areas where different ethnic groups live mixed in a confined space, is to make a clean cut in order to divide the groups. The goal, according to Muller—to some extent still echoing Woodrow Wilson’s idea of “self-determination” from the era following World War I—should be to create an as much as possible ethnically “clean” nation state for each and every group for itself by moving numbers of population, if necessary, thus splitting existing ethnic “aggregates” in the hope of ending conflict once and for all. Muller clearly prefers an end in terror to a terror without end. Ethnic partition, in his view, may prove to be the smaller evil in the end than ethnic groups mixed into each other and thus in permanent micro- and meso-conflict with each other. Or in his own words:

“Partition may thus be the most humane lasting solution to such intense communal conflicts. It inevitably creates new flows of refugees, but at least it deals with the problem at issue. The challenge for the international community in such cases is to separate communities in the most humane manner possible: by aiding in transport, assuring citizenship rights in the new homeland, and providing financial aid for resettlement and economic absorption. The bill for all of this will be huge, but it will rarely be greater than the material costs of interjecting and maintaining a foreign military presence large enough to pacify the rival ethnic combatants or the moral cost of doing nothing.” (Muller 2008)

That does not mean that Muller's to some extent highly problematic approach is officially sustained by the U.S., Western or democratic governments in any way. The contrary – explicitly and actively – is the case, and has in most cases programmatically been. It means though that there has been a trend in Western theory that reflects the limits of Western policy with regard to the outstanding complexities of ethnic nationalisms on the ground.

The truth is that, while of good intentions, Muller's is an approach that is contra-productive and has produced no good in history. Most important, such an approach wouldn't solve the problems of ethnicity in Iraq. Actually, it would just transfer the existing problem to a smaller level, splitting the nation into pieces of which each and every one would then have its own new minorities. Partition of ethnicities has led to the multiplication of states during the past century without necessarily improving the overall conflict situation. And while, when it comes to ethno-nationalism, every single case is different and lessons from one case can't simply be transferred to another, it is hardly imaginable that the ideas of "partition" could lead to any progress in today's Iraq, let alone help to defeat ISIS. Since Muller's solution is certainly not applicable on the ground, the only alternative such a theoretic approach would suggest in practice would be to leave everything as it is, since a "once and for all" policy rarely foresees intermediate perspectives. Yet the motto: A "clean home" for everybody is not appropriate to ethnically mixed and conflicting areas, and to think only within the parameters of ethnically unified spaces, be they large (Iraq) or small (the Sunni areas around Tikrit), is not helpful to find more complex differentiation and integration mechanisms.

Not few in the West in the past years seemed to share this in reality simplistic and reductionistic approach to ethno-nationalism. It manifested in poor information collection and occasionally in disinterest for the seemingly over-complicated details of ethnic conflict areas on the ground. It is not surprising, then, that many "gurus" of political anticipation broadly overlooked the ethno-nationalism issue not only with regard to Iraq, but in their overall analyses; in any case underestimated its practical importance for the future of the fight against extremism.

To find more appropriate approaches, what is needed to pacify former ISIS areas, to keep them peaceful after the victory, and to develop them towards greater participation in national issues is to emancipate, protect and status-upgrade the over twenty ethnicities in Iraq (and potentially Syria) not only diplomatically, but also institutionally. This means to do exactly what the above mentioned Pentagon Report on ISIS of January 2015 (Pentagon 2015) suggested: to give them local and regional self-administration and territorial—not

purely ethnic!—autonomies of varying degree, extent and quality according to the different concrete individual contexts on the ground. Local and regional cultures as a mix of habits and beliefs have eventually to be taken seriously by institutionalizing aspects of them in a reformed Iraqi constitution more inclined to integrate those who are not part of the majority, and to respect tribal and group logics alongside individual rights.

This could occur according to what internationally is probably best proven model of ethnic pacification through local and regional autonomization: the model of the autonomous province of South Tyrol in Northern Italy on the border of Austria. The model was officially presented by Italy's minister of Foreign Affairs Paolo Gentiloni (TASS 2015) on February 11, 2015 as an universal model for ethnic conflict resolution and by Italian prime minister Matteo Renzi (Armellini 2015) on March 5, 2015 as the best model for ethnic conflict areas in 'Europe's neighborhoods', including the Middle East. The South Tyrol model of ethnic pacification is currently also under discussion to be adapted for areas as different as East Ukraine, Chechnya, the West Sahara in Morocco, and Tibet. This broad discussion on the other hand suggests that the South Tyrol model cannot be simply taken as it is and transferred to other realities, but that it should be studied carefully in terms of its strengths and weaknesses and then customized in a process involving those directly affected by it, in order to fit specific local context.

#### **4. A Viable Model for Practical Solutions: The South Tyrol Autonomy, Part I**

In order to defeat ISIS, ethnic differences in Iraq (and beyond) must be mirrored by concrete, practical and legally binding institutional arrangements able to integrate minorities and majorities into a sound overall framework structured and guaranteed by law. That will be the best way to keep the remnants of ISIS—including their ideological traces—at bay after a probable victory over the extremists' army. The best practical solution to implementing such an arrangement is the South Tyrol model of local and regional autonomy. It consists in a complexity adequate to, and a non-discriminatory territorial autonomization of, ethnically problematic areas and it is dedicated to the protection and recognition of ethnic minorities and ethnic and religious particularities through legal guarantees. As far as can be seen now, this may be the only institutional model that will work in the long-term because it is based on legal and institutional regulations, not only on political diplomacy or treaties about national representation of minorities in the parliament or government alone. So what is the South Tyrol model about in detail? And how, concretely, can it help to defeat ISIS in a sustainable way?

First of all, some prerequisites need to be considered. Any win-win arrangement would have to balance political, cultural and ethnic dimensions while taking into account the

extraordinary power of contextual political factors in multiethnic and minority areas; these factors include traditions, customs, worldviews, religion, historic identity, mythology and social psychology. This means that it must consider factors outside institutional and party politics, while at the same time respecting both the (sometimes very specific) interests of tribal politics and of an Iraqi nation in need of unity and stability. This in turn implies the need to reconcile “classical” party and institutional politics with the emerging field of contextual politics (Goodin and Tilly 2008)– which describes one of the potentially most important challenges of contemporary politics on a global scale.

Perhaps the most viable interdisciplinary model of pacification and justice for all sides involved, at least as a transitional solution, could be one that strictly adheres to *realpolitik*: a non-ideological, practical, and problem-oriented policy applied to concrete circumstances on the ground. This solution might follow the example of northern Italy’s trilingual Autonomous Province of Bolzano-South Tyrol, a region where three different ethnic groups coexist in harmony and that is overseen and protected by the European (South Tyrol Provincial Administration 2016a). A similar solution, inspired by the South Tyrol example (South Tyrol Provincial Administration 2016b) could be implemented immediately after the military victory over ISIS in certain Sunni areas, as well as in ethnically mixed areas like Mosul or Kirkuk. It would establish regional autonomy for selected tribal and ethnic areas within the national borders of Iraq – self-administration (with elements of self-determination) without separation.

The regional autonomy model of South Tyrol, established in the framework of a “second autonomy statute” in 1972 and in the meantime proven successful for more than 40 years, is a model of “inter-ethnic tolerance established by law” (Pföstl s.a.; cf. Woelk et al 2008). To many, it is the so far best example for the handling of ethnic divisions found in Europe, and in the world (Salat et al 2014).

South Tyrol is a small area approximately half the size of the Kirkuk area along the mountainous alpine border between Italy, Austria and Switzerland. With a total population of 505,000, it has a high degree of political and cultural autonomy and its model presents a working and practical solution to multi-ethnic co-existence. Here, the German speakers are the majority (67%) and have the majority in the provincial parliament, which disposes of an autonomous legislative and executive power. Italian state population in the province amounts to 26%, and a third ethnic group, the Rhaeto-Romanic Ladins, represent 4%.

Before World War I the region of South Tyrol was part of Austria. A majority (95%) of the area's inhabitants were culturally Austrian, and thus German native speakers. Ceded to Italy by the Treaty of St. Germain in 1919 against the will of the population, South Tyrol experienced a troubled and difficult transition to its current status of a wide-ranging linguistic and cultural autonomy. Not until June 1992 did the foreign ministers of Austria and Italy sign what was to be a satisfying agreement safeguarding South Tyrol's full autonomous status within the Republic of Italy.

Three years following the annexation in 1919, Mussolini's Fascist government began the forced Italianization of the region by attracting large numbers of Italians, mainly from the South, to settle in the area – not dissimilar to the policy adopted by the Chinese in today's Tibet (South Tyrol Provincial administration 2016a). This practice was interrupted only by World War II. After the end of the Second World War South Tyrolean representatives and the provisional government of Austria began working to see that South Tyrol would be returned to Austria. The Great Powers of the victorious Allies had, however, already rejected such claims in the autumn of 1945 and, despite further massive attempts by the South Tyrolean and Austria (in South Tyrol more than 80% of the native population signed the call for a plebiscite, and in the capital of the Austrian federal state of Tyrol, Innsbruck, a huge demonstration was held on 5 May 1946), a final negative decision was taken at the end of April 1946. The only way left open now for Austria and Italy was to negotiate directly so that South Tyrol would obtain an "intermediate" status through some form of self-government. Special provisions and legislation needed to grant German-speaking citizens equalization of the German and Italian languages in public offices and official documents, as well as before the courts. A basic agreement was reached within the framework of the peace negotiations in Paris. On September 5, 1946 the "Paris Agreement" was signed by the foreign ministers of Italy and Austria, Alcide De Gasperi and Karl Gruber, and annexed to the peace treaty with Italy, thus giving the South Tyrol question official international standing.

In the years that followed, Italy did not fulfill its obligations as stipulated at the Paris Agreement and therefore, in September 1959, the South Tyrol question was raised at the United Nations by the then Austrian Foreign Minister Bruno Kreisky. Further efforts by the SVP (the South Tyrolean Peoples Party, an ethnic unification party representing the Austrian and Ladin population) and Austria were not successful: in 1961 bombing attacks were carried out by members of the growing independence movement with 37 separate incidents in the night of June 11 alone. They were followed by new negotiations with Rome, which reached a successful conclusion. Little by little a whole package of measures to put the self-government of the South Tyrol area into effect was agreed upon. It was approved by a narrow majority of the SVP at its congress on 23 November, 1969 against its independentist wing, and thereafter by the Italian and Austrian governments. Only after



the coming into effect of the new Autonomy Statute in 1972 was the equalization of the minorities energetically pursued with special executive measures and decrees by the Italian state.

As noted above, three ethnic groups currently live in South Tyrol: the German and Ladin speaking minorities and the Italian state population. According to the census carried out on October 9, 2011, (ISTAT, ASTAT 2013), the German-speaking ethnic group with 314,604 people represent 67.15 per cent of the population; the Italians with 118,120 represent 26.06 per cent and the Ladins with 20,548 4.53 per cent. The Ladins are the oldest and at the same time the smallest language group in the province. They had already been resident in the country at the time of the Roman conquest from the South, but were then increasingly pushed back by the German tribes invading from the North. The Italians in South Tyrol mainly live in the cities of Bolzano/Bozen/Bulzan (carrying three names according to the three ethnicities) and Merano/Meran/Maran and in the bigger centers. At the time of the 1910 census, the last to be held before World War I and therefore before South Tyrol's annexation by Italy, there were only 17,339 Italian-speaking inhabitants in South Tyrol (2.9 per cent of the population). The considerable increase of the Italian population of South Tyrol occurred in the 1930s as a consequence of the violent Fascist Italianization of the province, but it continued in the years after 1945, reaching its peak (34.3 per cent), at the 1961 census. Since then, the Italian percentage of the population has been in decline (1971: 33.3 per cent; 1981: 28.7 per cent, 1991: 27.65 per cent, 2001: 26.47 per cent).

#### *What are the pillars of South Tyrolean autonomy today?*

Until today, the statute of 1972 represents a solid guarantee that the German and Ladin linguistic minorities (at the national level) can survive as ethnic groups with their own linguistic and cultural identities, so that the implementation and observation of the measures of protection form the basis for a peaceful co-existence of the three ethnic and linguistic groups in the province. Currently, the pillars of the South Tyrolean autonomy are:

- 90% of the taxes collected in the province by the Italian national authorities—South Tyrol has no independent tax authority—are automatically restituted to the local autonomous government. They are then distributed proportionally to the three ethnic groups, thus in theory benefitting every citizen of South Tyrol equally, without favoring either the Italian state population nor the minorities. That's why the South Tyrolean autonomy is explicitly considered a *territorial* autonomy, not an *ethnic* autonomy, which would disadvantage the Italian state population living on the territory.



- The so-called *Ethnic Proportions Decree* demands the declaration of ethnic affiliation by every citizen on the soil of South Tyrol in the framework of every census, as well as the proof of an acceptable knowledge of the major provincial languages in South Tyrol, German and Italian, as obligatory for people employed in the public sector. The “acceptable knowledge of the German and Italian languages” is usually ascertained through a bilingualism examination, which can also be extended to trilingualism. This exam is a hurdle for all candidates of the Italian national state who have no knowledge of German and therefore it prevents uncontrolled immigration and is implicitly an advantage for the local population in search of labor. In the competition for employment in the public sector, the vast majority of the candidates from other Italian provinces would be excluded—to the advantage and benefit of South Tyrolean residents. This can be seen as one major reason for high employment in the province (currently 4,5% unemployment rate), which is another main precondition for the success of the autonomy model and for the peaceful co-existence between the ethnic groups. Most probably, the autonomy regulation would not be accepted so well by all three ethnic groups without the apparent economic success and the practical benefits for all local citizens.
- The proportion of percentages between the ethnic groups also regulates the distribution of public money to the respective groups, as well as the composition of public bodies and the distribution of administrative and bureaucratic posts in the public administration. In theory, every group has the right to a ratio of posts in public administration matching its percentage in the census; at present, this means that 67% of the posts are announced for declared members of the ethnic German (Austrian) speaking group, 26% for the Italians, and 4% for the Ladins. Nevertheless, the measure is handled flexibly, i.e. when for example no appropriate candidate can be found for a job reserved for the German speaking group, it is opened up to all groups.
- The regulations on bi- and trilingualism contained in the above-mentioned Ethnic Proportions Decree have been extended to the recruitment of personnel in firms, societies and bodies which carry out public services or services of use to the public in the Autonomous Province of Bozen (Bolzano).
- In order to ensure the independent cultural development of each linguistic group, each has its own administrative and organizational domain in form of an independent local ministry for culture and schooling. The Italian

ethnic group culturally cooperates closely with other Italian provinces and regions, while the German and Ladin ethnic groups maintain active contacts with the extra-territorial German and Ladin (Raeto-Romance) cultural worlds. According to the autonomy statute, the province of South Tyrol has primary legislative powers in terms of culture.

- Legal proceedings and trials must be conducted in the declared mother tongue of the accused.

In such an overall arrangement, the measures to protect the minorities are of particular relevance. The autonomy statute of 1972, the so-called “Autonomy Package,” consisted of 137 measures. The measures should have been issued within four years of signature by the Italian national government. But in the end more than 20 years were required for the constantly changing Italian governments to finally implement it. On the basis of the Paris Agreement, the South Tyrol autonomy statute should ensure the maintenance and linguistic and cultural development of the German and Ladin linguistic groups within the framework of the Italian national state. But at the same time the benefits of the enlarged powers of self-government apply to members of all three linguistic groups in South Tyrol.

- The most important *primary powers* of the Autonomous Province of South Tyrol are: place naming, protection of objects of artistic and ethnic value, the regulation of small holdings, arts and crafts, local customs and traditions, planning and building, public housing, public construction, common rights (for pasturage and timber), mining, hunting and fishing, agriculture and forestry, the protection of fauna and flora, fairs and markets, prevention of disasters, transport, tourism, expropriation, public welfare, nursery schools, school welfare, and vocational training.
- *Restricted powers* apply to teaching in primary and secondary schools, trade and commerce, apprenticeships, promotion of industrial production, hygiene and health, sport and leisure.

In addition, census and linguistic proportions play a crucial role in making to model work. This is because an important prerequisite for the protection of an ethnic minority is to know its exact numerical size. In the 1920s and 1930s the Italian Fascists succeeded almost completely in forcing the South Tyroleans (“those of foreign origin,”

as Mussolini described them in his speech to the Parliament in Rome in 1928) out of public employment and regional administration.

Furthermore, during the Fascist dictatorship, public housing in South Tyrol was almost exclusively allotted to Italian-speaking tenants. This kind of policy continued even after the 1946 “Paris Agreement” which provided for “equality of rights as regards the entering upon public offices with a view to reaching a more appropriate proportion of employment between the two ethnical groups.” From 1935 to 1943 3,100 units of public housing were built in South Tyrol (of which 2,800 were in the capital Bolzano/Bozen/Bulzan), which were entirely allotted to immigrating Italian families (not unlike today’s practice with regard to Chinese immigrants in Tibet). From 1950 to 1959 the national government built a further 5,500 units, of which 3,500 were in Bolzano/Bozen/Bulzan with only 5 per cent given to local German-speaking tenants.

The introduction of a fair distribution of administrative posts and housing according to the numerical strength of the three ethnic groups was therefore perceived as reparation of Fascist injustice by the minorities. Since 1972, the key to that distribution has been the above-mentioned principle of ethnic proportions which is based on the numerical strength of the three linguistic groups living in the province according to the latest census. Public housing built since 1972 was distributed according to ethnic proportions; but since 1988 it has been distributed according to a so-called “combined proportion” which takes into account not only the numerical strength of the three linguistic groups but also the needs of each group based on the requests for housing submitted.

Concerning the local bodies in the province (personnel of the public sector, the municipalities, the health services, etc.), the equality of rights which regulates the entering upon public offices provided for in the Paris Agreement was gradually implemented. By the year 2002, employment in Italian national and semi-autonomous bodies in South Tyrol (railways, postal service, roads administration, customs service, court administration) also occurred proportionally according to the strength of the three ethnic groups. However, certain state bodies such as, for example, the military, the police, and the security service are not subject to the principle of ethnic proportions.

## 5. The South Tyrol Autonomy, Part II

Summing up, the basic idea of the South Tyrol model of regional territorial autonomy is to solve ethnic conflict through self-government. It is based on primary legislative competences of the autonomous provincial government which that in the case of South Tyrol include: the organization of provincial authorities and their staff, the obligation of bilingualism (German and Italian, with Rhaeto-Romance a third language) for all public employees, the protection and care for historical, artistic and ethnic values, provincial planning and building directives, conservation of the landscape, community easements, roads and public works, communication and transport, tourism and catering industry, agriculture and forestry, public care and welfare. There are special measures to protect and preserve the various languages (German, Italian and the ancient Rhaeto-Romanic Ladin), such as the distribution of public money for cultural and education affairs according to the proportional system to the three mutually independent ministries of culture and education.

One of the most important measures is that the province of South Tyrol has three separate school systems for the three language groups, where every system works mono-lingually in the native language of one group (with the second language thought as first foreign language), but where all citizens, independent of their ethnic affiliation, can freely choose which system they want to send their children to. The province furthermore spends a substantial amount of money on German, Italian and Ladin cultural activities. In order to ensure the independent cultural development of each linguistic group, each has its own administrative and organizational domain: that means that the three parallel culture ministries, one for each group, are completely independent from each other and receive their part of the tax revenues according to the proportion of population they represent.

Nevertheless there are a number of areas, for example in music and art, where close cooperation between all three linguistic groups results in mutual enrichment.

“Three things are important to us: the parity of the German and Italian languages before the courts, the ethnic representation system in the public sector and the provision of mother tongue media programs”,

says Bruno Hosp, former Provincial Minister for Culture, Schools and Science of the German and Ladin ethnic groups, and his Italian colleague, Luigi Cigolla, former Minister of the Italian group, agrees. The spending of the 90% of the tax revenue generated in the Province that is returned by the Italian government to the Province is controlled by the

locally elected parliament. South Tyroleans receive different color identity cards from those of other Italians and the street signs and other public communications are bilingual, in the Ladin areas trilingual.

In addition, the United Nations plays an important role in South Tyrol autonomy. It made available to the South Tyrolese legal mechanisms to ensure Italy complies with international treaties affecting the region, and requires that Italy consult formally or informally with other members of the UN and the European Union before taking any action that may affect provincial autonomy. The result is that the Italians cannot forbid the use of German (as they did under Fascism in the 1920s) and cannot create economic projects to persuade Italian citizens from other provinces to immigrate, thereby possibly weakening the minorities (like the Chinese continue to do in Tibet). Moreover, Italy must consult with other states and abide by treaties signed with the minority groups or risk alienation by the European Union which is something that the country can afford neither for political nor for economic reasons.

The former Chancellor of Germany, Helmut Kohl, and the former leading member of the European Parliament, Ria Oomen-Ruijten from the Netherlands, represent the opinion of many international politicians and experts—including Italian statesmen Azeglio Ciampi and Lamberto Dini—when they contend that South Tyrol, after a violent past of ethnic division, is today the best example for the peaceful co-existence of different ethnic groups in Europe. (Eurac) Comparative autonomy researcher Thomas Benedikter calls it “one of the great modern autonomy systems of the world” (Benedikter 2011), able “to solve ethnic conflict through self-government”.

The overall arrangement is based on the assumption that in order to guarantee stable and sustainable peace in ethnic conflict areas, autonomy, equality and parity have to be balanced and integrated by concrete legal guarantees (South Tyrol Provincial Administration 2016c). To conclude this section, it can be stated that the proportional and bi- and trilingual regulations represent, on the one hand, reparation of Fascism's acts of injustice against the regional minorities. On the other hand, they are a safeguard—not uncontroversial but nevertheless useful for an agreed distribution of welfare amongst members of all three language groups. In contrast to the devastation that has accompanied other ethnic conflicts, the success of the South Tyrol model reveals that it could provide a good example of autonomous integrated regional organization between different cultural and ethnic groups. Can these arrangements be imitated and succeed in the ISIS-controlled areas as well, or at least help as an orientation for the co-existence of the major ethnic groups there and in greater Iraq?

## 6. Ethnic Pacification and Its Applications: Experiences, Problems and Options

In judging the origin and effectiveness of the South Tyrol autonomy system as well as its potential usefulness for contemporary Iraq's ethnic problems, it is important first of all to differentiate between the three concepts of *autonomy*, *equality*, and *parity*. They are not the same, but must all be integrated if a viable solution for notoriously complex multi-ethnic conflict areas is to be implemented. As the South Tyrol model teaches, ethnic conflicts are not necessarily about equality, but are in the first place about the self-determination of certain sub-groups within a more complex societal body. Such groups, like the Sunnis and other smaller groups in today's Iraq, feel disadvantaged and demand a counter-offer for leaving ISIS. This implies at least temporary special treatment, which is usually perceived as "justice" by the ethnic minority groups and as "unjustified privilege" by the others, in particular by the majority (in our case the Shiites of Iraq) which has to concede special rights to the minorities in certain areas.

On the other hand, ethnic conflicts, even if provisioned with the most efficient solution mechanisms, will never reach full "justice" and can never be based on equality alone, but are about inducing and including parity in an encompassing consideration. Parity in such settings can mean many things: from "positive discrimination" in order to further "equal" chances (a contradiction in itself, although productive and potentially progressive), to territorial implementation rather than an ethnic solution in the strict sense, thus giving every citizen living in a special area the same rights of a privileged group, not only to the members of the minority group that is the majority in that given area. This is the case in South Tyrol, where the privileges of autonomy and self-government are beneficial to all citizens living on the territory, be they German, Italian, or Raetoroman native speakers, without distinction. Such an arrangement would mean that the Sunni "special areas" conceded to the Sunni tribes in certain areas of Iraq are not exclusively applied to the Sunnis living there, but to all Iraqi citizens in the area, including Shiites, Kurds and the many other ethnicities.

That in turn may lead to new conflict, as in the case of Italy where "normal" Italian citizens at times denounce the special rights of self-government of German native speakers living in South Tyrol as an unjustified discrimination that allegedly hurts the principle of equality of all Italians in a national perspective, as well as certain fundamentals of the rule of law with regard to equal individual rights anchored in the Italian national constitution. Others fear that regional autonomies may become one additional factor among many that are tending to "break Iraq apart" (BBC News 2014) – with or without ISIS, as a result of ethnic fractions that undermine the unity of the nation (Prusher 2014). These issues are also

three main reasons why the Western democracies—centered on the constitutional rights of the individual—hesitate to deal with special group rights.

What could be the potential effects of such or similar autonomy regulations on the Sunni tribes, on other minorities, and on Iraq as a nation?

According to the South Tyrol experience, the best solution both in the Sunni areas and in other regions with strong numbers of minorities (and with a mix of minorities including a minority of the national Shia majority), as far as can be seen today, could be local federalization between the major ethnic groups within a regional autonomy paradigm following the South Tyrol model—but only if such a model is implemented through a sober, non-idealistic approach that doesn't ignore the differences and complexities between autonomy, equality, justice, and parity.

In particular, some basic components of the South Tyrol model could be transferred to ethnic conflict areas in post-ISIS Iraq, such as: ethnically differentiated regional tax autonomy, regional distribution of money according to percentages of ethnic population, guarantees for ethnic representation in the autonomous regional government and parliament, and systematic cultural (including educational) multipolarity and independence—all of these as an alternative to ethnic separatism. Particularly in areas with a high amount of “mixed” coexistence between different ethnic groups, it might be wise to install parallel cultural and school administrations, and to give national and international guarantees for language and heritage autonomy. Concerning all of these proposals, the South Tyrol autonomy should not be merely seen as a model to copy, but as an example of concrete success that can help to identify appropriate, original, local solutions according to the practical needs of discrete situations, and after carefully listening to the requests of the people directly living in the affected places.

In short, following the South Tyrol model the Sunni, Kurd and other (on average, smaller) minority areas would become autonomous zones within the national border of Iraq, administered by a regional or local government elected by the local or regional residents and equipped with primary and secondary legislative powers. The autonomous areas would be entitled to establish independent bilingual schooling systems where the national minorities would have their own self-administered schools.



All Sunni, Shia and other ethnicities would by law be represented in the regional government and parliament according to their percentages in the overall numbers of the population, and if that percentage is too small, then, if appropriate, through “positive discrimination.” Money for cultural and educational issues, including heritage protection, would be distributed among the ethnicities according to census percentages. The national government of Iraq would keep overall sovereignty, while taxes collected within the autonomous zones would belong exclusively to the autonomous region and be distributed among the ethnic groups, again according to population.

While the Iraqi national state would continue to control the military in order to secure borders, the autonomous zones would have their own police forces responsible for domestic security. They would have primary legislative powers in the fields of agricultural development, environment, fishing and hunting, housing (both public and private), industry, transport, demographic development and tourism, among others. Last but not least, the autonomous governments would be entitled to contain further immigration from other areas, following the outcome of negotiations between its resident ethnic groups. The respective agreements could be supervised by “neutral” neighbors such as the European Union, following the practice of supervision and guarantee of the South Tyrol model in Italy (South Tyrol Provincial Administration 2016b). Such a “greater” arrangement could in turn help to decisively improve Iraqi relations with Saudi Arabia and its other neighboring Sunni nations, and thus serve as trust-building measure with positive long-term effects on the geopolitics of the region. It could also help to bolster the international role of the EU and to stimulate it to become step by step a more concretely helpful player in problems areas.

## **7. Conclusion and Outlook: Addressing Ethnicity as a Key Factor in Long-Term Conflict Management**

Without doubt, there are many problems and difficulties built into any such attempt to install working minority protection in post-ISIS Iraq, particularly given its current state of transition which is not comparable to that of South Tyrol in the 1970s. In particular, we have to discern at least *three* problem clusters with which every attempt to use the South Tyrol model or similar approaches in post-ISIS Iraq will have to deal, and for which it would need to find specific, original solutions.

*First*, no neighboring “protecting power” should be involved in the autonomization process of certain Sunni (and other) areas in Iraq, comparable to the role of Austria in the case of the South Tyroleans. Although Iran’s weight is considerable at the moment and will probably remain so in the near future, neither Iran nor any of Iraq’s Sunni neighbors should seek to exert influence on the domestic differentiation process, with the exception of

potential financial help under certain conditions. If autonomization is the goal, the will of Iraq's government will be decisive. The only positive intervention from the outside—besides maybe a potential advisory role from the Autonomous government of South Tyrol (South Tyrol Provincial Administration 2016d) and its former Governor (*Landeshauptmann*) Luis Durnwalder who has repeatedly stated his availability to share experience from 25 years (1989-2014) of leadership (Benedikter 2015), as well as political scientists interested in the case—should come not from nation states but from international and global bodies like the United Nations, the Assembly of European Regions (AER), the Federal Union of European Nationalities (FUEN), or the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD).

*Second*, Iraq has a different culture of thinking about concepts like the nation, the individual, sub-groups of society, ethnicity, and authority as compared with the democracies of the West. This is due among other factors to the lack of an integrated Islamic democracy, which doesn't yet exist anywhere in the world. In contrast, one of the crucial prerequisites for the solution of the South Tyrol dispute was that all powers that participated in the negotiations, including in particular Italy and Austria, were working democracies. In principle subgroups in democracies do not fight each other, they negotiate. Iraq is formally a democracy, but still a rather authoritarian one in the view of its minorities. The long and difficult construction of a different democratic culture is needed, and this is probably the main challenge for the government after the victory over ISIS; it is certainly the strongest felt problem among Iraq's minorities, more important than most practical procedural and institutional issues.

*Third* and last, there is today without doubt a global trend away from group rights towards individual rights triggered by modernization, globalization and the respective growing transnational and transcultural interdependency. This trend goes against the efforts towards formalization of ethnically justified autonomies and makes the establishment of international agreements on the issue not exactly easier.

These differences in context, settings and prerequisites constitute without doubt considerable obstacles against applying the South Tyrol model to today's Iraqi realities. In addition, any such agreement will only work if all ethnic groups show understanding and a real commitment to reconciliation. Otherwise the Shiites will continue to dominate the Sunni population on the sheer basis of numbers, and that could lead to a situation where Sunnis may see democracy to be at their disadvantage, because "individualized" democracy is about the power of numbers—thus threatening to turn the Sunnis (and other minorities) against democracy once again.

*What is the outlook?*

First of all, it is one of the most urgent necessities of the present to navigate towards a new pragmatism in fighting and sustainably defeating extremism. Unfortunately, the new Iraqi government has not yet openly manifested the will to compromise for a solution of the ethnic issue. Yet without a constructive approach there will be no solution for the period “after-ISIS,” regardless of any “best practice” example like the South Tyrol model. What is needed now is first of all—and most importantly—a new pragmatism from all sides involved. The responsibility of the Iraqi government after the probable victory over ISIS will be to pacify its minority regions in order to change things for the better. The Iraqi government under Haider al-Abadi should not waste this chance and prepare for it in advance, because it will not be there forever, but will most probably be limited to a certain window of time. To give certain minority-populated areas of Iraq autonomy that deserve the name under federal law would liberate Iraq from a permanent spine in its flank, and prove to the many domestic and foreign critics that the new government has started a new phase of reconciliation and development. It thus would be in Iraq’s best interest.

Second, while such a “grand solution” will not be fully satisfactory for either party involved, because it necessarily relies on compromise from all negotiating partners, it could provide a rational model of renewal and progress in order to become an at least temporary win-win arrangement for all sides. The South Tyrol autonomy model may provide proven steps to move the situation forward in the Sunni and other ethnic areas of post-ISIS Iraq. The new heads of the Iraqi government are, we may assume, not dreamers but inclined toward realistic models of pacification and joint development. While the Shia, Sunni, Kurd, and other representatives of ethnic groups continue to be under strong pressure not to compromise from their respective constituencies, progress will be made only by negotiating arrangements more likely to foster peace than the existing ones. As the reality on the ground teaches, the old model of “pacification through force” is inadequate for dealing with the deep and complex ethnic divisions we find in contemporary Iraq. Given that the South Tyrol model allows cautious progress based on compromise, “tolerance by law” and justice based on realism, the new Iraqi government should study it, and consider it as a viable path to a better future for post-ISIS Iraq.

*What is the (intermediate) conclusion? It is threefold.*

*First*, the dimensions where extremist connections must be cut off must include ethnicity in the first place. Terrorist groups rely on networks. In the case of ISIS, besides economic, financial and political ones, they are ethnic. Cutting these networks off is crucial. It requires in-depth knowledge of the ethnic situation on the ground, and strategies to undermine the

respective relationships. To effectively counter the bases of ISIS, a strategy to address the ethnic problem is needed that will require years to be effective. This strategy should include the implementation of ethnic and cultural autonomies in Iraq and potentially also Syria, where ISIS dominance remain almost unaltered (BBC News 2015) despite the loss of 25% of its territories in Iraq between the end of 2014 and April 2015, for example according to the proven model of South Tyrol territorial autonomy. To integrate ethnicities in Iraq and Syria, i.e. in core areas of the Muslim world, is crucial not only for the region, but increasingly also for world politics as Islam will continue to be the fastest growing religion; according to a Pew Research Center Study of April 2015, it will

“leap from 1.6 billion (in 2010) to 2.76 billion by 2050 worldwide... At that time, Muslims will make up nearly one-third of the world’s total projected population of about 9 billion people.” (Burke 2015)

*Second*, it was an error of the West not to push toward institutionalized autonomies for Iraq’s ethnic minorities right from the start and instead trust a weak arrangement based on the alleged good will of the “political process” which has proven to be unreliable in the Iraqi situation. Participation in the political process as envisaged by many Western strategists will not suffice without constitutional laws that fix rights and duties of ethnic minorities within and beyond federalization.

*Third*, fighting extremism will require new task forces on ethnicity in the Western (and global democratic) command centers—not only for Iraq and Syria, but in a worldwide perspective. It will require a new inter- and transnational framework of military, political and economic experts to differentiate between nation and ethnicity, which in many cases don’t overlap, and to study the new amalgamation between ethnicity and religion which is becoming a driving force of anti-globalization in order to avoid new failures in nation-building. As of today, working groups on ethnicity are still tightly confined and have restricted influence. They have to be upgraded and interdisciplinarily enlarged, and they have to be situated in a more international and policy-oriented perspective, including best practice examples from Europe which remains the continent with the most concretely working examples in the field.

Modern democracies and international bodies such as the UN are well advised to work more intensively on the topic, which may contradict to some extent the basic democratic mindset and (political) culture. But it is imperative in developing areas like Iraq in order to avoid the return of ISIS or anti-democratic movements like it. To restrict the growing

influence of Iran in the country (already manifest in the recapture campaign of Tikrit which has strengthened the “Iran faction” and threatens to further shift balances in the region), the ethnic mosaic in Iraq has to be reordered and plurality has to be better institutionalized including tribal and ethnic groups. Legal and institutional measures aligned to local and regional contexts are required. They must be able to regulate the ethnic differences in the region, as related to some extent to religion, if the foreseeable victory over ISIS shall not become the source of new conflicts between the country’s ethnic groups.

## **8. Appendix: The need for further in-depth examination and detailed comparative research**

Considering the potential use of the South Tyrol model for the pacification of parts of the areas embattled between Iraq, Syria, international coalitions and IS/ISIS, it can be regarded as a historic irony that exactly the Autonomous Province of South Tyrol experienced a particular focus of IS/ISIS activities in 2015 and 2016 – and was even chosen, by some of its European activist groups with apparent seat in the German capital Berlin specializing in the “conquest of Rome“ and the “abolishment of the state of the Vatican“, as strategic refuge at the interface between the European North and South (Stol.it 2016 and ORF 2015).

Not only was a letter offensive from Berlin to South Tyrol trying to enrol active members in the area at the start of 2016 an alarm signal for the local authorities, but also an existing terror cell in the city of Meran-Merano and the provincial capital Bozen-Bolzano debunked at the end of 2015 (Südtirol News 2015a). They coincided with the uncoordinated influx of refugees and migrants from the Middle East and Northern Africa into the area, and triggered both upheaval about unregulated immigration and „Europe’s broken borders“ (Kaelin 2015) as well as multi-level scandals such as the revelation that the apartments of the terror cell were apparently financed by South Tyrol public social funds (Südtirol News 2015b).

According to local observers, the case manifested a typical weakness of smaller areas that successfully solve specific problems but in turn neglect others. While South Tyrol is widely considered an outstandingly successful example of ethnic pacification, cohabitation and reconciliation through the institutionalization of group rights, it has in itself long functioned as a political and administrative island within the nations involved (Italy and Austria), and thus has still an underdeveloped awareness of international interdependency and the need of regulating them in the age of global migration. To some extent South Tyrol exactly because its success both as a reality and as a model seems to have missed to prepare for new international and global challenges such as “asymmetric“ terror, extremism and the

regulation and integration of non-European cultures on its soil. Admittedly, this shortfall is not only manifest in South Tyrol, but also in other areas with regional or local autonomies (such as for example the Val d'Aosta in Northern Italy at the border to France) as well as in most European nation states.

Given the exemplarity of the case illustrated here to elucidate the interface between extremism and ethnicity, as well as the exemplary nature of the topic itself for the general framework of strategy building under the conditions of political, social and military asymmetry, it could not be in the intention of this paper, nor was there sufficient space for it, to engage in a specific and satisfying critical engagement with the conflict resolution literature and the literature on ethnic politics in Iraq and Syria, and the Middle East in a more encompassing view – a literature which is vast and multi-faceted and has substantially grown in recent years like few others. Nevertheless, to add such an inquiry and to further investigate the interrelation between the model of ethnic autonomization presented here and the attempts of peace-building through other approaches would certainly be much needed in the greater perspective. We recommend several areas of potential further development to be studied to lend greater analytical and theoretical depth to what could be sketched here only in the most basic pillars:

- A critical engagement with the debate about power-sharing and integrative approaches. Lijphart, Horowitz, Rothchild and Roeder have done exemplary work here that could – and should – be put into relation with what has been analyzed in this paper, in particular if the development of concrete policy-relevant programs is considered.
- Consideration should also be given to literature on ethnic politics in Iraq, for example to the work of Gareth Stansfield, Robert Smith and Stefan Wolff, among others. It would also be useful if one looked at the attempts to institutionalize ethnicity in Iraq in a historical perspective, in order to systematize experience in comparative and diachronic ways. The case of minority relevant legislation in Iraq and especially Iraqi Kurdistan would be a natural one to look at. Iraqi Kurdistan is in the process of passing its own constitution and aims to secede from Iraq. Although the outcome of the secession debate is open, although it will depend on the outcome of the war against IS, and although the perspectives of such potential secession once enacted are mixed, since Turkey may react as it could see its interest threatened, the question is: could secession trends swap over to other regions if territorial autonomy is granted to minorities?



In December 2015, Turkey's president Erdogan asserted explicitly that any request for regional autonomy by the Kurdish party in Turkey, similar to that proposed in this paper for certain regions and areas in Iraq, would be considered as "treachery" (Die Welt 2015). How then should be dealt with the resistance of powerful new religio-nationalist and authoritarian forces who continue to see autonomization of minorities as a threat for national unity?

- The further evolution of the issue debated here without doubt also needs a more expansive discussion of group rights versus individual rights under traditionally non-democratic cultural conditions in general. The institutionalization of group rights in the areas mentioned as examples in this paper can build on a rich theoretical and empirical literature on group rights and multiculturalism.
- If in this paper we suggest that peacebuilding in Iraq should be imposed and monitored by international actors, we intend to set a starting point for debate that is far from being satisfyingly clarified yet. Liberal peacebuilding has been widely criticized by critical peace-building literature. It would thus be useful - and necessary - to engage with these critiques in as much as possible applied ways.
- Last but not least, any deeper investigation about the concrete applicability of the South Tyrol model with regard to the areas mentioned has to further clarify the more detailed question that can only be answered within a concrete time- and space-frame and under specific situational conditions that may change relatively fast: How comparable is South Tyrol to Iraq? Why is the South Tyrol model more applicable to certain Iraqi areas than other cases of ethnic autonomy? That means that to reach the next level, the practical application debate must be taken directly to the ground which is meant to be touched by its effects and outcomes. In essence, it has to be continued from there as far as possible.

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