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SOCIAL HARMONY AN IRAQI PERSPECTIVE

LUKMAN FAILY

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Social Harmony: An Iraqi Perspective

Lukman Faily

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Abstract

This paper examines the three foundational pillars of Iraqi society, culture, state and religion, exploring who has power and who has authority within this framework. It then focuses in detail on each of the requirements for social harmony within Iraq and questions whether nation-building can be done prior to or in parallel with state-building. The paper ends by highlighting solutions for the way forward.

Introduction

The ethno-sectarian conflict between competing factions in Iraq has its origins in the lack of cohesion within the basic pillars that support the Iraqi nation state's relations with its own society. These pillars represent the distribution of influence between the state, religion and culture of Iraq, which was formally established in the early 1920s. The more aligned these pillars are, the more peaceful the social and political environments can be. In order to address the increase in tensions between Iraq's majority and minorities, we must begin by redistributing power between these three pillars. After decades of dictatorship, the Iraqi state must regain its influence in a positive way that is beneficial to its citizens.

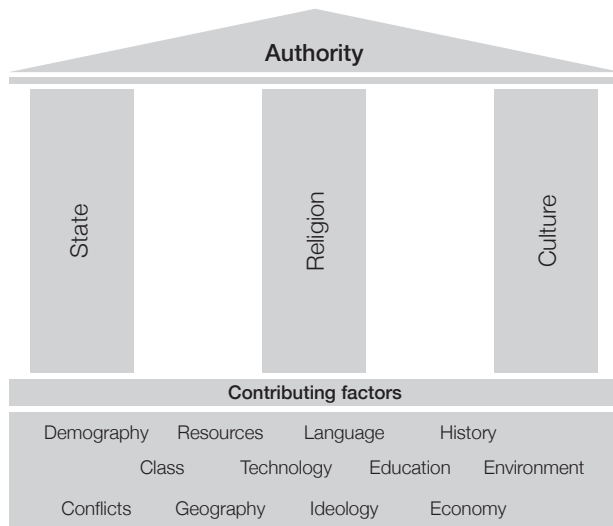
This paper argues that the lack of social harmony between the foundational pillars of society in Iraq represents a key factor of instability. To address this problem, it is necessary to identify and mediate the issues through increased cooperation between citizens in social and religious national programmes supported by the state. Ultimately, these national programmes will lead to more integration within the three pillars, and to a positive relationship based on respect, cultural, religious and political pluralism and tolerance.

In Iraq, tolerance within and between groups and subgroups is weak and hence the pace of group development within society is slow. Since 2003, the Iraqi state has not been able to answer many of its citizens' needs. This has led to an already fragile national identity increasing in fragility, and the emergence of other identities at the cost of national development, cohesion and stability. The development of the state has not been easy and is still not on the right trajectory, since its core political authority and legitimacy is based on an ethno-sectarian foundation – known in Iraq as *mohasasa* or quota – rather than a cross-national one. The state is the weakest institutional component within Iraqi society, suffering in comparison with religious and cultural institutions. It is therefore paramount that Iraqi stakeholders try to bring religious and cultural institutions in line with the state in order to cement the strength of the state's apparatus.

The State as a Pillar

In order for nation states to function effectively and efficiently, the roles and responsibilities of citizens and the three institutional pillars must be defined. The state must also take into account sources of influence within the country. While in many Western countries citizens expect the state to provide for them, in other countries the pillars of religion and culture overshadow the state's authority, where religious law is often instated as national or local law. It is important to identify which stakeholder holds authority and/or power within society, since without substantive power, certain pillars may have the authority but not the ability to enforce their policies.

This paper represents the author's interest in anthropology and his independent study of different Western, Middle Eastern and East Asian cultures and societies.

Figure 1. Sources of Power and Authority

Due to the evolutionary and reflective nature of humanity, and the ongoing global changes in the geo-political and geo-social arenas, new ideas can lead to new languages, sects, governments, states, subcultures and schools of thoughts. In some cases, the conception, and thereafter growth, of a new entity (e.g. religion or global movement) within one of the foundational pillars can lead to its transformation across other pillars and to its integration into the fabric of society.

If it is clear that, within a particular society, religion or culture is the

primary driving force of behaviour, it would be inefficient and ineffective to try to implement and enforce change through new state laws and regulations, especially if these are not aligned with existing cultural or religious values. The state benefits more by focusing its attention on influencing religious or cultural institutions to implement and embrace change, rather than attempting to be the sole institution within society advocating that change.

The state provides the most fundamental basis for the internal functioning of a society. It sets the guidelines for its citizens and organisations, and draws a roadmap for articulating acceptable and legal behaviour. State laws are the mechanisms used to determine a state's policies and the means by which these policies are then enforced. A state's legitimacy depends on whether authority in the state is rooted in a formal legal system or in pre-modern, traditional systems that rely on personal ties and the established belief in tradition (such as in tribal systems).

It is imperative for the state to reflect the ideals and beliefs of its citizens, and must tend to their well-being. The importance of the state in fostering social harmony cannot be understated. Harmony will only be achieved if legislations and policies relate to the fulfillment of the citizens' needs and aspirations. Otherwise, people will feel alienated and will be less likely to adhere to the laws. For example, during Saddam Hussein's rule of Iraq, the majority of laws and regulations related to his control and the norms of a police state; hence, citizens did not see these rules as relating to their daily needs and aspirations, and were less likely to participate in the development of Iraqi society.

A History of the Modern Iraqi State System

Prior to the formation on the new state of Iraq in 1920, the country was part of the Ottoman Empire under the three governorates of Baghdad, Mosul and Basra. After the

invasion and occupation of Iraq by the British Empire during the First World War, a British mandate was imposed between 1920 and 1932. From 1921 to 1958, Iraq was ruled by a Hashemite monarchy, not originally from Iraq, but introduced as rulers by the British occupiers. In 1958, a military coup by army generals led to the formation of the first Republic of Iraq, followed by another military coup by the Ba'ath party in 1963, which only lasted a few months. From late 1963 until 1968, the Arifs, two brothers and military generals, consecutively governed Iraq.

The Ba'ath party returned to rule Iraq with an iron fist in 1968, with General Ahmed Hassan al-Bakr, followed by Saddam Hussein until 2003. This 35-year rule of the Ba'ath party transformed Iraq into a 'republic of fear'. Iraq went through a series of conflicts with the Kurds in the north of the country, and a war with Iran in 1980–1988, followed by the invasion of Kuwait in 1990, and the imposition of severe United Nations Security Council (UNSC) resolutions as well as an economic embargo and trade sanctions against the state and people of Iraq. During these ninety plus years of the new Iraq, many different political systems governed the country, most of them by force. Iraqis also endured many social engineering campaigns that reflected the increasingly authoritarian desires of the various rulers. These campaigns had a major effect on the social classes and their associated political influence.

Since regime change in 2003, Iraq has faced daily terrorist incidents, which culminated in June 2014 in the occupation of Mosul by Da'esh – or Islamic State (IS). The current post-2003 political system in Iraq is republican, representative, federal, multiparty parliamentary and democratic. Executive powers are now exercised by the Prime Minister as Chair of the Council of Ministers, with the formal head of state being the President, and legislative power vested in the Council of Representatives.

After decades of dictatorship, the Iraqis have successfully held, since 2003, four general elections, one referendum and three cross-country governorate elections. However, the present state is characterised by incoherence and slow decision-making. In spite of this, the majority of political groups adhere to constitutional procedures, helping defuse political tensions and reaching, although after long delays, constructive decisions on vital issues. Political wrangling is a manifestation of the country's new-found democracy. Some describe the current regime in Iraq as a hybrid, between a flawed democracy and a transition from authoritarianism.

Religion and Iraqi Diversity

Religion manifests itself in narratives, lifestyles, sects, cults, symbols, rituals and traditions, with the intent of giving meaning to life or explaining its origin and purpose. Religion can also be viewed as an orientation system that helps interpret reality and define human beings. The practices of the followers of a religion can vary in depth and adherence to its rules.

Regardless of whether or not a society considers itself religious, the role and impact of its religious/ethical institutions are still important. The importance of a society or its individual members adhering to a certain religious or ethical school of thought should not be underestimated, as these perceptions become articles of faith and are central to defining national or regional identity.

Although religion, as a core component and an integral pillar in all societies, can play a central role in promoting social harmony, it can only be achieved if religious institutions, edicts and policies relate to the fulfillment of its followers' individual and collective needs and aspirations.

The major religion in Iraq is Islam, which is followed by 95–97 percent of the 35 million or so population. The remainder of the population are Christian, Mandaean, Yazidi and of other minorities. Within Islam, the majority are Shi'a (Arabs, Faily Kurds and Turkmen) and Sunni (Arab, Kurds and Turkmen). Iraq is home to many important religious sites for Shi'as and Sunnis alike, such as Najaf, Karbala, Baghdad and Samarra, and many other central sites for the minorities in the north, mainly in the governorate of Mosul. Sunnis are a majority in Islam but a minority in Iraq, while Shi'as are a majority in Iraq but a minority within Islam. The Kurds are mainly Sunnis from the Shafi'i school of Islamic law. Other small sects of Islam also exist in Iraq, such as the Shi'a Shaykhist communities in Basra and Karbala. The majority of the Shi'a community follows the various Grand Ayatollahs who are based in Najaf, Baghdad, Karbala, Samara or Iran's Qom and Mashhad. This diversity of sources of religion, within Iraq, Islam and Shi'ism, enriches discussions. It also makes consensus politics an important attribute for social cohesion.

Christianity was brought to Iraq in the first century Common Era (CE). Christians are mainly concentrated in the north of the country in the Dohuk and Ninewa governorates. Over the last 50 years, there has been a significant reduction in the size of the religious minorities through migration. Christians of Iraq are divided mainly across three churches, Chaldeans (Chaldean Catholic Church), Assyrians (Assyrian Church of the East) and West Syriac (Syriac Orthodox Church).

Until the mid-20th century, Iraq had a sizeable Jewish community as well, mainly in Baghdad. This is now virtually non-existent. Yazidis live in the Mosul governorate in the north, and their religion dates back to pre-Islamic times. The Mandeans have been present in Iraq for nearly two millennia and their highest concentration is in the southern Maysan governorate, with a significant presence in Basra. It is worth noting that other religious minorities exist in Iraq, such as Buddhism, Baha'ism, Shabakism, Yarsanism and Zoroastrianism.

Culture as the Third Pillar

Cultural behaviour is the third foundational pillar of social harmony. Those who share a culture do so because it has been acquired from their immediate network of influence – family, friends and society at large.

A tolerant society allows its members' cultural beliefs to influence their actions in a positive way and hence be enriched by diversity. Culture can be the glue that binds the behaviours, beliefs, ways of life and core assumptions of a society's members together. It also provides a reference point for bringing together the core and soft elements of a society's attributes, such as customs, ideas and social behaviour. People within a society take pride in belonging to a certain culture or subculture.

Background of Iraqi Cultural Diversity

Almost 75 percent of the Iraqi population lives in the flat alluvial plain stretching south-east from Tikrit to the Persian Gulf, while the north is mountainous with harsh winter conditions. The country is dominated by two large rivers, the Tigris and the Euphrates, which allowed for early agriculture to sustain a stable population as far back as the 7th millennium Before Common Era (BCE). Arabic and Kurdish are the two official languages of Iraq. The majority of Iraq's population are very young, with 37 percent under 14, 60 percent aged 15–64, and only 3 percent over 65. Iraq has a very high population growth rate at just under 3 percent and a median age of 20.

Iraq has one of the world's oldest cultural histories with a rich heritage in art, science, poetry and ancient civilizations. What is now Iraq was once the cradle of civilization in ancient Mesopotamia. Key human developments, such as writing, mathematics and science, had origins in Iraq. Iraq's economy was based on agriculture, which meant a large rural population, however, due to oil production, an economic boom in the 1970s resulted in large migration towards the urban centres. This rapid urbanisation had a major effect on social class development. What also complicates the social map of the country is that large kin groups tend to form the most fundamental social units, with higher importance than ethnic and sectarian identities. Family and tribal loyalty is considered an essential part of social belonging.

Today, Iraqi cuisine reflects the richness of its inheritance as well as the influence of its Persian, Turkish and Syrian neighbours. It is clear that contemporary Iraq reflects the same natural divisions as ancient Mesopotamia.

Aligning Harmony and Leadership

Within any nation state, the three foundational pillars can only be aligned when the values and practices of each individual pillar complement, rather than contradict, the other pillars. When a society's leadership within the three pillars is aligned, meaning that the leaders and those they lead share the same discourse, social harmony should improve. Harmony will be additionally be enhanced when leaders of a society occupy the leadership of more than one pillar, or when people view the leadership of a person for more than one pillar as legitimate. The ultimate leadership harmony will occur when a society has the same leadership for all three pillars. The opposite can be seen when, for example,

a military dictatorship is introduced via control of the state, producing a conflict of interests between the state's policies and the religious and cultural laws and customs uniting its citizens.

Dictatorial Consequences for Iraqi Democracy

Within the current nation state system, democracy is a very important factor in the drive towards social harmony. Democratic systems allow for the acceptance of the 'other', whether the 'other' is an ethnic or religious minority, or simply those who hold a unique view at odds with that of wider society. Here, the 'other' refers to those who do not hold the beliefs (political, cultural, ideological or ethical) of the majority of society. Tolerance, promoted by democracy, leads to the creation of a positive environment and greater social harmony.

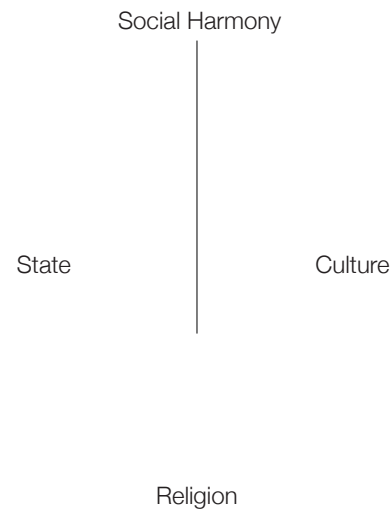
It is through this 'tolerance' that certain segments of society can come to feel less isolated and more integrated into state and society as a whole. Tolerance is particularly important for a state like Iraq that is very diverse. Diversity supplies a unique set of human resources which could, under the right institutional and cultural conditions, dramatically contribute towards the improvement of the state's economic, social and political development. While diverse groups have not always lived in harmony, this is where democracy should assist in easing tensions. However, democracy alone cannot promote harmony and it must be supported by other factors, including the rule of law and an institutional structure that promotes dialogue between the three foundational pillars and their associated institutions.

It is destructive to social harmony when dictatorship becomes the normal system of rule and democracy is regarded as a threat. In Iraq, the dictatorship's draconian methods led to the detachment of citizens from the state, such that they disregarded the welfare of the state and their fellow citizens. Under authoritarian rule, the state's institutions, which would otherwise benefit citizens as an important societal pillar of harmony, are considered the sole domain of the dictator. Hence people fear state institutions as a key tool for repression and disharmony.

When a dictator's repressive tools are removed, reprisals against those who controlled the state apparatus occur. On the other hand, while the dictator is in power, utilising the state for narrow personal objectives, cultural and religious institutions will weaken, at the cost of social harmony. People regain power and influence once the state's control has been weakened, and they will seek support through increased reliance on religious and/or cultural institutions. Continuous repression by a dictator, who governs by fear and is obsessed with control, will lead to the demoralisation of society. It will also create and promote a culture of mistrust among citizens – trust being a very important factor for social cohesiveness. In time, citizens will emotionally distance themselves from the state's institutions and will look inwards for personal survival. Hence, self-centrism or egocentrism is enhanced within that society. This self-centrism creates a momentum for zero-sum – rather than win-win – practices to prevail within society.

Thirteen years on from 2003, it is now time to evaluate this new democratic project for Iraq and reflect on its foundation and key challenges. From the point of view of the US, with its role in the development of a democratic system for Iraq, it is fair to ask whether a generic democracy model can be imposed on Iraqi society. Democracy cannot be customised and Iraq has a very weak democratic experience. It is also not in a democratic region, and so has been trying to plant new democratic seeds in a hostile environment. Is the nation ready for democratic institutions, or is this a luxury only available to developed nations? These questions are being raised because people expect a positive outcome from democracy – better services, governance and security. Iraqis have become used to dictatorships in which decision-making is straightforward and in the hands of a few, and security is not usually challenged owing to the threat of severe punishment. In this, people wrongly associate security with social stability.

Figure 2. Social Harmony via the Alignment of all Three Pillars



Social Harmony within Iraq

In Iraq, harmony can only prevail if a number of key factors are promoted and embraced by a significant portion of society across its three foundational pillars. Here again, the rule of law is paramount. In Iraq there are three competing legal systems or rules of law: the traditional state secular law, the religious law (*shari'a*) and the tribal law (*fasl*). The latter two religious and cultural systems were developed due to the weak implementation of state laws over 35 years of Ba'ath rule and the increasing precedence of traditional approaches. This exemplifies the disharmony that exists between the three main foundational pillars of society. In theory, at the highest level, there are laws set out by the judicial system; however, not every Iraqi trusts or follows this system, as they have limited faith in institutions that enforce the laws. Instead, citizens who do not trust the state fall back on their traditional sources of law: tribal and/or religious laws. This situation explains how Iraqi society has splintered into various social and political factions, rather than remaining united around the central state's national legal system. Likewise, due to the adverse impact of Saddam Hussein's dictatorship on Iraqi society, people no longer regarded the

state as belonging to the people, but rather to the ruler and his immediate associates. This meant that when the system of the state collapsed after the 2003 US invasion, the legitimacy of the state and state institutions declined as well. Regaining legitimacy and power for the state in Iraq has not been easy, nor has it been helped by the serious lack of security or service provision by the various post-2003 governments.

In addition to the three competing legal systems, there are three competing concepts of citizenship and hence three competing social contracts between citizens and state. Usually, social contracts stipulate roles and responsibilities for both state and society: what the state provides and expects from its citizens and vice versa. For the religious social contract dimension between a state and its citizens, the view is different; it looks at citizenship from a religious perspective, as one of obligation, expecting citizens to be selfless towards the state. As for the third cultural dimension, the social contract needs to take into account the view of society towards that person and their status, the view of a person (with his social status) toward his society, the view of his group toward society and finally the view of a person toward others within his society. In the cultural sphere, the social contract needs to take into account a number of elements such as region, class, status, kinship, tribe, financial status and finally that specific citizen's status within society, so a cultural social contract is more of a class contract rather than all citizens being equal.

Another factor promoting disharmony in Iraq has been various attempts by the state at ambitious social engineering. Examples of this would be the mass migration of farmers to cities and rapid urbanisation that began after 1945; the mass deportation of communities like Iraqi Jews during the late 1940s and early 1950s, the ethnic cleansing of the Faily and the Kurds in the 1970s and 1980s, and the disappearance of Iraq's Christian and other minority communities. Perhaps one of the most destructive factors for disharmony in Iraq has been the diminishment of the middle class due to wars and international economic sanctions and the mass emigration of the Iraqi middle class starting from the 1980s.

Iraq: Nation vs. State

Due to the various political, social and economical transformations which Iraqis have endured since the formation of the new state in 1920, the social contract between the state and its citizens has become fractured and fragile. Each of the Iraqi communities' viewpoints of the contract might be different, which has led to a rupture in the inter and intra-community relationships, making them more transactional than harmonious. While these intra-community relationships are not stable, the notion of having one, nation-wide, Iraqi identity is constantly challenged. One might even suggest that each separate community views this notion in a different manner. Democracy has been introduced to Iraq but it is still not on firm ground since society's democratic institutions are not strong enough.

During the post-2003 US project in Iraq, the concept of nation-building took centre stage. However, state-building should have been given more attention. Iraqis who lived through regime change developed very high expectations of nation-building, hoping

the outcome would be comparable to the rebuilding of Germany and Japan after the Second World War. But this could not be repeated in Iraq. The US occupiers were not clear about the requirements and resources needed for Iraqi nation-building. Nation-building can have a major adverse impact on society if not managed adequately. Hence, the rebuilding of nations should be a long-term project, with coherent efforts from all internal and external stakeholders. International parties, including the United Nations and United States, had very ambitious goals for Iraq. It was clear that US post-war planning was not complete and that short-term solutions were put ahead of the long-term vision. The root causes of inter- and intra-community conflicts were not properly understood. This was coupled with operational naivety by stakeholders on the implementation of key state redevelopment projects.

Remedies for Iraq

For Iraq to be rebuilt, the country's leadership (state, religious, and cultural) has to appreciate the scale of destruction done to the fabric of society, and to focus on redrawing the social contract between citizens and state. A clear sense of belonging and ownership of the key challenges, away from egocentrism and self-centrism, must be implanted in Iraqi society. New laws and regulations must bear in mind that people need to feel pride, rather than shame, in the adoption and implementation of laws for their welfare and benefit. With the destruction of people's pride in the state under Saddam's dictatorship, the cultural and religious leadership's cooperation with the state to restore self-pride and ownership in the nascent democratic state becomes even more essential for social harmony to be enhanced.

Iraq must strengthen the rule of law within the country by working with the religious and cultural (e.g. tribal or civil society) institutions. People must be shown that democracy, and the institutions associated with the state, do not threaten religious and cultural aspects of society, but that these factors all work together, supporting and complementing one another. The leadership of the three foundational pillars has to show the people of Iraq that democracy – and the tolerance it promotes – needs to be embraced in order to achieve people's needs and aspirations. Religious leadership is influential in all of Iraq's sects, and so cooperation between religious and state leaders should lead to the institutionalisation of democracy. The same is true with cultural leadership. While one or two religious and cultural groups may be approaching democracy in this manner, all religious and cultural groups need to simultaneously act in a similar way. This task should not be underestimated, as Iraqi society has diverse and complicated religious and cultural elements woven into its fabric.

The prime drivers for change differ from society to society. In some societies, religion is the primary driver (e.g. the Islamic Republic of Iran and the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia); while in others, it may be culture (e.g. in tribal Libya) or the state (e.g. the US, Japan or the UK). It depends on which pillar people regard as the leading force and the main lens through which they view their lives. Here, the state of Iraq is like an old protected historical

building, a heritage site that must be preserved and restored from within. Iraq cannot be demolished and rebuilt from the ground-up. The renovation of this listed heritage building is much more difficult and timely (and sometime more expensive). Regime change may have happened overnight in 2003, however, the raw foundations planted by Ba'athists are still being rooted out and replaced with democratic values and practices 13 years on. Without social harmony, this has proven to be a difficult, if not impossible, process.

For harmony to prevail in Iraq, the legal, religious and cultural narratives on a significant number of important issues need to be aligned, such as: the role and responsibilities of the state and its citizens, various types of rights (including human rights), the revision of the educational curriculum and the revision and adoption of the constitution. Without this alignment, Iraqis will always feel that their allegiance to the various centres of power and authority are in conflict, causing further disharmony and inhibiting the development of society. These alignments cannot be completed without the whole nation adopting these projects and utilising resources. There should be a sense of urgency on the part of all stakeholders to identify and adopt resolutions in order for harmony to prevail.

Another key issue is the scale of changes being sought by society as a whole. Corruption is deeply rooted in the state and change needs to take place at all levels. Some argue that change at the top is sufficient, while others question the ability of the political class to deal with this issue. Those who are nostalgic or convinced that democracy is not suitable for the Iraqi nation ask for change of the whole system and call for the return of the executive presidential system with a window dressing parliament. Here, agreeing on a vision regarding the scale of – and the roadmap for – change will be an important prerequisite for political and social development.

Conclusion

In order to enhance social harmony, it is important to look thoroughly at all three foundational pillars of society. Without an understanding of their relative strengths, it is difficult to enact reforms without alienating at least one important part of society. Within the current nation state structure, democracy and the rule of law are key to the enhancement of social harmony. Both create a state that is representative of different societal sectors, and, if carefully constructed, prevent alienation and promote tolerance towards Iraq's minorities.

In the case of Iraq, decades of dictatorship have driven people away from the state, made them distrust it, and forced them to form stronger cultural and religious subgroups that inhibit true social harmony and national identity within the current framework of the nation state. In order for Iraq to achieve social harmony and improve its future outlook, the state must regain its authority as the source of the nation's democratic institutions, in which all religious and cultural institutions can participate and have their voices heard and respected. The urgent focus should be on state-building (as a prerequisite to nation-building) as a core national project. This should help unify all within Iraq's borders under a common set of goals which are focussed on benefiting all Iraqi citizens. Understanding of, and adherence

to, the spirit and letter of the law is paramount to society's development and the achievement of political stability. Nation-building can only be enhanced once social services and security are provided to citizens, and people associate positively with the state.

Time is also an important factor in this process. In order for it to succeed, democracy must be slowly introduced and embraced by the people, and leadership must cooperate between its three foundational pillars. If the process is rushed, it will only drive Iraqis further away from the state and increase disharmony. Since this paper has focused on the diagnosis of rather than prognosis for Iraq's problems, its framework can also be used to describe bigger issues facing the Middle East and North Africa region, explaining some of the dynamics of the post-2011 Arab Spring environment.

Achieving harmony between the three foundational pillars of leadership in Iraq will not only help democracy to mature at a quicker and more stable pace, but will also allow democracy to become a beacon of unity amongst Iraq's diverse citizens. The pace of development and progress towards state stability will depend to a large degree on how quickly the state can rebuild its middle class. In order for the state to regain the trust of its citizens, people need to see that their interests and their well-being are drivers within state apparatus. Otherwise, a lack of basic security and services will lead to further alienation of citizens from state. The nation state system called for the Iraqi state to be the force leading and developing these initiatives. But these objectives are not simple, and support from cultural and religious establishments – and from international partners – is crucial for their success.

Harmony can only be achieved if the state focuses on a few key objectives, and thereby creates breathing space for further development within society. It must drive towards security, stability, economic development and better state services. Only then will it attain a positive social environment, where citizens are not threatened by the forces of power and legitimacy in Iraq, when leadership within the three societal pillars is aligned, and social harmony is enhanced.