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BRIEF

IRAQ'S SECTARIAN CRISIS: A LEGACY OF EXCLUSION

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One decade after the fall of Saddam Hussein's regime, violence and tensions between Sunnis, Shias, and Kurds continue to threaten Iraq's stability and fragile democracy. The political elite have failed to develop an inclusive system of government, and internal divides have been reinforced by the repercussions of the Arab Spring, especially the effects of the largely Sunni uprising against the Syrian regime and the reinforcement of transnational sectarianism. To prevent further fragmentation or the emergence of a new authoritarian regime, Iraq needs a political compact based less on sectarian identities and more on individual citizens.

The Many Identities of Iraq

- The approach to nation building in Iraq has focused more on finding communal representatives than on overcoming communal divides.

- Sectarianism is entrenched in the rules and practices of the political process. The state apparatus is dominated by Shias, and institutions are fiefdoms of conflicting parties competing for power, resources, and status.

- Shia Prime Minister Nouri al-Maliki has consolidated power, which has alarmed his Shia rivals but has not led them to break sectarian ranks.

- Sunnis feel increasingly marginalized and are radicalizing, providing extremist groups with an ideal environment for mobilization and action.

- Tensions are increasing between those who want to consolidate power in a strong executive branch (led by Maliki) and those who want more decentralization (first and foremost the Kurds).

- Both Maliki and Sunni leaders remain focused on mobilizing their constituencies rather than bridging the gap between communities. Identity politics and sectarian differences take center stage, with the Sunni-Shia divide deepening.

Implications for Iraq's Future

Addressing Sunni feelings of alienation is crucial. To build legitimacy and stability, the Shia-dominated state needs to launch a serious reconciliation plan.

The flaws in the political system must be addressed. The current electoral system, which favors competition in large constituencies, could be replaced with one based on small districts. Also needed are significant amendments to the constitution, new laws for political parties and resource management, and decentralization of power based on geography rather than sectarian and ethnic identities.

The political transformation that Iraq needs is unlikely in the near term. Maliki's opponents have not articulated a clear vision for the future, and no powerful international broker is pushing for change. If Maliki stays in power after the April 2014 general election, the transformation will be especially slow, with sectarian divisions bound to deepen and authoritarianism based on rentierism and the politics of exclusion likely to become further entrenched.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Harith Hasan Al-Qarawee is a political scientist whose research focuses on the state, sectarianism, and political transitions in Iraq and the Middle East. He has written extensively for various English and Arabic publications including Al-Monitor *and* Al-Alam*, and is the author of* Imagining the Nation: Nationalism, Sectarianism and Socio-Political Conflict in Iraq*.*

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