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SHIA-CENTRIC STATE-BUILDING AND SUNNI REJECTION IN POST 2003 IRAQ

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About the Author

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Summary

The clash of visions over the Iraqi state's identity, legitimacy, and owner-ship, long predating the U.S.-led invasion of the country in 2003, has been the root cause of political violence in postwar Arab Iraq. Post-2003 politics have been dominated by the competition between sect-centric Shia and Sunni forces as exemplified by the ongoing cycle of Shia-centric state building and Sunni rejection of this state-building project. As long as violence rages, the mistrust characterizing politics and sectarian relations will persist to the benefit of hardline actors on all sides.

The Roots of Iraq's Sect-Centric Politics

- Both Shia-centric state building and Sunni rejection of the post-2003 order are the result of cumulative processes that have unfolded over the course of the twentieth century. These developments ranged from the homogenizing nation building propagated by successive Iraqi regimes to the rise of a sect-centric Shia opposition in exile.

- The sectarianization of Iraq was not inevitable, but regime change in 2003 accelerated the empowerment of new and preexisting sect-centric actors. The necessary will, vision, and political skill to avert the sectarianization of Iraq were absent among Iraqi and U.S. decisionmakers at the time. The failure of the occupation forces and the new political classes to construct a functioning state that could deliver basic services exacerbated the problem.

- Sunni opponents of the post-2003 order became as sect-centric as the system they once derided for its Shia-centricity.

Implications for Iraq's Future

- Sectarianization will continue to define Iraqi politics. The spread of the self-proclaimed Islamic State across much of Iraq in 2014 represents the most extreme form of Sunni rejection. The state-sanctioned Hashd al-Shaabi, the term given to the mass mobilization of volunteers to repel the Islamic State, embodies the most serious defense of Shia-centric state building as of late 2015.

- Shia political ascendency will remain irreversible well into the foreseeable future. For Sunnis and everyone else, the distasteful implication of this is that they must either withdraw from the state by boycotting it or taking up arms, or they must accept a junior role in Iraqi politics.

- Extremist, sect-centric forces must be defeated if Iraq is to succeed. An end to Iraq's sectarian warfare is a prerequisite to shift the political focus away from questions of state legitimacy and toward those of state efficiency, corruption, and service delivery. These are key to the stability and sustainability of the Iraqi state and to the securing of broader buy-in to the post-2003 order.

Introduction

The clash of visions over the Iraqi state's identity, ownership, and legitimacy, long predating the U.S.-led invasion of the country in 2003, has been the root cause of political violence in postwar Iraq. In many ways, the carnage of the past twelve years can be viewed as part of a longer political conflict, one between two sets of ways of imagining Iraq: the more homogenizing and centralizing versions propagated by the former Baathist regime and those permitted within its redlines on the one hand and, on the other, the sect-centric and ethnocentric conceptions of Iraq advocated by the former regime's Shia-centric and Kurdish opponents. The overthrow of Saddam Hussein upset the balance of power between these camps and created the space in which attempts to redefine Iraqi state and society could be made. It also created conditions that incentivized the entrenchment of identity politics and heralded the start of an intensely violent contest over the definition of Iraq and Iraqi nationalism.

Political violence since 2003 and the ongoing instability in Arab Iraq have been chiefly driven by the dynamic between Shia-centric state building and Sunni rejection of this state-building project. These forces were evident soon after the fall of the former regime, quickly developing mutually reinforcing qualities, feeding off of each other, polarizing society, and drawing in external actors in the process. Both are rooted in pre- and post-2003 Iraqi and regional dynamics, and there is no sign of the cyclical and destructive relationship between the two breaking any time soon.

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As with many of the problems bedeviling Iraq in 2015, sectarian polarization and the dynamic between Shia-centric state building and Sunni rejection are cumulative issues with roots that have grown and evolved over the course of the twentieth century and into the twenty-first.[1] They are chiefly the product of a history of authoritarianism, failed nation building, and the mismanagement of communal plurality—a pattern that persists into the present. As such, although pre-2003 sectarian relations were vastly more benign than they have been over the past twelve years, they nevertheless contained the seeds of what was to follow after regime change. This was most evident in the emergence, growth, and ultimately the centrality of sect-centric actors in the pre-2003 Iraqi opposition. By making a link with pre-2003 history, the intention here is not to assign an eternal character or any kind of inevitability to sectarian animosities in Iraq or elsewhere. What has occurred over the past twelve years was neither mandated

by preceding events nor, however, was it completely divorced from them. As such, any attempt to understand a subject as complex and as multilayered as sectarian relations in post-2003 Iraq will yield only partial results as long as the broader sweep of modern Iraqi history is ignored.

The Dynamic Between Shia-Centric State Building and Sunni Rejection[2]

Many terms have been used to describe the toxic salience of sectarian identities in Iraq and elsewhere in the region since 2003. Mention is often made of "sectarianization" or a "sectarian landscape" or that the region has become "sectarian." As with much of the vocabulary associated with "sectarianism," the meaning of these terms is open to vastly differing interpretations in that they could refer to anything from sect-centricity to sectarian violence and anything in between.[3] Perhaps the simplest way to understand a sectarian environment such as post-2003 Iraq is to view it as one that encourages sect-coding. In such an environment, sectarian identity attains an outsized ability to influence people's social and political perceptions. As a result, significant actors and events rarely escape sectarian labeling: a political dispute becomes a sectarian dispute, a policy becomes a sectarian policy, a demonstration is invariably labeled a Sunni or Shia one, and so forth.[4] This is very much the case in Iraq and several other conflict zones in the Middle East in 2015.

While the various causes of the conflicts in Iraq and elsewhere are debatable, what is crucial is that since 2003, there has been a tendency to perceive them as being driven by sectarian identity. This has had a considerable impact on how conflict is perceived by both policymakers and public opinion in the post-2003 Arab world as witnessed by the outsized role of sectarian sentiment in regional mobilization, recruitment, and messaging in Syria, Iraq, and Yemen, and in understandings of regional geopolitical rivalries.[5] As such, it makes little difference where one draws the line between power politics and sectarian identity in, say, Saudi Arabian–Iranian rivalry, so long as their interplay is viewed and portrayed in such intensely sectarian terms by significant bodies of public opinion and by influential figures. Once such a pattern is in place, it develops a momentum of its own, with both elites and masses driving the sect-codification of ever-increasing facets of social and political life. Rather than sectarian entrepreneurs acting as puppeteers above masses devoid of agency, elites and masses mutually reflect and shape each other in a cyclical way: cynical politicians use sectarian identity to their political advantage but only succeed to the extent that such a strategy resonates with enough people for it to be effective. A Shia Iraqi politician scaremongering the public in 2015 is better placed trying to raise fears of a Baathist coup (code for a Sunni overthrow of the post-2003 order) rather than a Communist one: the former appeals to existing fears, existing sectarian entrenchment, and an existing conflict, whereas the latter—given

the demise of Communism as a significant political force in the post–Cold War era—would simply be bizarre.

There is no single factor—least of all the mere fact of sectarian plurality—that could account for the sectarianization of post-2003 Iraq. A cumulative web of perceptual and tangible drivers, spanning the better part of a century, gave birth to and still influence the defining feature of post-2003 Arab Iraq, namely, the tension between Shia-centric state building and Sunni rejection. Firstly, it is important to understand what these terms mean. Rather than fixed, uniformly defined positions, Shia-centric state building and Sunni rejection are two broad spectrums. Sunni rejection refers to the widespread resentment toward the post-2003 order beginning with the U.S.-led invasion and continuing in various forms into the present.[6] The spectrum runs from ambivalence, or even begrudging acceptance, all the way to anti-state violence.

Underlying this spectrum of Sunni rejection is a latent resentment toward the post-2003 order that in turn is founded on a deep sense of Sunni alienation, a sense of loss, and a sense of victimhood beginning with regime change in 2003.[7] This sense of resentment does not predetermine attitudes and positions; rather, and as with similar societal cleavages characterized by asymmetric power relations elsewhere in the world, people's attitudes and positions are constantly shifting. Most people are not ideological hardliners—they react to socioeconomic and political conditions and make their choices accordingly. This can be seen in changing Sunni political behavior and participation in the political process over the years: from the boycott in 2005 to violence to participation in 2009 and 2010 to protest in 2013 and back to violence in 2014–2015.[8] These shifts have reflected how Sunnis have perceived the permanence or transience of the post-2003 order and the prospects for political progress.

Shia-centric state building is likewise a spectrum. At its most basic, it involves ensuring that the central levers of the state are in Shia hands (and more specifically in Shia-centric hands) and that Shia identities are represented and empowered. This could range from allowing, or even encouraging, Shia symbolism in public spaces to incorporating the Shia calendar into the national calendar for events and holidays, all the way to attempting to endow the state with a Shia identity.[9] Whatever position a person adopts along this spectrum, the essence of it is that the Iraqi Shia are the Iraqi *staatsvolk*—Iraq's constitutive people.

Behind Sunni rejection is a deep sense of alienation, a sense of loss, and a sense of victimhood beginning with regime change in 2003.

As such, one way to understand Shia-centric state building is to view it as an effort to ensure that Shias are the big brother or the senior partner in Iraq's multicommunal framework. This mind-set is perfectly encapsulated in one of former Iraqi politician Ali Allawi's recollections in *The Occupation of Iraq*. In 2005, an internal document was circulated in the United Iraqi Alliance (UIA)—the grand Shia political alliance of the time, of which Allawi was a representative—that outlined a proposed vision for Iraq's future. The document's

significance lies in the unabashed framing of Iraqi Shias as the new governing class, asserting that, "Iraq is the Shi'a. . . . And the Shi'a are Iraq." Describing the document, Allawi writes: "It also marked the abandonment of the western ideal of citizenship, in favour of a constellation of lesser sects and ethnicities revolving around a Shi'a sun."[10] This, rather than classical understandings of state building, is the essence of what is being referred to here as Shia-centric state building: instead of building institutions or constructing the mechanisms of a functioning administrative order, Shia-centric state building has been far more concerned with seizing the remnants of the pre-2003 state and altering its identity so as to reify the concept of the Shias as the Iraqi *staatsvolk*.

Both spectrums are fluid and inherently inconsistent in that, beyond their extreme ends, the positions and attitudes they embody are implicit rather than explicit. These spectrums have to accommodate and at times compete with older frames of reference and older social and political values that Arab Iraqis have been thoroughly socialized into accepting, including an inclusive Iraqi citizenship, a rejection of "sectarianism," a commitment to Iraqi unity, and other similar ideals. While these continue to resonate with many ordinary people and while politicians are, at the very least, still obliged to pay lip service to them, the attachment to these ideals has been coming under increasing

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strain over the past twelve years. It is doubtful that a critical mass of Iraqis has stopped believing in these principles—as has been consistently demonstrated in opinion polls;[11] however, despite their continued resonance, these ideals have not been mirrored in Iraqi political and social reality. Consequently, at certain junctures, the perceived interests of the moment render them irrelevant in the face of sect-centric existential fears. Indeed, it is precisely at these junctures—the battles of Fallujah, the spiraling violence of 2006–2007, the Sunni protest movement of 2012–2013, and the fall of Mosul in 2014, to name a few—that, out of conviction or perceived necessity, the mind-sets of Shia-centric state building and Sunni rejection gain broader support at the expense of other conceptions of Iraq.

The dynamic between Shia-centric state building and Sunni rejection was evident almost immediately after regime change. Both spectrums emerged very quickly precisely because they fed on preexisting narratives and preexisting elements of Iraqi society. However, the spectrums being referred to here have not resulted in the coalescence of two monolithic, sect-specific camps; rather, what has emerged is a division between two largely sect-specific constellations of actors each internally competing for a sect-specific audience. This is perhaps most clearly visible in political messaging and electoral politics. By 2010, and more so by the time of the 2013 provincial elections and the 2014 parliamentary elections, an intensely segmented electoral scene had emerged, bearing no resemblance to the grand coalitions of 2005.[12] Nevertheless, a Sunni-Shia duality was clearly visible despite the intensity of intra-Sunni and intra-Shia

competition: to a considerable extent, the 2010 and the 2013–2014 elections primarily involved two sets of political actors competing for two separate, multilayered constituencies. While issues of class, region, political habit, ideology, and patronage animated intrasectarian competition, the division between the two sets of political actors and constituencies considerably mirrored the sectarian divide with few exceptions.[13]

It seems likely that the dynamic between Shia-centric state building and Sunni rejection will continue into the foreseeable future. There are far too many actors in Iraq and beyond that are thoroughly invested in this dynamic, thereby ensuring its perpetuation. Furthermore, it is difficult to break the cyclical relationship between the two spectrums: as long as the mind-set of Shia-centric state building is in place and is politically empowered, Sunni resentment and rejection will persist; and as long as there is a sense that Sunnis reject the post-2003 order, the mind-set of Shia-centric state building will deepen and gain broader popular acceptance. In both cases, feelings of mistrust, fear, encirclement, and insecurity drive further sectarian entrenchment and stand in the way of compromise and reform.

The Pre-2003 Roots of Post-2003 Sectarianization

Many observers argue that 2003 marks the dividing line separating a sectarian Iraq from a nonsectarian Iraq. According to this view, the sectarian entrenchment of the past twelve years is solely a product of the invasion and subsequent events.[14] An opposing, though no less common and no less narrow, view regards ethnosectarian entrenchment as the default setting of Iraqis: the union of Shias, Sunnis, and Kurds was never voluntary and always required the coercive force of a strong centralized state. Once this was removed, it was only natural—so the argument goes—for Iraqis to succumb to their centrifugal tendencies and innately held animosities.[15]

The most obvious tension between the two camps is in their opposing views about the viability of the Iraqi nation-state and the validity, or even existence, of Iraqi nationalism: the former cling to the idea of a transcendent Iraqi nationalism whose otherwise perpetually enduring qualities were only interrupted by the invasion of 2003, while the latter dismiss the Iraqi nation-state in favor of perennially divided Sunnis and Shias (and Kurds). Underscoring the two positions are divergent views as to whether or not Arab Iraq has always been sectarian and whether or not "sectarianism" was a feature of pre-2003 Iraq. From the outset, this debate is doomed to incoherence because of the incoherence of the terminology. If the understanding of "sectarianism" is restricted solely to violent sectarian conflict, widespread sectarian hate, and the empowerment of sect-centric political actors, then yes, 2003 undoubtedly becomes the moment separating a sectarian Iraq from a nonsectarian Iraq. However, such a

restrictive approach obscures a far broader spectrum of sectarian competition: if "sectarianism" is taken to include not just the headline-grabbing extremes witnessed over the past twelve years but sect-centric bias, prejudice, stereotypes, or institutional discrimination as well, then "sectarianism" in Iraq and the Arab world dates to far earlier than 2003. That year marked the empowerment of sect-centric political actors and the political institutionalization of Iraq's sectarian and other communal divides; in Arab Iraq, it marked the beginning of the contest between Shia-centric state building and Sunni rejection. Yet, it is worth asking why sect-centric actors existed in the first place, why they were so well-placed to reap the benefits of regime change, and why Arab Iraq was so susceptible in 2003 to identity politics and to the cycle of Shia-centric state building and Sunni rejection.

Throughout its existence, the modern Iraqi nation-state has struggled to adequately manage communal pluralism. The country's ethnic, religious, and sectarian diversity was framed in a paradoxical way: state discourse often celebrated it as a defining fact of Iraq while at the same time regarding it with a degree of suspicion as a potential threat to national unity. This applied not only to Iraq's sectarian divide but also to the state's relations with other religious and ethnic groups that were suspected of obstructing its conception of Iraq and Iraqi identity, as illustrated by the examples of the Kurds, the Assyrians, and the Jews. This relationship is the product of a history of exclusionary nation building that was based on problematic conceptions of unity and pluralism.[16] Rather than fostering unity or respecting and nurturing pluralism (politically or communally), these concepts were repeatedly used to exclude dissenters whose nonconformity was deemed a threat to the body politic. Be it the Iraqi Nationality Law of 1924, Arabization policies, or the way *tabaiyya* (dependency) and other concepts were used, time and again citizens were marginalized or excluded on the basis of their identities or their political dissent, all in the name of a very coercive understanding of unity.[17] These tools of exclusion, particularly given that they often relied on the manipulation of communal identities, considerably aided in the process of turning social multiplicity into social division among some Iraqis.

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Popular conceptions of unity in the twentieth century often translated into something more akin to a desire for uniformity or conformity. In this framework, unity was not to equally embrace difference under an all-encompassing national meta-identity. Rather, the more commonly seen pattern was the censorship or suppression of difference; the validation of a dominant group's sense of entitlement to assert its identity, frames of reference, and ownership—culturally and politically—of a country; and a firm expectation that out-groups should accept the status quo and their secondary role in it as an integral part of the natural order of things.

These conditions formed the backdrop to sectarian relations prior to 2003 in Iraq. With that in mind, sectarian dynamics between the state's establishment in 1921 and regime change in 2003 had three key characteristics: First, Iraq had a sectarian issue that was chiefly concerned with state-Shia relations rather than Sunni-Shia relations. Indeed, it can be argued that prior to 2003, Sunnis did not have an active sectarian identity, nor did they regard themselves in sectarian terms.[18] In that sense Iraq's sectarian issue was a Shia issue, the relevance of which varied considerably from time to time and never bore any resemblance to post-2003 sectarian relations, but it nevertheless existed. Second, sectarian dynamics never overtly challenged the nation-state; sectarian competition took place in the name of and in Iraq, and at no point did any significant sect-centric actor seek to alter borders or contemplate secessionist ideas. Third, while sectarian plurality was accepted—celebrated even—sectarian identity and its expression were viewed negatively to the point of criminalization because the dominant discourse framed them as being detrimental to national unity.[19]

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In theory, a secular state may vilify all sectarian identities, thereby acting as an equal opportunity enemy of all active sectarian identities. However, because Sunnis tended not to view themselves in sectarian terms, the issue of "sectarianism" in Iraq was one disproportionately associated with Shias, many of whom felt that state policy pressured them to dilute their sectarian identity. As such, in pre-2003 Iraq, to stigmatize sectarian identity was not to equally stigmatize Sunnis and Shias. As a result, the pre-2003 state's stance toward "sectarianism" and toward sectarian identities proved to be one of the key drivers behind the growth of a sect-centric Shia political culture, one that was to expand throughout the twentieth century, eventually eclipsing other forms of political activism and ultimately flourishing after 2003. By the same token, the pre-2003 state's policies toward sectarian relations not only led to the growth of Shia-centric political actors but also laid the foundations of post-2003 Sunni rejection through vilification and national excommunication of the state's sect-centric opponents.

While it is true that a certain generation of a certain socioeconomic bracket really was oblivious to its own and others' sectarian identities, what proponents of a purportedly nonsectarian pre-2003 Iraq overlook is that this was unfortunately not the general condition of Arab Iraqi Muslims. The much-lauded secularism of twentieth-century Iraq was, for the most part, an urban phenomenon that was heavily influenced by class. While the facts of coexistence and the absence of overt sectarian conflict—particularly on a societal level—remained undeniable features of twentieth-century Iraq, there was nevertheless from the earliest days of the Iraqi nation-state a Shia issue, the contours of which were essentially related to political representation, the institutional extent of organized Shiism, and the limits of Shia identity in the public space.

This was not a case of Shia agitation against a Sunni state; rather, since state establishment in 1921, and unlike their Sunni compatriots, significant sections of Shia society had a politically salient and culturally autonomous sectarian identity that demanded recognition and grated against the modern state's homogenizing impulses.

It is not that the Iraqi state wanted Shias to abandon Shiism nor was the state anti-Shia per se; rather, it would be far more accurate to argue that the pre-2003 state was suspicious of those whose lives and identities were embedded in Shia social and religious structures (some of which are transnational) that provided parallel truths regarding Iraqi history, the Iraqi self, and the Iraqi nation and that flew in the face of the state's narrative of Iraq. As such, social and political mobility were more readily available to Shias who were unencumbered by these parallel truths and whose Shia sectarian identity was as invisible as Sunni sectarian identity.[20] Successive governments were unwilling or unable to accommodate a salient or active Shia identity, often regarding it—and the semiautonomous structures underpinning it—with suspicion. This was to become especially pronounced under the Baath who, due to rising internal and external challenges (both real and perceived), persecuted Shia religious figures, banned major Shia rituals, and suppressed Shia activism and the expression of Shia identity. In many ways, the Shia issue was a contestation over the relationship between Shia-Iraqi identity and an unhyphenated, state-approved, Iraqi identity and consequently the place and role of Iraqi Shias in state and society.

The pre-2003 state was suspicious of those whose lives and identities were embedded in Shia social and religious structures that provided parallel truths.

From the earliest days of the modern Iraqi nation-state, there were instances of certain Shia politicians, leaders, and organizations advocating for specifically Shia issues—with little in terms of a Sunni counterpart, thereby further entrenching the association of "sectarianism" with Shias. For example, as early as April 1922, Mahdi al-Khalisi—a militant, though far from marginal, Shia cleric known for his opposition to the government—made a series of political demands that, alongside demands for complete Iraqi independence from the United Kingdom, included calls for half the cabinet to be composed of Shias and half of all government officials to be Shias.[21] Similarly, in the 1920s, the short-lived and avowedly Shia-centric al-Nahdha Party emerged, championing the causes of Shia rights and Shia representation.[22] Another example can be found in the People's Pact (Mithaq al-shaab) of 1935. Addressed to King Ghazi, Iraq's second monarch, this document was signed by tribal and religious leaders from the mid-Euphrates region and by Shia lawyers in the capital demanding, among other issues unrelated to sectarian identities, that Shias be better represented in government and that Shia jurisprudence be represented in the judiciary.[23]

These examples do not preclude other strands of Shia opinion and political activism, and they should not be taken as proof of hostility or interminable

division. Rather, such examples reflect many Shias' latent resentment against the pre-2003 state. Regardless of whether this was a product of reality or perception, the inescapable fact is that, throughout pre-2003 Iraq's existence, some sections of Shia society firmly believed that they were treated as second-class citizens on account of their sectarian identity as evidenced, they would argue, by the political underrepresentation compared to their demographic weight and the suppression of their sectarian identity. Indeed, this resentment was commented upon by Iraq's first monarch, Faisal I, who, writing in 1932, argued that the causes of Shia disadvantage were due to structural and historical reasons (such as their distance from the centers of government or their lack of state education and hence their lack of qualification for government office) rather than sectarian discrimination, but that this had nevertheless "led this majority [Shias] . . . to claim that they continue to be oppressed simply by being Shi'a."[24]

It is this belief that led to the emergence of sect-centric Shia political movements. Until at least the 1960s these were rather marginal and were overshadowed by more popular movements, such as the Iraqi Communist Party, that fought for broader conceptions of social justice beyond the prism of religious or sectarian identity. Over the decades, however, several factors conspired to reverse that. The state's ever-increasing authoritarianism was accompanied by an intensification of Shia activism both qualitatively and quantitatively.[25] This resulted in the sharpening of the state's suspicions of political Shiism and of the mobilization of Shia identity that in turn served to deepen Shia resentment and broaden support for Shia-centric movements.

By the 1970s, Shia political activism was becoming more outspoken and more brazen, resulting in increasingly violent confrontations with the state. Several disturbances were witnessed in the 1970s, most notably the violent clampdown of Shia processions in 1977 and the disturbances of 1979.[26] This escalation was partly shaped by the regional environment and deteriorating relations with Iran—naturally this downward spiral only accelerated after the Iranian revolution of 1979. The demise of Arab nationalism and communism as popular mobilizers and the emergence of the Islamic Republic of Iran (and regional Islamist movements in general) further explain the growing relevance of Shia-centric movements to the opposition of the regime in Iraq and beyond. Beginning in the 1980s, but particularly in the 1990s, the opposition in exile was undeniably dominated by Kurdish ethnocentric and Shia sect-centric movements, both of which were viewed with intense suspicion by Iraqis subscribing in one way or another to the state's centralizing and homogenizing visions of Iraqi nationalism.[27]

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The 1990s: The Opposition in Exile and the Sectarianization of Iraq

While one can—and indeed should—highlight the role that U.S. policy played in institutionalizing and perpetuating division and conflict in Iraq, one should not deny Iraqis agency in, and responsibility for, their political development. Various developments in the decades preceding regime change, and particularly the era of sanctions that began in 1990, created sociopolitical realities that proved conducive to the advent of identity politics, Shia-centric state building, and Sunni rejection after 2003. Nowhere was this more evident than in the exiled opposition to Saddam Hussein and the Baath regime that came to play a key role in postwar Iraq.

Sect-centric political causes were championed by sect-centric political actors from as early as the 1920s in Iraq, but by the 1980s, and more so by the 1990s, this once-marginal sect-centricity had matured and deepened to the extent that it dominated the non-Kurdish opposition to Saddam Hussein's regime. This sect-centric political culture that had steadily grown among Shias had been built on a conviction that they were uniquely victimized by the regime coupled with an equally strong sense of entitlement based on their demographic weight. In time, this belief in themselves as the long-oppressed majority came to alter the political identity of a significant body of Shia Iraqis and elevated the relevance of Shia-centric politics among the organized (and exiled) opposition to Saddam Hussein and the Baath regime. These developments were accelerated by a number of factors: the suppression and demise of other forms of political mobilization, such as Arab nationalism and communism; the empowerment of political Shiism in post-1979 Iran; the Gulf War and particularly the uprisings that followed it in 1991; the social costs of the sanctions era and the resultant mass migration witnessed throughout the 1990s; and the increased interest and support that opposition movements were able to garner from foreign patrons. These and other factors helped to reshape the Iraqi diaspora and diaspora politics.

The most significant effect of this was the shift away from an apologetic Shia identity that downplayed, or even diluted, Shia specificity in the hopes of placating detractors who argued that the Shia challenged the homogenizing nation-building efforts of the modern Iraqi state. Instead, in the 1990s, and particularly in diaspora circles, it became increasingly acceptable to speak in sect-specific terms, and a clearly and unambiguously differentiated Shia political identity was articulated. For example, in 1992, the London-based Al-Khoei Benevolent Foundation hosted a seminar on "The Shi'a of Iraq at the Crossroads." The title alone, with its specific focus on the Shia as opposed to Iraq, would have been unthinkable in earlier decades, but what was even more unprecedented was the seminar's proposal of federalism as a solution to the Shias' disempowerment.[28] This was an early example of a process that was

initially triggered by the rebellions of 1991 and their costly suppression but that unfolded throughout the sanctions era, namely, the withering away of a hitherto deeply held aversion to discussions of sects and sectarian relations and the mainstreaming of more assertive forms of Shia identity.[29]

Importantly, these developments were taking place at a time when the exiled opposition to the regime was turning into something of an industry—one largely subsidized by foreign powers, including the United States.[30] With regards to U.S. Iraq policy, there was a positive feedback loop between the sect-centricity (and ethnocentricity) of the Iraqi opposition and U.S. preconceptions of, and interests in, Iraq. The simplistic reduction of Iraq into oppressive Sunnis and victimized Shias and Kurds was one largely subscribed to—out of conviction or calculation—by both U.S. policymakers and by many of their Iraqi interlocutors in the opposition. Many if not most of these were not simply Iraqis who happened to be Shias or Kurds; rather, they were products of ethnocentric and sect-centric movements: Shia politicians, whose politics were deeply embedded in Shia identity and in the concepts of Shia victimhood and Shia entitlement, alongside Kurdish nationalists. While it is perfectly legitimate and sometimes necessary to highlight the plight of a particular community by engaging in sectional advocacy, this form of sectional politics was to dominate the Iraqi opposition, in turn shaping or at least reinforcing U.S. views on Iraq.

Come 2003, the politics of sectional advocacy were superimposed onto national politics, turning them into the defining political principles of the new Iraq. Few examples better illustrate this than the much-maligned ethnosectarian apportionment of postwar Iraqi politics. Far from being solely a product of the past twelve years, the major players in the Iraqi opposition had adopted the principle of ethno-sectarian quotas as the arbiter of political representation and entitlement from as early as 1992.[31] There have been criticisms singling out the United States as the mastermind behind the divisive policy and behind the political elevation of ethnosectarian identities more generally, but while the obsession with ethnosectarian identities may have been a feature of U.S. policy toward Iraq, it was also a characteristic feature of significant parts of the Iraqi opposition.[32]

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The shift in Shia political consciousness was not restricted to those in exile; similar developments were under way in Iraq. The 1990s saw the rise of religious and, by extension, sectarian identities' relevance in Iraq. Equally important, Shia resentment of the state deepened and broadened during the sanctions era, as did Shia sectarian entrenchment. This did not necessarily entail any anti-Sunni social antagonisms nor did it presage the sectarian violence that was to follow 2003. However, it did mean the further development of a Shia vision of Iraq, one largely unknown to Sunnis prior to 2003, that revolved around the triumvirate of victimhood, demographics, and entitlement. The point to be

made here is that while the exiled opposition lacked a social base and often even lacked name recognition in Iraq, by 2003 its identity politics and the mind-set of Shia-centric state building resonated with a significant body of Shia opinion. As such, the most immediately noticeable manifestations of popular sentiment after the fall of the regime were to be found in the assertions of Shia identity through public displays of religiosity. As analyst Nicolas Pelham puts it, "[For Iraqi Shias] freedom was not the saccharine of Hollywood movies or American pop, both of which could already be found in [pre-2003] Baghdad. It was mass Shi'a pilgrimage and the public display of the revered trinity of Imam Ali . . . and his two sons."[33]

Both in social and political terms, the power vacuum left by the fallen regime was quickly filled by varying shades of Islamist forces whose power and popularity surprised outsiders—as exemplified by the Sadrists (supporters of Shia cleric Muqtada al-Sadr).[34] The only notable reception that greeted any of the returning political exiles was the one that met Shia cleric Mohammad Baqir al-Hakim—head of the Supreme Council for Islamic Revolution in Iraq, as the Islamic Supreme Council of Iraq was known in 2003—when he returned from his long exile in Iran.[35] Politically, the fact that identity politics and Shia-centric state building resonated with a significant body of Shia opinion was reflected in the electoral process. For a certain constituency, regime change provided a unique opportunity through which to guarantee the empowerment of Shia political actors, thereby validating their sense of entitlement, their sense of victimhood, and their demographic weight. This partly explains the sweeping success of the UIA—the grand Shia electoral coalition—in the December 2005 election. As reported at the time by the International Crisis Group, "Even secular Shiites appear to have voted for the UIA rather than for the available alternatives. . . . In the words of a Western diplomat, they may well have voted 'against the hijacking of a historical opportunity for the Shiites.'"[36]

> **As with Shia-centric state building, Sunni rejection was rooted not only in postwar changes but also in pre-2003 prejudices, convictions, fears, and ways of imagining Iraq.**

Nevertheless, one should be wary of tautologies that predetermine the institutionalization of identity politics in post-2003 Iraq. Sect-centric politicians and their constituencies were just one group of voices among many in 2003. Neither they nor the positions they espoused, namely, identity politics and Shia-centric state building, were alien to Iraq but nor were they the only voices therein. Sect-centric politicians and their parties may have formed the broadest and most organized position along Iraq's political spectrum, but that position was empowered and privileged in the new Iraq as a result of U.S. policy, the regional environment, and the evolution of diaspora politics.

In summary, the course taken after 2003 was not inevitable but was always likely. The drivers of Shia-centric state building came from both above and below: Shia-centric state building was championed by Shia elites and by U.S. policy, but it also fed off preexisting social divisions, fears, and aspirations. The idea that Shias were the long-oppressed majority that should rule Iraq was not

invented by U.S. policymakers, nor was it the preserve of Shia-centric politicians in exile; rather, for many Shias it was a long-held article of faith dating back to the foundations of the modern Iraqi state. Unsurprisingly, it proved problematic in post-2003 Iraq in that its main practical implication was Shia ascendency (through demographic weight) rather than sectarian equality. As such it was incompatible with and resistant to a nonsectarian or sect-blind approach to Iraq: for those who implicitly or explicitly advocate forms of Shia-centric state building, a sect-blind approach would be rejected for fear that it would squander the Shias' demographic advantage and that it would stifle the expression of Shia identities.

As with Shia-centric state building, Sunni rejection was rooted not only in postwar changes but also in pre-2003 prejudices, convictions, fears, and ways of imagining Iraq that, among other things, vilified active sectarian identities. At heart, Sunni rejection was not just a reaction to occupation, regime change, and the empowerment of sect-centric and ethnocentric politicians, it is a rejection of the system of ethnosectarian power sharing and of the elevation of subnational identities to politically relevant categories. In many cases, this has led Sunnis to deny the notion that they are a demographic minority.[37]

The ambivalence with which many Sunnis have viewed subnational identities goes back to the paradoxical way in which the subject was approached by successive regimes before 2003: communal plurality was at once celebrated as a defining feature of Iraq and vilified or feared as a potential threat to national unity. As such, the post-2003 system of ethnosectarian power sharing not only disadvantaged Sunnis as a demographic minority devoid of sect-centric organizations, structures, and leaders but also struck them as unfamiliar if not downright sinister. In the words of Allawi: "There was a general sense [among Sunnis] that an unnatural, alien, force had overthrown an entire system of power and authority. It had no connection to Iraq's history or experience and could not therefore be considered a legitimate arbiter of the country's destiny."[38] Political scientist Harith al-Qarawee further underlines the reasons for Sunni alarm at regime change by arguing that in pre-2003 Iraq, Sunnis had been told, and had believed, that they faced three major threats: foreign occupation, Kurdish separatism, and Shia Islamism: "In 2003, Sunni Arabs woke up and saw these three enemies (the occupiers, the Kurdish nationalists, and the Shia Islamists) sitting together and setting the rules for the new Iraq."[39]

What became clear only after 2003 and complicated Sunnis' acceptance of the new order was the extent of their obliviousness to the facts of Shia sect-centricity. Prior to 2003, many Sunnis had never encountered or even known of the existence of an alternate Shia-centric narrative of Iraqi nationalism. Because for many if not most Sunnis, a differentiated and explicitly Shia political consciousness was an alien and irredeemably negative notion that had only been visible when it was highlighted by the former regime as evidence of pro-Iranian treason, this predisposed them toward rejection of the post-2003 order. The outpouring of Shia symbolism immediately after the fall of the former

regime and the empowerment of Shia-centric—even Iran-aligned—political actors validated Sunni fears that Iraq had succumbed to a Shia takeover. Even the Shias' demographic weight came as a rude awakening, with many Sunnis never having conceived of Baghdad as anything even approaching a Shia-majority city.[40]

For many Sunnis, rejection of the post-2003 order was prompted not just by the mere fact of Shia empowerment; it was also a reaction to the empowerment of a particular brand of Shia.

For many Sunnis, and indeed for some anti-Islamist Shias as well, rejection was prompted not just by the mere fact of Shia empowerment; it was also a reaction to the empowerment of a particular brand of Shia: not politicians who just happen to be Shia, but Shia-centric politicians whose politics were inseparable from their Shia identity. More to the point, they were exactly the forces that had long been demonized by state propaganda as the treacherous arm of Iranian machinations in Iraq. This Sunni predisposition toward rejection of the post-2003 order was hardly ameliorated by the actions of the newly empowered Shia political elites, the regional environment, or the abject failure of the new political classes to construct a functioning state that could deliver basic services and offer hope for a brighter future.

There was also a basic obstacle facing Sunni acceptance of the new order in that it carried an overt sense of Shia ownership. Even if this contained no anti-Sunni sentiment, it would have still been difficult for Sunnis—unaccustomed as they were to thinking of themselves as a sectarian group, much less as a minority one—to subscribe to a new national mythology based on the symbols and narratives of what would formerly have been considered an outgroup. The Shias' profound sense of victimhood under Saddam Hussein meant that, generally speaking, they celebrated the downfall of the Baath Party as their salvation as much as it was Iraq's. Even if Sunnis were glad to see Saddam Hussein's downfall, it was hardly likely for them to subscribe to a celebration so heavily tinged with someone else's mythology of victimhood and entitlement, particularly given that this mythology can all too easily be construed as implicitly vilifying Sunni Arabs by associating them with the former regime. These conditions shaped the manner in which a previously nonexistent Sunni identity emerged after regime change.

Ironically, despite Sunnis' long-held aversion to the assertion of subnational identities, Sunni opponents of the post-2003 order had to become as sect-centric as the system they derided for its sect-centricity.[41] Prior to 2003, Sunnis had seldom if ever had any real cause to conceive of, mobilize, or organize themselves as Sunnis. After regime change, Sunnis had to imagine themselves as a sectarian group both as a response to Shia-centric state building and in order to be relevant in a system fundamentally based on identity politics.

The Sunni identity that emerged was one founded on opposition to the post-2003 state. As such, Sunni rejection, be it in the form of begrudging acceptance, anti-state violence, or anything in between, is an integral part of post-2003 mainstream Iraqi Sunni identity. This has proven problematic in that Sunni

leaders have often found themselves seeking greater representation in a system that many of their constituents deem illegitimate. This paradox and the consequently ambivalent relationship toward anti-state violence has led some Sunni politicians to collude with anti-state insurgents.[42] Furthermore, there is also the danger that, if left unaddressed, Sunni rejection of the post-2003 order may ultimately translate into alienation from the Iraqi nation-state—something that has already been seen on the most extreme end of the spectrum in the form of the self-proclaimed Islamic State. Likewise, and particularly at times of heightened tension, the line separating Sunni rejection of a Shia political project from outright anti-Shiism can easily be blurred.[43]

Where to for Arab Iraq?

In 2015, sect-centricity is more prevalent and sect-centric actors are more powerful than in 2003, and the future of the Iraqi state is at stake. The year 2003 marked the simultaneous emergence of Shia-centric state building and Sunni rejection. The dynamic between the two, particularly once they were politically empowered, quickly developed mutually reinforcing and self-perpetuating characteristics that were accelerated by the divisiveness of the occupation; the role of external actors; Iraqi electoral politics; and the spiral of violence, fear, mistrust, and uncertainty that continues to mark post-2003 Iraq.

However, Iraq did not travel a clear downward path between 2003 and 2014. There were moments when Shia-centric state building and Sunni rejection seemed to be in retreat and hopes were raised that the cycle could be broken. The most promising period was 2008 to 2010: violence was declining, sectarian politics were in clear retreat,[44] militia and insurgent networks had been crippled, and many were optimistic that post-2003 Iraqi politics had come of age.[45] But whatever glimmer of hope existed began to fade during the controversial parliamentary election of 2010 in which Nouri al-Maliki lost the ballot but retained power. His disastrous second term as prime minister from 2010 to 2014 saw the retrenchment of identity politics, the deepening of Sunni alienation from the state, the reinvigoration of militant networks—partly aided by the spiraling and heavily sect-coded conflict in neighboring Syria—and ultimately the return of civil war.[46]

The summer of 2014 saw the dynamic between Shia-centric state building and Sunni rejection reach its most extreme expression to date in the form of the Islamic State and the Hashd al-Shaabi (the Hashd hereafter).[47] The Islamic State obviously represents not just a rejection of Shia-centric state building in Iraq but also a rejection of the Iraqi nation-state and a genocidal rejection of Shias and others. The rise of the Islamic State and its conquest of Mosul and most Sunni-majority areas of Iraq in the summer

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of 2014 has seen mainstream Sunni political actors and non–Islamic State Sunni insurgent groups reduced to irrelevance, thereby accentuating the post-2003 state's Shia-centricity and limiting the presence and effectiveness of less extreme, non–Islamic State manifestations of Sunni rejection.

The Hashd is the term given to the mass mobilization of volunteers and militias to repel the Islamic State. Its origins date to the final months of Maliki's second term and prior to the fall of Mosul to the Islamic State in June 2014. However, it only gathered momentum after Grand Ayatollah Ali al-Sistani's call on Iraqis to volunteer in the security services to defend Iraq against the Islamic State. This resulted in a massive Shia mobilization that included the reinvigoration of older Shia militias and the formation of newer ones. Although officially an institution of the state, the more powerful formations in the Hashd, particularly Badr, Kataib Hezbollah, and Asaib Ahl al-Haq, are widely viewed as a parallel force competing with the Iraqi security forces. In several regards, this mirrors a broader intra-Shia struggle between Prime Minister Haider al-Abadi and his rivals on the Shia right.

The Hashd is the most popular and mainstream manifestation of Shia-centric state building yet. It is also significant in that it is a rare example of Shia-centric state building in an institutional sense. The gravity of the events of the summer of 2014, following on from the calamities of the preceding eleven years, resulted in a significant shift in Shia political identity further toward sect-centricity and away from the ideals that Iraqis had been socialized into embracing throughout pre-2003 Iraq. The Hashd, and its political patrons on the Shia right, is the most visible embodiment of this shift. The Hashd's organic popularity, not to mention its military muscle and political relevance, seems destined to alter Iraqi politics in a way that may further cement the post-2003 Iraqi state's Shia identity.[48]

The issues of Shia-centric state building, Sunni rejection, and, more broadly, Iraq's Sunni-Shia issue are at heart inseparable from questions of state legitimacy. This is best illustrated in the parallels between the reactions to impending state collapse in 2003 and 2014. In 2003, Shias were, broadly speaking, more receptive to the idea of regime change than their Sunni compatriots. The reason was not that Sunnis were pro–Saddam Hussein; rather, it was that some Sunnis accorded the state structure some measure of legitimacy regardless of their views on Saddam. Conversely, many Shias accorded the state no legitimacy whatsoever, viewing it as an oppressive apparatus that targeted them as a sectarian group. As such, Shias were more likely to view state collapse in 2003 as Iraq's, and particularly Shia Iraqis', chance to be liberated from tyranny, while Sunnis were more likely to view state collapse as an existential crisis.

In 2014, the same dynamic was evident but in reverse: as Islamic State militants surged toward Baghdad, and as the post-2003 order seemed to be on the verge of collapse, Shias rallied to the defense of the state despite the deep resentment they harbored against the government. Conversely, there was a body of Sunni opinion that would have welcomed the collapse of the entire

post-2003 order if it were at the hands of practically any group other than the Islamic State—hence Sunni public discourse in the summer of 2014 downplayed the group's role while making repeated references to "tribal revolutionaries" instead.[49]

The reactions to the Islamic State threat highlighted a fundamental divergence in perceptions: while Grand Ayatollah Ali al-Sistani's calls for mass mobilization were enthusiastically answered by Iraqi Shias, they incensed several Sunni public figures who believed—or at least propagated the belief—that the mobilization was an anti-Sunni mobilization in defense of Maliki rather than the state.[50] More to the point, the fact that the events of the summer of 2014 constituted a national emergency in need of mass mobilization was self-evident to many Shias but not, generally speaking, to Sunnis. A rhetorical question that was often heard being asked by Sunnis at the time was: Where were Sistani's powers of mobilization in 2003 when Iraq was invaded? Herein lies the crux of the matter: broadly speaking, neither Shias in 2003 nor Sunnis in 2014 wanted the state to survive because neither considered the state legitimate; in both cases, Sunnis and Shias were divided on whether it was justifiable to defend the state. That these divergent positions were nevertheless couched in nationalistic terms is testament to the depth of division regarding the contours of what Iraq and Iraqi nationalism constitute.

Changing the mind-sets that sustain the dynamic between Shia-centric state building and Sunni rejection will take a new generation of political and religious leaders.

As of late 2015, there was nothing to suggest that the latest phase in Iraq's civil war would be concluded any time soon. Political developments since the fall of Mosul have further accentuated the cycle of Shia-centric state building and Sunni rejection and have created new obstacles, not least of which is the Hashd, that hinder the likelihood of the cycle being broken.

The question is whether there is a breaking point. Changing the mind-sets that sustain the dynamic between Shia-centric state building and Sunni rejection will take a new generation of political and religious leaders. As evidenced by Prime Minister Abadi's faltering reform agenda and the political reactions to it, the current crop of leaders is too invested in the status quo to enact meaningful change. Likewise, battle fatigue paving the way to compromise remains a distant possibility given the zero-sum nature of the conflict—particularly where the Islamic State is concerned—and given the seemingly inexhaustible external support that various Iraqi actors continue to receive from regional and international powers.

The reality in Arab Iraq is that Shia political ascendency—more specifically and problematically, the ascendency of Shia-centric political actors—will remain irreversible well into the foreseeable future. For Sunnis and everyone else, the distasteful implication of this is that they must either withdraw from the state by boycotting it or taking up arms, or, alternatively, they must accept a junior role in Iraqi politics. Dreams of a sect-blind Iraqi state based on citizenship will likely remain dreams for the time being.

However it is achieved, the priority has to be finding an end to the war and to mass mobilization. As long as violence rages, the mistrust characterizing politics and sectarian relations will persist to the benefit of hardline actors on all sides. With Iraq in a state of undeclared but seemingly endless civil war, it will remain difficult to meaningfully shift the focus away from questions of state legitimacy toward those of state efficiency, corruption, and service delivery. Putting these universally relevant material issues on the political center stage may be the surest way toward long-term solutions and a reduction in the salience of communal identities—after all, even a somewhat discriminatory state is more likely to be tolerated if it is efficient and offers people a decent standard of living and the prospects of a brighter future. However, this is unlikely to happen before violence is dramatically reduced.

Left unchecked, the cycle of Shia-centric state building and Sunni rejection will continue to deepen, much to the benefit of the extremes of both spectrums.

Left unchecked, the cycle of Shia-centric state building and Sunni rejection will continue to deepen, much to the benefit of the extremes of both spectrums. Iraq's political leaders and those with a stake in Iraq's future have to grasp the dire implications of this: current dynamics may ultimately reduce Arab Iraq to, on the one hand, a relatively secure but dysfunctional, crisis-ridden, perpetually mobilized Shia Iraq with only the slimmest pretense to representing all Iraqis and, on the other hand, an ungoverned or semigoverned zone of conflict and instability stretching across Sunni areas of Arab Iraq.

Iraq's future is being shaped today by far more than its blundering political elites and the weight of history. Violence in Iraq is inextricably linked with the Syrian civil war, which itself is perpetuated by and hostage to the conflicting policies and interests of regional and international powers. In Iraq, the rise of the Shia right after the fall of Mosul and the deepening penetration of their Iranian patrons has significantly constrained the political space for would-be reformers. Added to that is a less than benevolent economic situation prompted by plummeting oil prices and the mounting costs of war, all of which equates to a gloomy forecast for Iraq's future and for the prospects of positive change at precisely the time when a departure from current trajectories is most critically needed.

Notes

1   For the purposes of this essay, sectarian dynamics refer specifically to Sunni-Shia relations as distinct from other intergroup relations such as Arab-Kurdish relations (which may be better phrased in "ethnic" rather than "sectarian" terms).

2   These concepts should be taken broadly as referring to dominant or salient outlooks rather than absolute positions subscribed to by all Sunnis and Shias. As is always the case with sectarian dynamics, nothing can be said about all Sunnis or all Shias.

3   The term "sectarianism" appears in quotation marks throughout, the reason being that the term has no definitive meaning. Until one is able to define "sectarianism," a more coherent way of addressing the issue would be to use the term "sectarian" followed by the appropriate suffix: sectarian hate, sectarian unity, sectarian discrimination, and so forth.

4   This was aptly illustrated in late 2012 when then prime minister Nouri al-Maliki moved against two public figures in short succession: governor of the Central Bank Sinan al-Shibeebi and then vice president Tariq al-Hashimi. The former is a fellow Shia and hence Maliki's attack against him was perceived as a power move aimed at consolidating the prime minister's grip on power; the latter, however, is Sunni, which immediately lent the episode an unavoidable sectarian dimension in popular perceptions. As is inherently the case in a sectarian environment, political disputes cannot escape sect coding so long as the protagonists are of different sectarian backgrounds.

5   This has been vividly demonstrated by the reactions to the conflict in Yemen in 2015. Despite the complex and local drivers behind the conflict, some commentators seem content to frame it as part of a broader sectarian, Sunni-Shia conflict. The most breathtaking example of this reductionist logic may be Thomas Friedman's assertion that "the main issue [in Yemen] is the 7th century struggle over who is the rightful heir to the Prophet Muhammad — Shiites or Sunnis." See Thomas Friedman, "Tell Me How This Ends Well," *New York Times*, April 1, 2015, http://www.nytimes.com/2015/04/01/opinion/thomas-friedman-tell-me-how-this-ends-well.html. For more nuanced analysis on the conflict in Yemen, see Susanne Dahlgren and Anne-Linda Amira Augustin, "The Multiple Wars in Yemen," Middle East Research and Information Project, June 18, 2015, http://merip.org/multiple-wars-yemen; International Crisis Group, *Yemen at War*, Middle East Briefing No. 45 (Brussels: International Crisis Group, March 27, 2015), http://www.crisisgroup.org/en/regions/middle-east-north-africa/iraq-iran-gulf/yemen/b045-yemen-at-war.aspx. On how sectarian identity inheres on popular perception toward the conflict, see Maria Abi-Habib and Sam Dagher, "Sunnis Cheer Saudi-Led Battle for Yemen," *Wall Street Journal*, March 27, 2015, http://www.wsj.com/articles/sunnis-cheer-saudi-led-battle-for-yemen-1427507176.

6   See Joel Rayburn, "The Sunni Chauvinists," in *Iraq After America: Strongmen, Sectarians, Resistance* (Stanford: Hoover Institution Press, 2014); Shireen T. Hunter, "The Real Causes of Iraq's Problems," *LobeLog*, June 14, 2014, https://lobelog.com/2014-06-the-real-causes-of-iraqs-problems/.

7   For more details, see Fanar Haddad, "A Sectarian Awakening: Reinventing Sunni Identity in Iraq After 2003," *Current Trends in Islamist Ideology* 17 (August 2014): 145-76.

8   For details of Sunni political participation, see Stephen Wicken, *Iraq's Sunnis in Crisis*, Middle East Security Report 2 (Washington: Institute for the Study of War, May 2013), http://www.understandingwar.org/sites/default/files/Wicken-Sunni-In-Iraq.pdf; International Crisis Group, Make or Break: Iraq's Sunnis and the State, Middle East Report No. 144 (Brussels: International Crisis Group, August 14, 2013), http://www.crisisgroup.org/~/media/Files/Middle%20East%20North%20Africa/Iraq%20Syria%20Lebanon/Iraq/144-make-or-break-iraq-s-sunnis-and-the-state.pdf.

9   See Fanar Haddad, "Sectarian Relations and Sunni Identity in Post-Civil War Iraq," in *Sectarian Politics in the Persian Gulf*, ed. Lawrence Potter (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013).

10   Ali Allawi, *The Occupation of Iraq: Winning the War, Losing the Peace* (London: Yale University Press, 2007), 438.

11   For a summary of recent polls on several issues including the basis of identity and secular politics, see Mansoor Moaddel, "Is Iraq Actually Falling Apart? What Social Science Surveys Show," *Informed Comment* (blog), June 20, 2014, http://www.juan-cole.com/2014/06/actually-falling-surveys.html.

12   This was especially pronounced among major Shia political actors who ran jointly in 2005 under the banner of the UIA. By 2014, many of the constituent parts of the UIA were running under their own newly formed lists. On the two elections held in 2005, see Kenneth Katzman, *Iraq: Elections, Government, and Constitution*, Congressional Research Service Report for Congress RS21968 (Washington: Congressional Research Service, November 20, 2006), http://fpc.state.gov/documents/organization/76838.pdf. On the election of 2014, see Ahmed Ali, *Iraq's 2014 National Elections*, Middle East Security Report 20 (Washington: Institute for the Study of War, April 2014), http://www.understandingwar.org/sites/default/files/AhmedAliIraqElections.pdf.

13   On the election of 2014 see Ahmed Ali, *Iraq's 2014 National Elections*, Middle East Security Report 20 (Washington: Institute for the Study of War, April 2014), http://www.understandingwar.org/sites/default/files/AhmedAliIraqElections.pdf.

14   For example, see Sami Ramadani, "The Sectarian Myth of Iraq," *Guardian*, June 16, 2014, http://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2014/jun/16/sectarian-myth-of-iraq.

15   For example, see Peter W. Galbraith, *The End of Iraq: How American Incompetence Created a War Without End* (London: Simon & Schuster, 2006). This line of argument may be valid with regards to the Kurds—particularly since 1991 when they first attained a measure of self-rule. However, it would be inaccurate to conflate the drivers of Arab-Kurdish dynamics with those of the Sunni-Shia divide.

16   Several explanations can be proposed for this. Anticolonial activism may have led some political figures to prescribe a clearly defined and distilled "us" against the colonizer. Related to this, the manner in which Arab nationalism manifested in the early and mid-twentieth century, making "Arab" credentials a central criterion for

inclusion in the nation-state, certainly contributed to the problem. Perhaps most relevant is the ever-intensifying authoritarianism of the twentieth-century Iraqi state.

17 The Nationality Law divided Iraqis into "original" and "non-original," "original" meaning those that had been registered as Ottoman subjects. This followed the precedent set by the first Iraqi constitution of 1921 and the Law for the Election of the Constituent Assembly of 1922, both of which similarly divided Iraqis into original and non-original. The Arabization policies targeted Kurds, Turkomans, and Assyrians in northern Iraq. See Hania Mufti and Peter Bouckaert, "Iraq: Forced Expulsion of Ethnic Minorities," *Human Rights Watch* 15, no. 3 (March 2003), http://www.hrw.org/sites/default/files/reports/Kirkuk0303.pdf; and Hania Mufti and Peter Bouckaert, "Claims in Conflict: Reversing Ethnic Cleansing in Northern Iraq," *Human Rights Watch* 16, no. 4 (August 2004), http://www.hrw .org/reports/2004/iraq0804/iraq0804.pdf. Another divisive concept was *shuubiyya*, which refers to an eighth-century movement that challenged the privileged position of Arabs in the early Islamic empires, arguing that Islam does not differentiate between believers on the basis of ethnicity. In the twentieth century, the term was revived by pan-Arabists to describe internal enemies of the Arab world. It was most notably used to discredit Iraqi Communists. See Sami A. Hanna and George H. Gardner, "Al-Shuʿubiyyah Up-Dated: A Study of the 20th Century Revival of an Eighth Century Concept," *Middle East Journal* 20, no. 3 (summer, 1966): 335–51. *Tabaiyya* is commonly translated as "dependency." In recent Iraqi history, the term has been shorthand for *tabaiyya Iraniyya*, meaning those who are of "Iranian dependency"—that is, registered as Persian rather than Ottoman subjects—as stipulated by the Nationality Law of 1924. The charge of *tabaiyya* was used to justify the deportation of hundreds of thousands of Shias. See Ali Babakhan, "The Deportation of Shi'as During the Iran-Iraq War: Causes and Consequences," in *Ayatollahs, Sufis and Ideologues: State, Religion and Social Movements in Iraq*, ed. Faleh A. Jabar (London: Saqi, 2002).

18 As one Sunni politician put it: "We awoke one day and suddenly discovered that we are all Sunnis." Quoted in International Crisis Group, *Make or Break*, 4–5.

19 To illustrate, in 1985, Ofra Bengio lamented the fact that "The extent to which the regime has suppressed the [Shia] issue can be gathered from the fact that the term Shi'i itself has become almost taboo in the Iraqi media. This in itself poses tremendous difficulties for the analyst." Ofra Bengio, "Shi'is and Politics in Ba'thi Iraq," *Middle Eastern Studies* 21, no. 1 (January 1985): 13.

20 This explains Shia representation in the upper reaches of government and the civil service in pre-2003 Iraq, despite the existence of a Shia issue. More recently, it also explains how Ayad Allawi—who is from a Shia background—became the Sunni electorate's candidate of choice in 2010.

21 Peter Sluglett, *Britain in Iraq: Contriving King and Country*, 1914-1932 (New York: Columbia University Press, 2007), 224.

22 Ibid, 103–5; Hanna Batatu, *The Old Social Classes and the Revolutionary Movements of Iraq*, 2nd ed. (London: Saqi Books, 2004), 327–28.

23 For full text see Abdul Razzaq al-Hasani, *Tarikh al-Wizarat al-Iraqiyya* [The History of the Iraqi Cabinets], 7th ed., vol. 4 (Baghdad: Dar al-Shu'un al-Thaqafiyya al-Ama, 1988), 92–94.

24 Memorandum written by Faisal in March 1932 addressing Iraq's political elite in which he gave his personal assessment of the state of the country. The memorandum can be found in full in Salih Abd al-Razzaq, *Masharee' Izalat al-Tamyeez al-Ta'ifi fi al-Iraq: min mudhakarat Faisal ila Majlis al-Hukm*, 1932-2003 [Plans for the

Elimination of Sectarian Discrimination in Iraq: from Faisal's Memorandum to the Governing Council, 1932-2003] (Beirut: al-Ma'arif, 2010), 16–27.

25   Amatzia Baram, *Saddam Husayn and Islam, 1968–2003: Ba'thi Iraq From Secularism to Faith* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2014), chap. 3.

26   On the disturbances of 1979, see Faleh A. Jabar, *The Shi'ite Movement in Iraq* (London: Al Saqi, 2003), 228-231. On the disturbances of 1977, see Jabar, *The Shi'ite Movement in Iraq*, 208-215; and Marion F. Sluglett and Peter Sluglett, *Iraq Since 1958: From Revolution to Dictatorship*, (London: I. B. Tauris, 2001), 198–199.

27   This was by no means restricted to Sunni Arab Iraqis; however, given that the sect-centricity in question is Shia sect-centricity, suspicion was more likely to emanate from Sunni quarters in the same way that sympathy was more likely to emanate from Shia ones.

28   Allawi, *The Occupation*, 75.

29   Fanar Haddad, *Sectarianism in Iraq: Antagonistic Visions of Unity*, (London: Hurst and Co., 2011), chaps. 4-6.

30   For the opposition in exile during the sanctions era, see Tareq Y. Ismael and Jacqueline S. Ismael, *Iraq in the Twenty-First Century: Regime Change and the Making of a Failed State*, Durham Modern Middle East and Islamic World Series 34, (Oxford: Routledge, 2015), 84–89.

31   The principle was adopted at the Iraqi opposition conferences of Vienna in June 1992 and Salah al-Din in October 1992. See Ibrahim Nawar, "Untying the Knot," *Al Ahram Weekly*, February 19, 2003; Allawi, *The Occupation*, 50; Ismael and Ismael, *Iraq*, 86, 88. Hayder al-Khoei has argued that the idea of ethnosectarian quotas dates to an opposition conference held in Tehran in 1987; Hayder al-Khoei, "The Construction of Ethno-Sectarian Politics in Post-War Iraq: 2003-05" (master's thesis, International Studies and Diplomacy, School of Oriental and African Studies, 2012), 12.

32   Perhaps the most cited example demonstrating this fact is the "Declaration of the Shia of Iraq," July, 2002. Full text can be found on http://www.al-bab.com/arab/docs/iraq/shia02a.htm.

33   Nicolas Pelham, *A New Muslim Order: The Shia and the Middle East Sectarian Crisis* (London: I. B. Tauris, 2008), 17.

34   Juan Cole, "Shiite Religious Parties Fill Vacuum in Southern Iraq," Middle East Research and Information Project, April 22, 2003, http://www.merip.org/mero/mero042203.

35   See for example, Joel Roberts, "Triumphant Return of Shiite Leader," CBS News, May 11, 2003, http://www.cbsnews.com/news/triumphant-return-of-shiite-leader/; Associated Press, "Iraqi Opposition Leader Returns Home," *USA Today*, May 10, 2003, http://usatoday30.usatoday.com/news/world/iraq/2003-05-10-shiite-leader_x.htm; "Prominent Iraqi Shiʿite Leader Returns From Exile," *Irish Times*, May 10, 2003, http://www.irishtimes.com/news/prominent-iraqi-shi-ite-leader-returns-from-exile-1.476266.

36   International Crisis Group, *The Next Iraqi War? Sectarianism and Civil Conflict*, Middle East Report, No. 52, (Brussels: International Crisis Group, February 27, 2006), 29. The report adds: "Already in early 2004, a secular Shiite academic had told Crisis Group that at the end of day, confronted with the choice to vote for a secular or an overtly Shiite party, he would vote for the latter out of 'Shiite

solidarity' – to ensure the realisation of the Shiite majority's dream of ruling Iraq." Ibid., 29, ft. 204.

37 The argument commonly made by Sunni Arabs is that they constitute 42 percent of the Iraqi population, while the Shia account for 41 percent; hence, according to this logic, alongside the mostly Sunni Kurdish north, Iraq is a Sunni-majority country. Many Sunni figures have publicly stated their rejection of any notion that they are a numerical minority: from religious leaders such as Harith al-Dhari (former general secretary of the Association of Muslim Scholars); to politicians such as Khalaf al-Ulayan, Muhsin Abd al-Hamid (former head of the Iraqi Islamic Party), and Osama al-Nujaifi; to extremists such as Taha al-Dulaimi. In fact, as early as August 2003, Dulaimi was calling the idea that Sunnis are a minority a lie. See "Al Haqiqa: Awal Kitab Makhtoot an Ti'dad al Sunna wal Shia fil Iraq" [The Truth: The First Written Book on Sunni and Shia Enumeration in Iraq], October 2003, *Islam Memo*, http://www.islammemo.cc/2003/10/02/2626.html.

38 Allawi, *The Occupation*, 136.

39 Harith al-Qarawee, "National Reconciliation and Negotiation: The Path Forward in Iraq and Syria: Panel 1," YouTube video, from the "National Reconciliation and Negotiation: The Path Forward in Iraq and Syria" event at School of Advanced International Studies, Johns Hopkins University, December 15, 2014, posted by "SAIS events," December 16, 2014, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Na5tfjOiB3M.

40 Rayburn, *Iraq After America*, 130.

41 Initially there were two broad tendencies among Sunni Arabs: one that clung to the sect-averse political frames of reference of the pre-2003 world and another that essentially tried to catch up with Shias in terms of building a politicized sectarian identity. Although this divergence still exists to some degree, the latter trend quickly gained ground, as evidenced by the December 2005 election in which the Sunni Islamist coalition, Tawafuq, secured the majority of Sunni seats. See International Crisis Group, *Make or Break*, 5; Wicken, *Iraq's Sunnis*, 36.

42 Benjamin Bahney, Patrick B. Johnston, and Patrick Ryan, "The Enemy You Know and the Ally You Don't," *Foreign Policy*, June 23, 2015, https://foreignpolicy.com/2015/06/23/the-enemy-you-know-and-the-ally-you-dont-arm-sunni-militias-iraq/.

43 These paradoxes of Iraqi Sunni identity are discussed in more detail in Haddad, "A Sectarian Awakening," 153–65.

44 This was particularly noticeable in 2009 (which incidentally was an election year). For example, see Ahed Wahid, "Suwar rijal al-din al-siyasiyin tufariq al-manazil wa al-sayarat" [Pictures of political religious figures leave houses and cars], *Al-Hayat*, September 22, 2009.

45 Writing in 2009, Reidar Visser provides an overview of the reasons for optimism and also why optimism needed to be cautious. Indeed, while the January 2009 election was largely peaceful, there were several instances of questionable electoral tactics such as the use of de-Baathification to exclude rivals from the elections. See Reidar Visser, "Post-Sectarian Strategies for Iraq," Historiae.org, March 18, 2009, http://historiae.org/post-sectarian.asp.

46 For an analysis of Maliki's second term and of Iraqi politics during that period see, Marc Lynch et al., *Iraq Between Maliki and the Islamic State*, POMEPS Briefing no. 24 (Washington: Project on Middle East Political Science, July 9, 2014), http://pomeps.org/wp-content/uploads/2014/07/POMEPS_BriefBooklet24_Iraq_Web.pdf.

47 On the Hashd, see Fanar Haddad, "The Hashd: Redrawing the Military and Political Map of Iraq," Middle East Institute, April 9, 2015, http://www.mei.edu/content/article/hashd-redrawing-military-and-political-map-iraq. On Sistani's statement, see Luay Al Khatteeb and Abbas Kadhim, "What Do You Know About Sistani's Fatwa?" *Huffington Post*, July 10, 2014, http://www.huffingtonpost.com/luay-al-khatteeb/what-do-you-know-about-si_b_5576244.html.

48 On the Hashd's impact on and possible role in politics see Mustafa Habib, "The Next Rulers of Iraq?" *Niqash*, July 30, 2015, http://www.niqash.org/en/articles/politics/5067.

49 For example, after the fall of Mosul, then speaker of parliament Osama al-Nujaifi used the term "revolution" (a term whose positive connotations imply legitimacy) to describe the renewed insurgency, while accepting that "terrorists are taking advantage of it." See Abigail Hauslohner, "Iraq's Crisis Won't be Resolved by Fighting, Sunni Leader Says" *Washington Post*, July 12, 2014, https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/worldviews/wp/2014/07/12/iraqs-crisis-wont-be-resolved-by-fighting-sunni-leader-says/. Similarly, the Mufti of Iraq, Sunni cleric Rafii al-Rifaii rejected the label of "terrorist," referring instead to "rebels" or "revolutionaries"; see his comments to *Al-Taghyeer*, "Mufti Rafii al-Rifaii's response to Mahdi al Karbalais' statements," YouTube video, posted by "pressnews10," June 14, 2014, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=kl9XO63TGAM.

50 This view was widely shared across the Arab world: soon after news of Sistani's statements emerged, Twitter was awash with tweets carrying the hashtag "Sistani orders our death" (*al-Sistani yafti bi qatlina*).

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