



# Challenges to the Post-2003 Political Order in Iraq

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## Executive Summary

This paper argues that Iraq's post-2003 identity-based political structure is not the only useful tool for understanding domestic political trends and the nature of the conflict in that country. Iraqis have lived for over 16 years with the same political parties, political elite and political system, marred by corruption, and many are beginning to demand change. Two major and interlinked dynamics – the fragmentation of ethno-sectarian blocs and the emergence of a protest movement that pits citizens against their leaders – are challenging the post-2003 structure. However, these developments do not necessarily signal a post-sectarian Iraq. The *muhasasa* system of ethno-sectarian quotas, which protesters see as the primary symbol of the post-2003 order – reinforces the system of identity-based politics and creates the grounds for impending conflict. Iraq's newly elected government faces a difficult road ahead as it attempts reform. The absence of serious reform efforts in recent years means that Iraqis no longer believe that it is possible to change or address problems of governance through institutional means. There may therefore be attempts to organize protest, but these will be met with violence from those powerful actors which seek to maintain their power within the current system. This friction between reform and the status quo will become a major source of conflict.



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# Introduction

Before the dust could settle on the defeat of the Islamic State (IS) group's territorial rule, Iraq entered into an election year in 2019 – the fourth since the US-led invasion in 2003. During the electoral process, two competing moods emerged: a sense of rejoicing following the military victory clashed with a sense of disillusionment with the political process and a leadership that had failed to provide good governance for the past 15 years. As Iraqis went to the polls, the biggest story to emerge was voter turnout, which was officially 44.5 per cent – the lowest since Saddam Hussein's regime was toppled. In many major cities in central and southern Iraq, from Baghdad to Basra, the figure was reportedly even lower.<sup>1</sup>

Since 2003, the conflict in Iraq has been cyclical. There have been periods of militarization (2003–2004, 2006–2008, 2014–17) and periods of recovery (2008 and 2018). In general, the solution to civil wars and insurgencies has been a military one: to attack the armed groups. For this reason, US presidents from George W. Bush to Donald J. Trump have declared military victories in Iraq but been unable to end the conflict. A military solution has thus far been unable to tackle the root causes of conflict and the conditions that give rise to groups such as IS.

The key to moving past the cycles of conflict and to rebuilding state institutions is a political solution that can represent and

respond to the needs of Iraqi citizens. Despite the rejoicing at the removal of IS, according to a survey conducted by the National Democratic Institute (NDI) in 2018, two-thirds of Iraqis believe that the country is heading in the wrong direction.<sup>2</sup> The mood in Mosul – almost two years after its liberation – has deteriorated. Many residents claimed that they had yet to see the government since the day of liberation.<sup>3</sup>

In focusing on the political solution to the cycles of conflict, this paper argues that the post-2003 identity-based political structure is not the only useful tool for understanding domestic political trends and the nature of the conflict in Iraq. Iraqis have lived for over 15 years with the same political parties and political elite, and the same political system marred by corruption. Many are beginning to demand change. Two major and interlinked dynamics – the fragmentation of ethno-sectarian blocs and the emergence of a protest movement that pits citizens against their leaders – are challenging the post-2003 structure.

Shortly after the 2018 election, Iraqis took to the streets in Basra and other parts of southern and central Iraq in protest. Many of these protests were based on citizen frustration with the lack of basic services – notably electricity and water – and with unemployment, but they also reveal a wider dynamic. For many years, Shia citizens have been protesting against their own Shia leaders, Kurdish citizens have been

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<sup>1</sup> Matthew Schweitzer, "Protests in Southern Iraq Intensify: Is Instability to Follow?", 24 July 2018, <https://theglobalobservatory.org/2018/07/protests-southern-iraq-intensify-is-instability-to-follow/> (19 December 2018).

<sup>2</sup> National Democratic Institute, "Parliamentary Elections: A New Turning Point for Iraq", 12 July

2018, <https://www.ndi.org/sites/default/files/Iraq%20Feb-April%202018%20Survey%20Public%20Report%20Final.pdf> (19 December 2018).

<sup>3</sup> Author's interviews with residents in Mosul, 2017–2019.





protesting against their Kurdish leaders and, increasingly, Sunni citizens have been criticizing their own Sunni leaders. This paper unpacks the protest movement and argues that the wider conflict that is emerging will not be defined along ethno-sectarian lines, but rather along citizen-elite lines.<sup>4</sup>

Linked to the protest movement, another political trend was evident in 2018: the breakdown of ethno-sectarian electoral blocs during the process of forming a government. During the formation of a governing coalition in 2005, the major Shia Islamist groups were all represented in the United Iraqi Alliance (UIA) and the major Kurdish groups were represented in the Kurdistan Alliance. Over the years, these monolithic blocs have fragmented, but always come back together during government formation to share power and resources. In the 2018 process, however, two rival blocs emerged – Binaa and Islah – each of which contained Shia, Sunni, Kurdish and minority groups. Thus, identity did not form the lens through which to view politics in Baghdad.

However, the protest movement and the breakdown of ethno-sectarian blocs does not necessarily signal a post-sectarian Iraq. The *muhassasa* (quota) system – the system of ethno-sectarian quotas, which protesters

view as the symbol of the post-2003 order – continues to reinforce identity-based politics, thereby creating the grounds for future conflict.<sup>5</sup> Iraq's new Prime Minister, Adil Abd al-Mehdi, and President, Barham Salih, face a difficult road ahead in attempting to reform this identity-based system. In the absence of reform, Iraqis do not believe that it will be possible to change or address problems of governance through institutional means. They will attempt to take to the streets to protest for change, but this will be met with increased violence from those powerful actors which seek to maintain the system.

For the past 16 years, international actors have made Iraq a playground for wider geopolitical contestation. Most notably, the United States and Iran have made significant efforts to shape successive governments in Baghdad to their liking. In the 2005, 2010 and 2014 government-formation processes, both Washington and Tehran used allies and proxies to ensure friendly governments. Ironically, whether it was Maliki in 2010 or Abadi in 2014, the two sides supported a similar cast of characters for prime minister. Due to the past failures, however, in 2018 many Iraqis rejected foreign interference – be it from Iran, the USA or any other entity.

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<sup>4</sup> In this paper, the term ethno-sect refers to subnational identity, be that faction within Islam (i.e. Sunni and Shia) or ethnic faction (Arab, Kurdish, Assyrian, etc.). The term elite refers to the political leadership in Iraq.

<sup>5</sup> Renad Mansour, "Iraq's 2018 government formation: unpacking the friction between reform and the status quo", 14 February 2019, London School of Economics (LSE) Middle East Centre report, <http://eprints.lse.ac.uk/100099/>.



# The Post-2003 System: Identity Politics and Inter-Community Rivalries

Under the guise of regime change, in 2003 the US-led coalition and its allies among exiled Iraqi opposition leaders led by Ahmad al-Chalabi swiftly dismantled the Iraqi state, which had been built by the British in 1920 and featured a centralized political system based on a command economy. The decision by the Coalition Provisional Authority (CPA) to dissolve both the Iraqi armed forces and the civil service – under its de-Ba’athification campaign, which sought to remove several layers of Iraq’s civil service which had been members of the Ba’ath party – further eroded the structures of the state.

In place of the old structure, Baghdad’s new leaders established a decentralized and quasi-federal state based on a market economy. These new leaders came from the ranks of Shia Islamist groups and Kurdish nationalist parties formed in the second-half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century in opposition to Saddam Hussein’s Ba’athist regime. Guided by traumatic memories of strongman rule under the former Ba’athist regime, this elite saw state-building and political compromise as an opportunity to profit financially, gain power and limit existential threats to their ethnic or sect-based communities. To pursue the latter, the new leaders worked with the US-led coalition to create an identity-based political system, which

became known as *muhasasa*. Under *muhasasa*, political representation is based on ethnic, religious or sectarian identity. This political order has governed Iraqi politics since 2003. In the words of a senior politician, “after 2003, I had to check whether I was Sunni or Shia in order to engage in political life”.<sup>6</sup>

This new system was effectively established in 2005, when two national elections shaped the post-2003 Iraqi state. In the January election, Iraqis went to the polls to elect the committee that would draft the national constitution. In the December election, Iraqis elected their first parliament, which would serve from 2006 to 2010. Both elections featured competition primarily along identity-lines between Shia Islamist groups, which came together in the United Iraqi Alliance (*al-italaf al-Iraqi al-muwahad*, UIA), and Kurdish nationalist groups, which united in the Kurdistan Alliance (*al-tahaluf al-Kurdistani*, KA). With no political party or central authority, Sunni groups lacked institutional political representation, leading to their absence during the state-building years of 2004 and 2005. Moreover, a large-scale Sunni boycott meant that Sunnis would have very little say in the drafting of the constitution and minimal representation in Iraq’s first post-2003 elected government.

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<sup>6</sup> Interview with INC political figure, Beirut, March 2010.



**Table 1** *Main Victors in the 2005 Parliamentary Election*

Electoral Alliance	Identity Base	Seats (total 275)
United Iraqi Alliance	Shia Islamism	140
Kurdistan Alliance	Kurdish nationalism	75
Iraqi List	Mixed (secular)	40

From this point, Iraqi politics became a game of post-election horse-trading between the major identity-based political parties, which made backroom deals to split ministries and government posts and ultimately to share power. Under *muhassasa*, ministers, deputy ministers, directors of ministries and, more broadly, the civil service were appointed by the political parties based on the ethno-sectarian identity of the candidate. Over the years, although the monolithic UIA and KA

split into several groups, the leaders always came back together after elections to divide up power. In 2010, for instance, Muqtada al-Sadr rejoined Nouri al-Maliki to bring the Shia groups back together, even though the two leaders had fought a civil war against each other just a few years before. The political system was therefore guided by inter-community rivalry and each group was afforded positions based on its demographic weight.



# Challenges to the Post-2003 Structure

The post-2003 political system was not the first instance of politicizing identity. The Iraqi sociologist, Faleh A. Jabar, argues that attempts to politicize Shia identity have been a constant feature throughout the Iraqi state-building project, since Amin al-Charchafchi's attempts to establish a Shia party ('Ennahda' or the Renaissance Party) in 1924. However, these attempts had never completely succeeded in the past.<sup>7</sup>

The politicization and militarization of identity featured early on in the building of the new state in 2003 and in the subsequent civil wars.<sup>8</sup> However, as it had in the past, the process began to unravel during the post-2003 period too.<sup>9</sup> As the militarization of identity began to recede in Shia areas, a maturing electorate began to demand more from their leaders, who struggled to maintain sufficient legitimacy by relying on identity-based discourse. More critically, this rejection of identity-based politics erupted at the same time as IS – a group that specifically targeted Shia Iraqis – was in control of up to one-third of Iraq. Shia leaders were unable to use the external threat of IS against their community to rally their constituencies. When a protest movement emerged, one of the main slogans was "the corrupt are the same as

the terrorists".<sup>10</sup> In July 2016, after IS killed around 350 people in Baghdad's primarily Shia Karada district, the neighbourhood's residents pinned the blame on their own Shia leadership rather than on the Sunni Salafi-jihadi group.<sup>11</sup>

Today, the post-2003 identity-based political order is unravelling, having failed to legitimately represent or respond to the basic needs of Iraqis. On the ground, Arab Iraqis are challenging *muhasasa* and Kurds are increasingly challenging their own political leadership. Some analysts have argued that Kurdayeti (Kurdishness) is in a period of stalled transition as the current leadership is unable to use the same old ethnic-based logic to make legitimate claims to representation.<sup>12</sup> According to an NDI survey, over half of Kurdish interviewees would prefer to support a party that represents multiple religious sects and ethnicities. Leaders across Iraq are less able to use identity as a tool to gain legitimacy and build constituencies. Another recent NDI poll reveals that an overwhelming majority of the Arab Iraqis surveyed would prefer their parties to be cross-ethno-sectarian. Many writers have

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<sup>7</sup> Faleh A. Jabar, "The Iraqi Protest Movement: From Identity Politics to Issue Politics", LSE, 11 June 2018, [http://eprints.lse.ac.uk/88294/1/Faleh\\_Iraqi%20Protest%20Movement\\_Published\\_English.pdf](http://eprints.lse.ac.uk/88294/1/Faleh_Iraqi%20Protest%20Movement_Published_English.pdf) (19 December 2018).

<sup>8</sup> Fanar Haddad, *Sectarianism in Iraq: Antagonistic Visions of Unity* (London: C. Hurst and Co., 2011).

<sup>9</sup> Faleh A. Jabar, "The Iraqi Protest Movement: From Identity Politics to Issue Politics", LSE, 11 June 2018, [http://eprints.lse.ac.uk/88294/1/Faleh\\_Iraqi%20](http://eprints.lse.ac.uk/88294/1/Faleh_Iraqi%20)

[Protest%20Movement\\_Published\\_English.pdf](#) (19 December 2018).

<sup>10</sup> Interviews with protest movement leaders, Baghdad and Beirut, March–May 2017.

<sup>11</sup> Fanar Haddad, "Interview with Fanar Haddad: After Sectarianism", 20 November 2017, <https://www.epic-usa.org/after-sectarianism/> (19 December 2018).

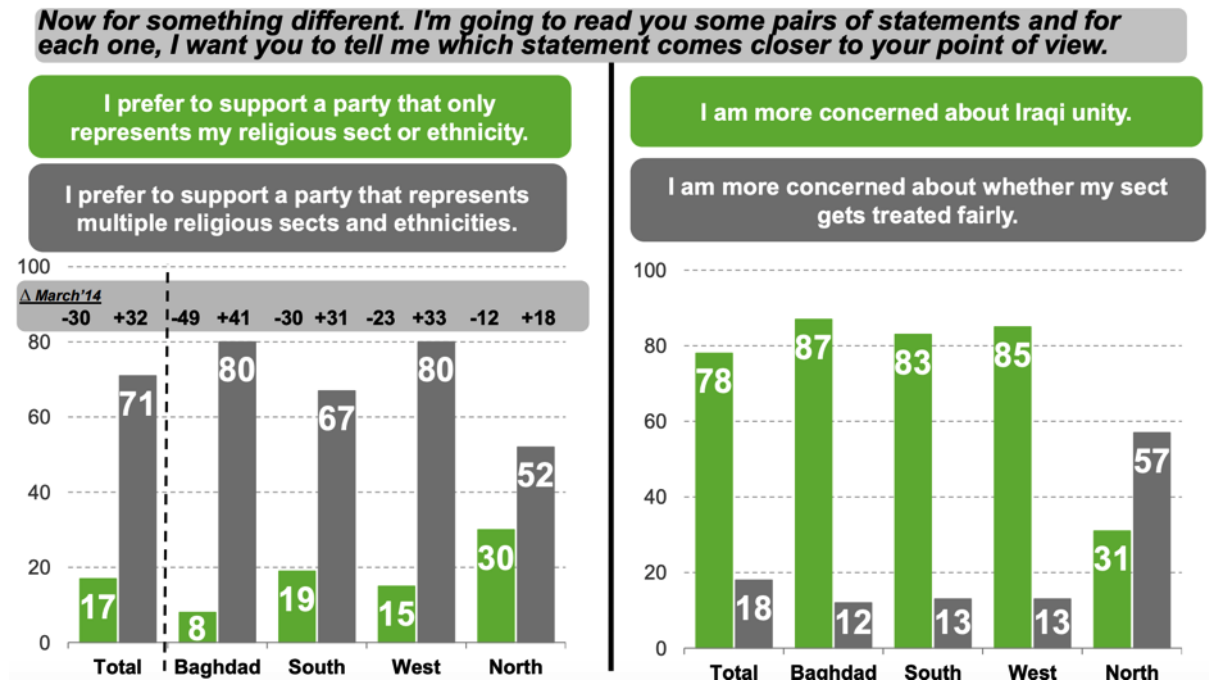
<sup>12</sup> Cale Salih and Maria Fantappie, "Kurdish Nationalism at an Impasse", the Century Foundation, 29 April 2019, <https://tcf.org/content/report/iraqi-kurdistan-losing-place-center-kurdayeti/?agreed=1> (11 May 2019).





similarly noted the emergence of a post-sectarian political dynamic.<sup>13</sup>

**Figure 1** Views on cross-sectarian party support



Source: NDI, "Parliamentary Elections: A New Turning Point for Iraq", 12 July 2018.

The challenge for the old game of identity politics in Iraq's domestic affairs is primarily twofold: first, the internal competition within each group has discredited the idea of large monolithic blocs; and, second, the

emergence of a protest movement has challenged the legitimacy of the leadership and its ability to rely on identity-based arguments to rally popular support.

<sup>13</sup> See e.g. Borzou Daragahi, "Welcome to Iraq's First Post-Sectarian Election", *Foreign Policy*, 10 May 2018,

<https://foreignpolicy.com/2018/05/10/welcome-to-iraqs-first-post-sectarian-election/> (19 December 2018).



# Intra-Community Rivalries

The current challenges to the political use of identity are linked to internal struggles within each of the ethno-sectarian blocs. As the post-2003 leaders struggled to maintain their legitimacy by using identity to rally constituents, they faced internal power struggles, exposing the myth of homogenous ethno-sectarian blocs. Although these blocs were never genuinely united, and often displayed internal fragmentation, they maintained enough unity in the 2005/6 and 2010 government-formation processes to negotiate internally. By 2018, however, these blocs were no longer able to maintain unity even during the government formation process. Identity alone no longer served as an explanatory variable in post-IS Iraqi politics.

## Internal Shia Competition

In the lead-up to the May 2018 elections, thousands of candidates from over 200 political parties sought to win one of the 329 seats in Iraq's Council of Representatives. As noted above, the 2003 elections did not produce a clear victor, but a process whereby all the parties came together to make grand compromises and backroom deals to share power. Before the vote in 2018, recent political realities had suggested that the breakdown in the monolithic ethno-sectarian blocs would be far stronger than in previous election cycles.<sup>14</sup>

### *The Two Poles of Shia Politics*

The Shia camp has fractured into several groups over the years, but the most significant rivalry to emerge has two poles. On one side there is a right wing, conservative or reactionary group of Islamists who support a "strongman state" and seek strong relations with Iran.<sup>15</sup> This group is led by Nouri al-Maliki and leaders of the PMU such as Hadi al-Ameri and Qais al-Khazali. On the other side of the divide is a group of reformist and critical Shia leaders that opposes all foreign interference in Iraq and calls for a civic state. This group is led by the Shia cleric, Muqtada al-Sadr. Thus, the Maliki-Sadr dispute is at the core of Shia politics – and thus at the core of Iraqi politics.

The results of the 2018 elections saw no outright winner and more fragmentation than ever before as the competing groups each won a similar number of seats. Muqtada al-Sadr's Revolutionaries for Reform Alliance (*Tahaluf al-Sairoon*) won the election with only 54 seats. This is the lowest number of seats for a victorious coalition: the winning group won 140 seats in 2005, 91 seats in 2010 and 92 seats in 2014. Coming a close second, Hadi al-Ameri's Conquest Alliance (*Tahaluf al-Fateh*) won 48 seats, while in third the incumbent, Haider al-Abadi's Victory Alliance (*Tahaluf al-Nasr*), won 42 seats. Among the other Shia Islamist groups were Nouri al-Maliki's State of Law Alliance (*Itilaf Dawlat al-Qanun* - SOL), which won 25 seats; and Ammar al-Hakim's National

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<sup>14</sup> Renad Mansour, "Iraq After the Fall of ISIS: The Struggle for the State", Chatham House, 4 July 2017, <https://www.chathamhouse.org/sites/default/files/publications/research/2017-07-04-iraq-after-isis-mansour-final2.pdf> (19 December 2018).

<sup>15</sup> Faleh A. Jabar was the first to use the conservative label with reference to this group of Shia Islamist leaders at a conference at the LSE on 15 January 2018.



Wisdom Movement (*Tayar al-Hikma al-Watani*), which won 19 seats.<sup>16</sup>

According to Article 76 of the Iraq Constitution, “the President of the Republic shall charge the nominee of the largest Council of Representatives bloc with the formation of the Council of Ministers within 15 days of the date of the election of the President of the Republic”.<sup>17</sup> With 188 seats between them, these five groups would have had a majority if they had been able to come together to form the largest bloc. After a delay following accusations of fraud and a subsequent manual recount, the Iraqi Supreme Court ratified the election results on 19 August. President Masum had 15 days to summon a parliament. Two weeks later, on September 4th, the new parliament convened. The session was legally mandated to appoint the largest bloc and elect a speaker.

The chance to forge a majority bloc peaked one month after the vote, when the leaders of the two largest coalitions – Sadr and Ameri – formed an alliance. For Sadr, Ameri became a way to finally bring down Maliki and to co-opt the other conservative Shia Islamists. Maliki, however, rallied on the same day, working with members from inside Ameri’s Fateh coalition, such as Sadiqoon leader Qais al-Khazali, to ensure that this alliance did not last. Ultimately, Maliki and his allies successfully prevented the Ameri-Sadr alliance from stabilizing.

In the end, neither side could form a dominant bloc, and instead formed two competing ones: the conservative group led by Ameri established Binaa; and the Sadrist and opposition groups formed Islah. Legal issues meant that each side

offered different interpretations of how many MPs it controlled, leading to chaotic scenes in parliament, and cementing the fragmentation of the Shia bloc in the government formation process.

Representing two sides of the Shia (and Iraqi) spectrum, the Islah versus Binaa contestation restructured Iraqi politics. On one side, Islah represented a number of electoral coalitions that included Shia groups (Sairoon, Hikmeh, parts of Nasr), Sunnis groups (parts of al-Qarrar, parts of al-Wataniyya, parts of Identity) and Kurdish groups (New Generation and at times the Patriotic Union of Kurdistan, PUK). This side viewed itself as closer to the protest movement, which is discussed below, and as staunch advocates of reform. It argued that the prime minister should be free to choose his own cabinet and free to pursue institutional reform and anti-corruption measures. This side was also against Iran interfering in Iraqi affairs – and any other country for that matter.

On the other side of the changing political spectrum, Binaa, at its core, represents the conservative Islamist groups such as Fateh, State of Law and the Eradaa Movement. This group has strong relations with Iran and the senior military leadership of the Popular Mobilization Units controlled in reality by Abu Mehdi al-Muhandis. It believes in strongman rule and opposes the presence of US troops in Iraq. This electoral bloc is allied with Sunni groups (parts of Identity and Wataniyya) and Kurdish groups.

<sup>16</sup> Renad Mansour and Christine Van Den Toorn, “The 2018 Iraqi Federal Elections: A Population in Transition”, July 2018, [http://eprints.lse.ac.uk/89698/7/MEC\\_Iraqi-elections\\_Report\\_2018.pdf](http://eprints.lse.ac.uk/89698/7/MEC_Iraqi-elections_Report_2018.pdf) (19 December 2018).

<sup>17</sup> Government of Iraq, ‘Destour jumhuriyya al-Iraq’ [Constitution of the Republic of Iraq], 2005, <http://www.cabinet.iq/PageViewer.aspx?id=2> (19 December 2018).



### ***The Rise of the Popular Mobilization Units (al-Hashd al-Shaabi)***

The Popular Mobilization Units (PMU) were officially established in June 2014 when the then prime minister, Nouri al-Maliki, created a committee to bring together and recruit various non-state armed groups to offset the collapsing Iraqi army as IS took Mosul and one-third of the country's territory. Days later, Grand Ayatollah Ali al-Sistani's *wajib al-kifai* fatwa called on all able-bodied men to defend Iraq.<sup>18</sup> Although Sistani's office offered clarification that they had intended that the men join government institutions, Maliki and his conservative Shia Islamist allies, including Abu Mehdi al-Muhandis who would become the de facto PMU leader, used the fatwa to mobilize recruits. The PMU served a key function in the initial fight against IS between 2014 and early 2016, when the Iraqi armed forces suffered defeats in several arenas.<sup>19</sup> The PMU groups then served to support the Iraqi Ministry of Defence (MOD), Ministry of Interior (MOI) and Counter-Terrorism Service with the liberation of Iraqi towns and cities.

However, the PMU was not an entirely new phenomenon in post-2003 Iraq. Several armed groups had existed prior to the establishment of the PMU, such as the Badr

Organization, Asaib ahl al-Haq (AAH), Kataeb Hezbollah (KH), Kataeb Sayyid al-Shuhada, Harakat Hezbollah al-Nujaba, Kataeb al-Imam Ali and Kataeb Jund al-Imam. These groups had flourished during Maliki's premiership in particular, following the breakdown of the Mehdi Army in 2008 and the start of the civil war in Syria, where many Iraqi Shia fighters went to defend the regime of Bashar al-Assad.<sup>20</sup> Moreover, after 2011, these non-state armed groups became an important ally in Nouri al-Maliki's centralization of power. He used these groups to attack opponents, be they Sadrists or Sunnis, who he accused of terrorism or de-Ba'athification.<sup>21</sup>

Although there had been various plans to eventually integrate the PMU into the Iraqi armed forces – defined constitutionally as under the MOD or the MOI – Law Number 40 (2016) granted the PMU autonomy.<sup>22</sup> This law made the PMU “an independent military formation as part of the Iraqi armed forces and linked to the Commander-in-Chief” under the National Security Council (NSC).<sup>23</sup> As a result, the PMU was now an official state institution. Prior to this law, PMU leaders would speak of eventual integration. Following passage of this law, however, PMU leaders agreed that their organization was now a state agency and

<sup>18</sup> Renad Mansour and Faleh A. Jabar, “The Popular Mobilization Forces and Iraq’s Future” Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, 28 April 2017, <https://carnegie-mec.org/2017/04/28/popular-mobilization-forces-and-iraq-s-future-pub-68810>

<sup>19</sup> Ibid.

<sup>20</sup> Harith Hassan, “Iraq’s Sectarian Crisis: A Legacy of Exclusion”, Carnegie Middle East Centre, 23 April 2014, <http://carnegie-mec.org/2014/04/23/iraq-s-sectarian-crisis-legacy-of-exclusion-pub-55372> (19 December 2018).

<sup>21</sup> Dexter Filkins, “What We Left Behind”, *The New Yorker*, 28 April 2014, <https://www.newyorker.com/magazine/2014/04/28/what-we-left-behind> (19 December 2018).

<sup>22</sup> International Crisis Group, “Iraq’s Paramilitary Groups: The Challenge of Rebuilding a Functioning State”, 30 July 2018, <https://www.crisisgroup.org/middle-east-north-africa/gulf-and-arabian-peninsula/iraq/188-iraqs-paramilitary-groups-challenge-rebuilding-functioning-state> (19 December 2018).

<sup>23</sup> Iraq Council of Representatives, “The Law of the Popular Mobilisation Units Commission”, no. 40 of 2016, November 2016, <http://ar.parliament.iq/2016/11/26/%D9%82%D8%A7%D9%86%D9%88%D9%86-%D9%87%D9%8A%D8%A7%D8%A9-%D8%A7%D9%84%D8%AD%D8%B4%D8%AF-%D8%A7%D9%84%D8%B4%D8%B9%D8%A8%D9%8A/>.

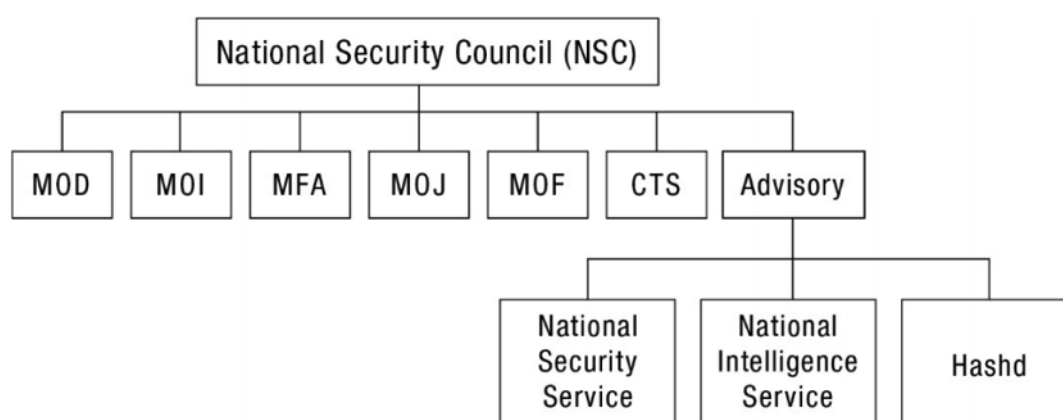


thus did not need to integrate into the MOD or the MOI.<sup>24</sup>

Today, the PMU wants to serve as an independent force that can be used as a national guard outside cities and along Iraq's border with Syria. It has also developed a network of local armed groups

– Sunni, Christian, Turkman, Shabak and Yezidi – that the PMU funds and arms in return for their allegiance. The PMU leadership seeks to use this strategy to gain a foothold in recently liberated areas, particularly along major roads and supply routes.

**Figure 2** *The PMU's Institutional Security Standing*



**MOD** Ministry of Defence  
**MOI** Ministry of Interior  
**MFA** Ministry of Foreign Affairs  
**MOJ** Ministry of Justice  
**MOF** Ministry of Finance  
**CTS** Counter-Terrorism Service

Source: ICG, "Iraq's Paramilitary Groups: The Challenge of Rebuilding a Functioning State", 2018.

The rise of the PMU as a political force has been another defining feature of post-IS political dynamics in Iraq. Even before the PMU was established, some of its members were political actors. For instance, both Badr and the AAH had political representation following the March 2014 elections, in which they won 23 seats and 1 seat, respectively. During the 2018

elections, several PMU groups campaigned as part of the Fateh Alliance, which finished second just a few seats behind Sadr. As a result, the PMU has become a strong political force in post-IS Iraq.

The PMU is also part of the internal Shia competition that today defines Iraqi politics across the spectrum. Internal power

<sup>24</sup> Author interviews with various PMU leaders, Baghdad, Najaf, Basra and Beirut, 2014–2018.





struggles pin primarily the conservative Islamist groups close to Iran, Maliki–Badr, the AAH and the KH, against other members that are critical of the conservative Islamist leadership of the PMU. For instance, a leading Hakim official issued a harsh critique of the AAH and its leader, Khazali, as “the biggest abuser of the PMU”.<sup>25</sup> Sadr has also criticized the PMU’s “bad apples”, who he sees not as part of his armed group (Saraya al-Salam) but rather as among the conservative groups. He has repeatedly called for the dissolution of the PMU.<sup>26</sup> Even within the conservative Shia Islamist camp of the PMU, some authors have noted internal contestation as the organization seeks to consolidate power.<sup>27</sup> In short, the intra-Shia rivalry also exists within the PMU umbrella organization, various members of which are competing with each other

## Rifts in Kurdistan

Like the Shia leadership, the Kurdish leadership has also united in a single bloc when it comes to elections and then government formation. In 2005, the Kurdistan Alliance, representing the two major parties – the Kurdistan Democratic Party (KDP) and the Patriotic Union of Kurdistan (PUK) – negotiated on behalf of the Kurdistan Region. Both parties had enjoyed several decades of institutional representation of the Kurdish people, and

had been governing the autonomous region of Iraqi Kurdistan since 1991. Following a civil war in 1994–96, the two parties came together under the 1998 Strategic Agreement, which called for power-sharing and a working relationship between the two. After 2003, this agreement guided the two parties’ politicking vis-à-vis Arab parties in Baghdad. They would make internal agreements among themselves behind closed doors and then present their demands to their Arab counterparts.

However, in another parallel with the Shia leadership, the Kurdistan Alliance has begun to fracture. In 2010, a new movement, known as the Change Movement (Goran), emerged in Sulaimania when several senior leaders, led by Nawshirwan Mustafa, split from the PUK. Goran called for an end to the KDP-PUK duopoly in the Kurdistan Region and ran separately from the KDP/PUK-dominated Kurdistan Alliance in the 2010 elections. In the 2014 elections the Kurdistan Alliance split altogether as the PUK decided to run independently of the KDP. Nonetheless, in both 2010 and 2014, while the KA was increasingly fractured, Erbil’s leadership remained united when it came to negotiating with Baghdad.

However, by 2018 the Kurdish leadership was no longer able to present a united front to Baghdad. This open split was symbolized by the election of President Barham Salih in

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<sup>25</sup> “Director of the Euphrates Channel directs a ‘fiery message’ to Qais al-Khazali: You are more than insulting the PMU”, Nas News, 11 January 2019, <https://www.nasnews.com/%D9%85%D8%AF%D9%8A%D8%B1-%D9%82%D9%86%D8%A7%D8%A9-%D8%A7%D9%84%D9%81%D8%B1%D8%A7%D8%AA-%D9%8A%D9%88%D8%AC%D9%87-%D8%B1%D8%B3%D8%A7%D9%84%D8%A9-%D9%86%D8%A7%D8%B1%D9%8A%D8%A9-%D8%A5%D9%84%D9%89/> (10 April 2019).

<sup>26</sup> Renad Mansour and Faleh A. Jabar, “The Popular Mobilization Forces and Iraq’s future”, Carnegie Middle East Center, 28 April 2017, [https://carnegieendowment.org/files/CMEC\\_63\\_Mansour\\_PMF\\_Final\\_Web.pdf](https://carnegieendowment.org/files/CMEC_63_Mansour_PMF_Final_Web.pdf) (19 December 2018).

<sup>27</sup> Renad Mansour, “Why are Iraq’s paramilitaries turning on their own ranks?”, *Washington Post*, 18 February 2019, <https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/monkey-cage/wp/2019/02/18/why-are-iraqs-paramilitaries-turning-on-their-own-ranks/> (10 April 2019).



October 2018. In the past, and in the spirit of the 1998 strategic agreement, the PUK was granted control over the position of president while the KDP acquired senior ministries. Thus, the PUK's leader, Jalal Talabani, was elected president in 2005 and 2010, and a PUK member, Fuad Massum, was elected president in 2014. The KDP did not contest the presidency, leaving it for the PUK to nominate and control.

However, the 2018 government formation process was not so straightforward. For the first time, the PUK challenged the KDP by contesting its candidate for the presidency, Barham Salih. Despite internal rivalries, a growing faction inside the PUK, led by Lahur and Bafel Talabani and backed by long time politburo member Kosrat Rosul, supported Salih's nomination as the PUK choice for president of Iraq. The KDP leadership, however, believed that Salih was not fit to be president. It also argued that the PUK was weaker than in the past, because of the splits in its electoral base and the emergence of several rival parties. Ultimately, the two sides were unable to arrive at a backroom deal on a compromise candidate, which led to an open vote. The heads of the Arab blocs had previously stressed the need for one Kurdish candidate, fearing differences in opinion within their own fragmented ranks. For instance, Hadi al-Ameri's Binaa bloc included large groups that supported Fuad Hussein and other large groups that supported Salih.<sup>28</sup> Unable to maintain a party line, the blocs eventually agreed to an open vote, which gave Salih a major victory.

The Kurdish leadership was now fragmented in Baghdad, and in 2018 these splits played into the Shia divide between Binaa and Islah. During the government

formation process, the KDP tended to side with the leadership of the Binaa bloc, which included Maliki and Ameri. One year before – following the Kurdistan independence referendum – KDP leaders spoke against the conservative Shia Islamist leadership and the PMU allies that made up the Binaa bloc. However, after the summer of 2018, the KDP moved closer to this side of Shia politics and began to support the Binaa bloc. According to a KDP official, “we understood that leaders like Maliki and the Binaa bloc are more effective at getting things done. The other side [Islah] is disorganized and less effective”.<sup>29</sup> According to a PUK official, however, the PUK tended to side more closely with Islah.<sup>30</sup>

Thus, the so-called Kurdish house – once united – was divided in Baghdad. A senior PUK official told the author that following the election, the 1998 strategic agreement was now dead.<sup>31</sup> Clearly, the Kurds were no longer able to negotiate among themselves and then present a united front when negotiating with Baghdad. Instead, multiple lines of representation have emerged to represent the Kurdish movement. Politics are now based not exclusively on identity, but rather on short-term opportunism as the political parties seek to outmanoeuvre each other. Although not exclusively linked to ethno-sectarian identities, Kurdish politics is still linked to patronage networks.

## The Sunni Predicament Revisited

Following the events of 2003 and the creation of the identity-based system, the Sunnis failed to unite in the same way as the Shia Islamist or Kurdish ethno-nationalist

<sup>28</sup> Interviews with leaders of Binaa and Islah, Baghdad, September 2018.

<sup>29</sup> Telephone interview with KDP official, December 2018.

<sup>30</sup> Interview with PUK official, Baghdad, November 2018.

<sup>31</sup> Interview with PUK official, Baghdad, September 2018.



groups. Lacking a political party or other forms of social authority (i.e. centralized religious leadership), the Sunnis had no long-serving institutional representation, particularly following the process of de-Ba'athification.<sup>32</sup> The Shia and Kurdish parties had existed for several decades and mobilized first in exile, and then in Iraq after the US-led invasion.

Beyond the absence of strong institutions, intra-Sunni conflict also reduced the relevance of identity as a mobilizing factor. Unlike the UIA or the KA, at no point did the Sunnis have a unified institutional means of representation. Over the years, several attempts to unite Sunni representation in conferences inside and outside Iraq have ended without resolution. In the past, this split matched the dividing line between Islamist and non-Islamist movements. The former have primarily involved the Islamic Party, while the latter have included groups from Ayad Allawi's 2010 al-Iraqiya and other secular or liberal leaders.

This fragmentation featured in the 2018 government formation process, in which Sunnis were divided along the Binaa-Islah contestation. The division was not between Islamists and non-Islamists, but based on strategic calculations of enhancing the interests of the various Sunni political elites.

Foremost among the Binaa Sunnis were Khamis al-Khanjar and Jamal al-Karbouli, who had reached an agreement with the Binaa leadership, including Hadi al-Ameri and Nouri al-Maliki. Although these Sunni leaders had previously been staunch enemies of the conservative Shia leadership, in 2018 they decided to side with Binaa in order to gain power against their Sunni opponents. According to Khanjar,

who returned to Baghdad during government formation, "when we got to Baghdad, we saw that the Binaa leadership has the same ideas as our project on how to fix the crisis of trust".<sup>33</sup> Moreover, Sunni leaders had been engaging with the PMU for several years. This provided financial and military support for Sunni armed groups, known as the "Sunni PMU".

On the other side of the divide were Sunni leaders associated with Islah, such as Ayad Allawi and Saleh al-Mutlaq. They had made their own strategic calculation that the Sadr-led movement could best enhance their interests. They remained anti-Iranian and anti-Maliki.

Thus, the divisions among the Sunni politicians no longer ran along Islamist and non-Islamist lines. Instead, they became part of the larger intra-Shia divide, as each leader made his own strategic calculations as to which side could afford him greater power and the best government post.

## **Iraq's Smaller Communities Still Divided**

Fragmentation can also explain the political realities of Iraq's smaller ethnic communities, such as the Christian, Yezidi, Turkman and Shabak communities primarily in northern Iraq. These groups are of great interest to the larger political actors for two main reasons: they are guaranteed representation – and thus seats – through the parliamentary quota system and they tend to reside in the disputed territories between Ninewah and Kirkuk. As such, these minority groups have become part of the larger intra-ethno-sectarian contestation.

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<sup>32</sup> Renad Mansour, "The Sunni Predicament in Iraq", Carnegie Middle East Centre, 1 March 2016,

[https://www.jstor.org/stable/resrep13043?seq=1#page\\_scan\\_tab\\_contents](https://www.jstor.org/stable/resrep13043?seq=1#page_scan_tab_contents) (18 December 2018).

<sup>33</sup> Interview with Khamis al-Khanjar, Baghdad, November 2018.



The Christians in Iraq are divided into several camps. The largest camp to emerge following the 2018 government formation process was the Babylon Battalion, led by Sheikh Rayan al-Kaldani, who is a PMU fighter and close to the Binaa leadership.<sup>34</sup> With the support of Hadi al-Ameri, Kaldani was able to become a significant Christian leader, gaining two seats, which were added to Ameri's Binaa.<sup>35</sup> Another group, the Popular Assyrian Council, has been supported by the KDP in both the KRI and Baghdad. As the KDP official, Hemin Hawrami, tweeted, "KDP as the only multi religious party in Kurdistan, mobilized the Christian members & succeeded in winning 2 of the 5 seats of the Christian quota".<sup>36</sup>

A similar story applies to the other minority groups, which fall between the major players seeking to gain a foothold in the disputed territories and to use the minority quota to gain extra political representation.

## From Identity to Issue-Based Politics?

All these internal rivalries expose the fragility of the monolithic ethno-sectarian blocs as year by year internal community rivalries have led to fragmentation at the leadership level. However, the leadership also faces a fragmented electorate, which over the years has stopped accepting identity-based arguments and called for basic services, employment opportunities and an end to corruption. This trend reveals another way in which identity is becoming less of a political tool. In its place, issue-based politics has emerged as the leadership begins to adopt the rhetoric of reform. This change was sparked by the emergence of the Iraqi protest movement. The protest movement is a consequence of years of bad governance. Figure 3 shows that Iraq has consistently scored low on most governance and corruption rankings.

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<sup>34</sup> "Iraq's Paramilitary Groups: The Challenge of Rebuilding a Functioning State", International Crisis Group, 30 July 2018, [https://d2o71andvipowj.cloudfront.net/188-iraqs-paramilitary-groups\\_o.pdf](https://d2o71andvipowj.cloudfront.net/188-iraqs-paramilitary-groups_o.pdf) (10 April 2019).

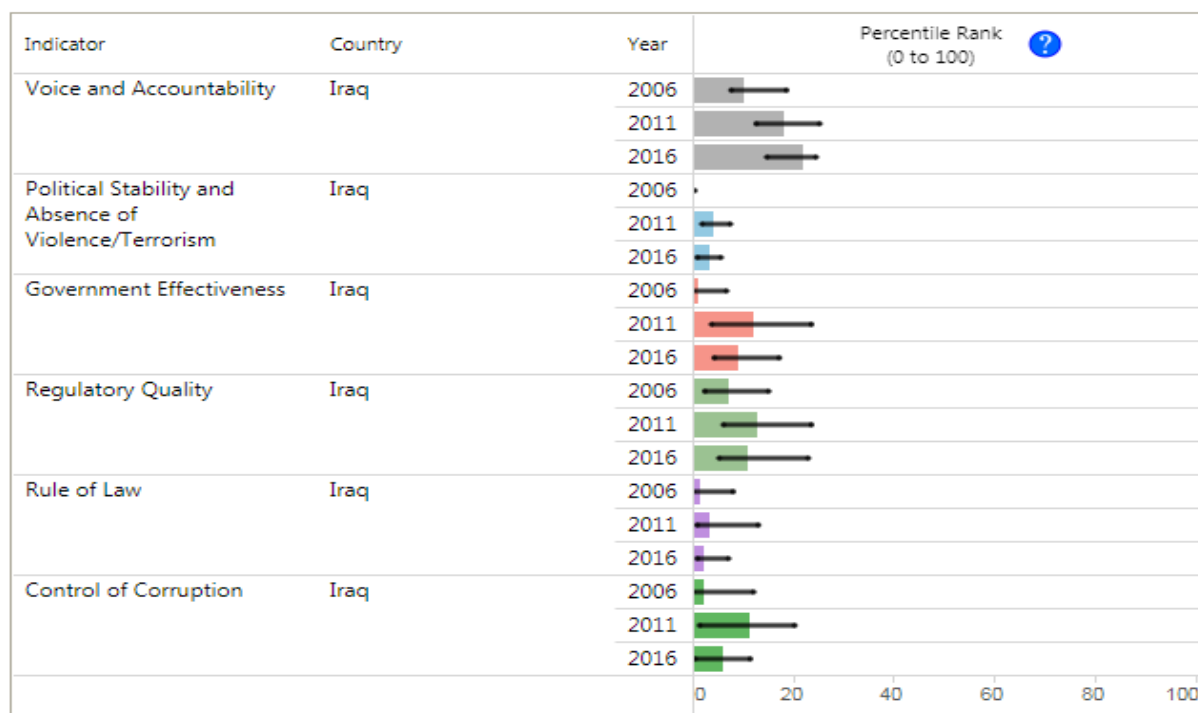
<sup>35</sup> Adad Alan Shmuel and Joanne Patti Munisteri, "Iraq's 2018 Elections Aftermath: A Critical

Situation for Christian Minorities", *Small Wars Journal*, 28 July 2018, <https://smallwarsjournal.com/jrn/art/iraqs-2018-elections-aftermath-critical-situation-christian-minorities> (10 April 2019).

<sup>36</sup> Ibid.



**Figure 3** World Bank's Iraq Country Profile



Moreover, the socio-economic indicators in Iraq also paint a picture of failing governance. Iraq ranks 120th in the UN human development index.<sup>37</sup> More critically, gross national income (GNI) per capita fell from \$6,900 in 2013 to \$4,700 in 2017.<sup>38</sup> A fall in average income corresponded with the emerging protest movement, which was first sparked in the summer of 2015 as incomes decreased and the gap between the citizens and their leaders increased.

### ***The Emergence of the Protest Movement***

In recent years, protest movements throughout Iraq have been challenging the post-2003 elite, which has been unable to represent or respond to the needs of the citizens. In 2015 – at the peak of the existential threat from IS – Shia citizens in the south and Baghdad took to the streets to protest against their own Shia leaders,

rather than against IS, Sunni radical movements or even Sunni politicians who would previously have been accused of supporting such attacks. Similarly, in the north, Kurdish citizens took to the streets to protest against their own Kurdish leaders, rather than against the Arab government in Baghdad.

At the core of these protest movements was a changing reality: ethno-sectarian identity was no longer a legitimizing factor for leaders. The protest movement has mobilized millions, primarily in Baghdad and southern Iraq. The Iraqi sociologist Faleh A. Jabar argues that the protest movement:

*shows how the politicization of ethnic and communal identities is losing some of its unifying potency, allowing political, social and class divisions to*

<sup>37</sup> "Human Development Indices and Indicators: 2018 Statistical Update", UNDP, [http://hdr.undp.org/sites/all/themes/hdr\\_theme/country-notes/IRQ.pdf](http://hdr.undp.org/sites/all/themes/hdr_theme/country-notes/IRQ.pdf) (10 April 2019).

<sup>38</sup> Iraq: Country Dashboard", World Bank, <http://datatopics.worldbank.org/jobs/country/iraq> (10 April 2019).





*creep in and segment these identities into what may be described as a shift from identity politics to issue politics. As stolen funds and the shortage of electricity have no religion or ethnicity, the emergence of issue politics has the potential to transcend communal and ethnic segmentation.<sup>39</sup>*

Citizens were now making demands on their local and federal governments based not on identity, but on their civic duty to provide basic services and support. The movement rejects the post-2003 political system symbolized by *muhassasa*. According to an NDI survey conducted in 2018, 42 per cent of Iraqis agreed that the next government should focus on jobs and employment, and another 36 per cent believed that the new government should focus on anti-corruption measures. In this survey, only 10 per cent of respondents believed that sectarianism was an issue that needed to be addressed.<sup>40</sup>

The protest movement's intellectual core can be traced back to major protests that erupted in Basra several years before. The emergence of the civic trend (*al-Tayar al-Madani*) reflected a wide array of ideologies linked primarily to leftist, pan-Arabist and secular thinkers. This group included scholars, poets, journalists and political figures who rejected the post-2003 Islamist order of the conservative Shia parties.<sup>41</sup> They worked closely with the Iraqi Communist Party to spread ideas of state building, anti-corruption and secular/liberal politics. However, this group of civil activists

and the intelligentsia remained largely confined to academia and never sought to foster support from among the general population. During demonstrations in 2010 and 2011, when citizens took to the streets to protest against increasing temperatures and the government's inability to provide electricity or water, this group of civic thinkers was unable to politicize the sporadic protests.

In 2015, however, the protest movement was given new life, as years of maladministration, decreasing GNI and a lack of basic services reached boiling point in the intense heat of that year, bringing millions of Iraqis out on to the streets. The protests that erupted, first in Basra and then throughout the south and in Baghdad, were politicized by civic activists. They were able to unite their opposition to the *muhassasa* and the post-2003 political order with the sporadic grievances that led citizens to march in the summer heatwaves of 2015. From this point on, the protest movement has been able to shape the narrative and mobilize citizens to demonstrate against local and federal government leaders.

The protest movement argues for improved local and federal level governance, particularly in the provision of employment, electricity, water and other basic services to the population. It calls for an end to the corruption that has made the post-2003 elite rich at the expense of the citizens. The movement argues that this elite, which often sends its money abroad to foreign

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<sup>39</sup> Faleh A Jabar, "The Iraqi Protest Movement: From Identity Politics to Issue Politics", LSE, 11 June 2018, [http://eprints.lse.ac.uk/88294/1/Faleh\\_Iraqi%20Protest%20Movement\\_Published\\_English.pdf](http://eprints.lse.ac.uk/88294/1/Faleh_Iraqi%20Protest%20Movement_Published_English.pdf) (19 December 2018).

<sup>40</sup> National Democratic Institution, "Parliamentary Elections: A New Turning Point for Iraq", 12 July 2018,

<https://www.ndi.org/sites/default/files/Iraq%20Feb-April%202018%20Survey%20Public%20Report%20Final.pdf> (19 December 2018).

<sup>41</sup> Benedict Robin, "The Sadrist-Communist Alliance: Implications for Iraq's Secular Politics", LSE Middle East Centre, 6 June 2018, <https://blogs.lse.ac.uk/mec/2018/06/06/the-sadrist-communist-alliance-implications-for-iraqs-secular-politics/> (10 April 2019).



bank accounts, relies on foreign health care systems and sends its children to foreign private schools, and has no interest in building state institutions that it does not use itself.<sup>42</sup>

Thus, unlike other Arab Spring protest movements that sought to bring down the political leadership – from Mubarak in Egypt to Ben Ali in Tunisia – the Iraqi protest movement is not interested in bringing down any specific leader. Instead, the movement represents an anti-system drive to bring down the post-2003 political order – as symbolized in the repeated references to *muhassasa*. For this reason, a change in leadership or in government posts will not satisfy the demands of the protesters.

The protest movement represents primarily lower and middle-class segments of the Shia population in the south and centre of Iraq, with incomes ranging from 500,000 to 2 million Iraqi dinars per month. Most protesters depend on public sector employment for their livelihoods, and therefore suffer when the government is unable to pay them. The movement is comprised primarily of citizens under the age of 30, who make up around 67 per cent

of the population. This youth segment suffers from high levels of unemployment.<sup>43</sup> According to the World Bank, Iraq's labour force participation rate is 46.3 per cent.<sup>44</sup>

The rise of the protest movement is linked to the retreat of violence and of the mobilization of ethno-sectarianism in Iraq. In the areas of southern Iraq and Baghdad, or the Kurdistan Region where protests have erupted previously, the level of violence has dramatically reduced. According to Iraq Body Count, there were 3,319 violent civilian deaths in 2018, the lowest number since 2003.<sup>45</sup> As a result, the ethno-sectarian blocs have been divided by their own infighting as a more mature electorate begins to demand more from its leadership. NDI polling has shown that, during the period of the protest movement, corruption, employment and services have become bigger concerns for citizens than security. Identity-based logic is easier to employ in times of instability and insecurity. In a recent NDI poll, Iraqis across the country claimed that the security situation had dramatically improved in their lives, but claimed that the availability of jobs, the level of corruption and the cost of living had deteriorated.<sup>46</sup>

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<sup>42</sup> Interviews with protesters, Baghdad, April 2018.

<sup>43</sup> For a comprehensive sociological study of the 2015 protest movement, see Faleh A. Jabar, "The Iraqi Protest Movement: From Identity Politics to Issue Politics", LSE, 11 June 2018, [http://eprints.lse.ac.uk/88294/1/Faleh\\_Iraqi%20Protest%20Movement\\_Published\\_English.pdf](http://eprints.lse.ac.uk/88294/1/Faleh_Iraqi%20Protest%20Movement_Published_English.pdf) (19 December 2018).

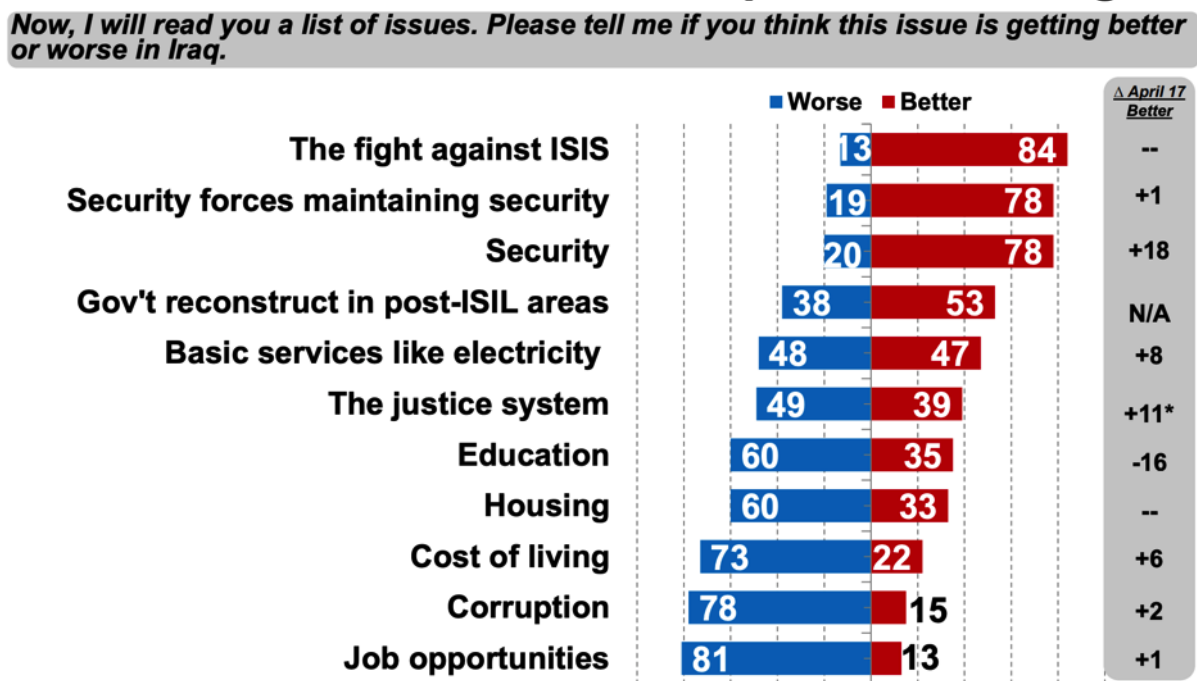
<sup>44</sup> "Iraq: Country Dashboard", World Bank, <http://datatopics.worldbank.org/jobs/country/iraq> (10 April 2019).

<sup>45</sup> "Documented Civilian Deaths from Violence", Iraq Body Count, <https://www.iraqbodycount.org/database/> (10 April 2019).

<sup>46</sup> National Democratic Institute, "Parliamentary Elections: A New Turning Point for Iraq", 12 July 2018, <https://www.ndi.org/sites/default/files/Iraq%20FEB-April%202018%20Survey%20Public%20Report%20Final.pdf> (19 December 2018).



Figure 4 Opinion Poll on Issues in Iraq



Source: NDI, "Parliamentary Elections: A New Turning Point for Iraq", 12 July 2018.

More critically, the protest movement has received widespread support from the Shia religious establishment. In August 2015, as protests flared throughout southern and central Iraq, Grand Ayatollah Ali al-Sistani signalled his support for the movement. His representative, Ahmed al-Safi, argued that the then-prime minister, Haider al-Abadi, "should strike with an iron fist those who tamper with the people's money".<sup>47</sup> Rather than the traditional, false dichotomy of secularist/nationalist versus political Islam, the protest movement represents the coming together of different ideological backgrounds under the same banner to end the post-2003 political system that for 15 years has failed to represent or govern the majority of Iraqis. The Sairoon electoral coalition showcases the connection

between communists, liberals and the Islamists associated with the Shia cleric Muqtada al-Sadr. According to protest movement leader and Iraqi Communist Party member Jassim al-Helfi, "We used to be separated from the Sadrists and the Islamists. We thought our ends would not match. However, as we have all come on to the streets since 2015, we have begun to realise that we all want the same thing".<sup>48</sup> Camping out in Tahrir square during marches, the two social movements began to spend time with each other – and even to dance with each other late into the evening as they spent nights in the square in solidarity.

<sup>47</sup> "Iraq cleric pushes anti-corruption fight as protests flare", Reuters, 7 August 2015, [https://www.reuters.com/article/us-mideast-crisis-iraq-reform/iraq-cleric-pushes-anti-](https://www.reuters.com/article/us-mideast-crisis-iraq-reform/iraq-cleric-pushes-anti-corruption-fight-as-protests-flare-idUSKCN0QC1I620150807)

[corruption-fight-as-protests-flare-idUSKCN0QC1I620150807](https://www.reuters.com/article/us-mideast-crisis-iraq-reform/iraq-cleric-pushes-anti-corruption-fight-as-protests-flare-idUSKCN0QC1I620150807) (19 December 2018).

<sup>48</sup> Interview with Jassim al-Helfi, Baghdad, February 2018.



### ***The Protest Movements and Institutional Politics***

Many commentators celebrated the 2018 national parliamentary elections not only as the first country-wide vote following victory over IS territorial rule, but more critically as the first so-called post-sectarian election in Iraq. Much of this hype was focused on the rhetoric and discourses of the various campaigns. In addition, many electoral lists headed by Shia Islamist leaders campaigned in Sunni and Kurdish areas. For instance, Prime Minister Haider al-Abadi's Nasr coalition campaigned in Kurdish and Sunni areas. In Mosul, the Sunni politician, Khalid al-Obeidi, helped Nasr win the predominantly Sunni province. Similarly, Fateh campaigned in areas such as Kirkuk and Salahadeen where its PMU allies could contend for institutional representation.

Electoral campaigning during the 2018 vote revealed the influence that the protest movement had had on Iraqi political life. Many of the words and slogans employed by the protest movement were adopted into the lexicon of the elite. Thus, in the election campaigns, all the alliances had similar agendas and made similar promises: to fight corruption, to end *muhasasa*, to provide better services and to build a civic movement. Even the conservative Islamist side took on phrases such *civicness*, which in Iraq had been reserved for the secular *tayar al-madani*, as described above. For instance, the AAH leader, Qais al-Khazali, gave a public speech claiming that he and

his movement was the original civic movement.<sup>49</sup>

The relationship between the protest movement and the state is unlike that in other countries in the region. In Lebanon, for instance, the elite has come together to block rising protests, civil society and social movements.<sup>50</sup> In Iraq, however, the elites use the protests to target each other. In late 2015, for instance, Muqtada al-Sadr decided to join the emerging protest movement in an effort to make it his platform for political change. Ever since, he has used protests – and the language of protest – to pursue his agenda. The conservative Islamist groups also use the protests as political tools. For instance, the PMU organized protests in March 2018 when Saudi Arabia's Crown Prince, Mohammad bin Salman, stated his intention to visit Iraq. In sum, rather than sidelining the protest movement, the various political groups have sought to co-opt its language and thrust it against their opponents. In so doing, however, they have opened up the political system to greater contestation. All the major lists use similar vocabulary and ostensibly offer the same promises based on the spirit of the 2015 movement.

The clearest example of how the protest movement is beginning to influence Iraqi political dynamics in a post-IS setting is the new parliament, which first sat on 4 September 2018. Following the May elections, two-thirds of parliamentarians were new to the job. Many of the new

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<sup>49</sup> The irony was not lost of Iraqi comedian Ahmad Bashir, who took issue with al-Khazali's statements. "The Joke of Qais al-Khazali after he becomes a Civic Person", DW Arabic, 25 July 2018, <https://www.facebook.com/dw.arabic/videos/%D8%A8%D8%B9%D8%AF-%D8%A3%D9%86-%D8%A3%D8%B5%D8%A8%D8%AD-%D9%85%D8%AF%D9%86%D9%8A%D8%A7%D9%8B/1918591798164665/> (19 December 2018).

<sup>50</sup> Carmen Geha, "Politics of a garbage crisis: social networks, narratives, and frames of Lebanon's 2015 protests and their aftermath", *Social Movement Studies* 18 (2017): 78–92.



parliamentarians believed they were put in office as part of a new phase to address the failures of the past 15 years. They wanted to keep close to the street and the protest movement.<sup>51</sup> Thus, during the various parliamentary sessions – including the selection of a parliamentary speaker, the election of the president of the republic and the many attempts to form Adil Abd al-Mehdi's cabinet – many of the new parliamentarians employed both the discourse and the tactics of the protest movement. For instance, on several votes parliamentarians defied the party line and decided to vote against their own leadership. On other occasions, the parliamentarians have defied the procedures of the parliament. On 4 December, for instance, Iraqi parliamentarians halted another attempt by al-Mehdi to form a cabinet by marching into the parliament and disrupting the session. In short, the new parliamentarians have taken on the spirit of the protest movement, leading to chaotic and disorderly scenes since the parliament's first session in early September, but also in greater parliamentary autonomy vis-à-vis the government.

The parliament is important for two reasons.<sup>52</sup> First, it has the power to check the political leadership, through motions of no confidence or requests for legal adjudication. Second, parliament is the institution that is closest to the citizens. Many parliamentarians are not in sync with the leaders of the political parties who engage in backroom deals. Since 2003, parliamentarians have served merely as a rubber stamp for such deals. In post-IS Iraq, however, parliamentarians are beginning to

challenge the political system and the identity-based logic that governs it.

### ***Changing Role of Foreign Actors***

During the process of government formation, as well as in political life more generally, the post-2003 system has received significant input from regional and international actors, and in particular from both the USA and Iran. When Iraqi politics was confined to large blocs based on ethno-sect identities, these foreign actors often found themselves on the same side. Washington and Tehran both endorsed the premiership and governments of Nouri al-Maliki in 2006 and 2010, and then of Haider al-Abadi in 2014. They also endorsed the unified leadership of the Kurdistan Region during these periods. However, the breakdown of the seemingly monolithic blocs has altered the equilibrium and changed the political calculus. While Iran has stood strongly behind the Binaa leadership, which includes PMU fighters, the USA has back Abadi and parts of the Islah leadership. This equation has also been affected by splits among the foreign actors involved in Iraq. For instance, the intra-Gulf Cooperation Council split linked to the Saudi Arabia-Qatar rift had consequences for Iraq's government formation process in 2018. Saudi Arabia aligned itself more closely with the Islah figures Abadi, Sadr and Allawi, whereas Qatar aligned itself with Sunni actors such as Khanjar and got closer to the PMU leadership in Fateh. The international community was more fragmented than at any point in the past 15 years.

In post-2003 Iraq, the international sphere served as a legitimizing factor for Iraqi leaders, who often visited foreign capitals –

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<sup>51</sup> Interviews with new MPs, Baghdad, September 2018.

<sup>52</sup> For a debate on the role of parliament, see "In Baghdad Time from al-Iraqiya IMN" Facebook,

18 December 2018, [https://www.facebook.com/iraqianewshd/videos/525985077899203/UzpfSTEwMDAwMDcoMTMwNDY4MDoyMzl3ODE3MjQzOTE5NjMw/ \(10 April 2019\).](https://www.facebook.com/iraqianewshd/videos/525985077899203/UzpfSTEwMDAwMDcoMTMwNDY4MDoyMzl3ODE3MjQzOTE5NjMw/ (10 April 2019).)





from Washington, DC to London, and from Tehran to Riyadh – to gain support for their rule in Iraq. Under this system, many leaders understood that foreign support was essential to political success. The USA and Iran, in particular, had a large role in forming the government following the 2005, 2010 and 2014 elections.

However, 15 years later many Iraqis began to reject foreign interference in their domestic politics. During the government formation process of 2018, many newly elected parliamentarians argued that foreign meddling was one of the largest challenges to their attempts to form the next government.<sup>53</sup> A common chant of protesters was, "Iran out, Iran out!".<sup>54</sup> This push against foreign interference did not stop at Iran, which was targeted because it was the most influential actor in Iraq, but also included the USA, the Gulf states and

Turkey, among others. For instance, in September 2018, the British Ambassador to Iraq published a tweet stating, "I called on the Iranian ambassador to discuss the latest developments in Iraq and we agreed that the next government should improve its services and provide jobs to the people".<sup>55</sup> Although this would have been a typical tweet in post-2003 political system Iraq, where regional and international actors were deeply involved in government formation, in 2018 Iraqis took issue with the statement. After pressure from protesters, the Iraq foreign ministry had to issue a response to the tweet to state that it would not accept foreign meddling in its domestic affairs.<sup>56</sup> Although foreign meddling had been a constant feature in Iraqi politics since 2003, the 2018 process exposed a growing rejection of this reality.

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<sup>53</sup> Renad Mansour, "Iraq's 2018 government formation: unpacking the friction between reform and the status quo", LSE Middle East Centre, 14 February 2019, <http://eprints.lse.ac.uk/100099/> (10 April 2019).

<sup>54</sup> "Iran Out from the Square of Celebrations in Baghdad 2016", YouTube, 30 April 2016, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=e75OcTgghqI> (10 April 2010).

<sup>55</sup> Jon Wilks' Twitter, 20 September 2018, <https://twitter.com/JonWilksFCO/status/1042665131015118848> (20 December 2018).

<sup>56</sup> "The Iraqi Foreign Ministry is surprised by the British ambassador's Tweet for the next government", Sumeria News, 20 September 2018, <https://www.alsumaria.tv/news/247846/%D8%A7%D9%84%D8%AE%D8%A7%D8%B1%D8%AC%D9%8A%D8%A9-%D8%AA%D8%B5%D8%AF%D8%B1-%D8%AA%D8%B5%D8%B1%D9%8A%D8%AD%D8%A7-%D8%A8%D8%B4%D8%A3%D9%86-%D8%AA%D8%BA%D8%B1%D9%8A%D8%AF%D8%A9-%D9%84%D9%84%D8%B3%D9%81%D9%8A%D8%B1-%D8%A7%D9%84%D8%A8%D8%B1%D9%8A%D8%B7%D8%A7%D9%86%D9%8A/ar> (20 December 2018); However, the debate continued, see the Twitter Page of Adnan al-Tae, 20 September 2018, [https://twitter.com/altae72/status/1042831670695538694?ref\\_src=twsrc%5Etfw%7Ctwcamp%5Etweetembed%7Ctwtterm%5E1042831670695538694&ref\\_url=https%3A%2F%2Fyaqeen.net%2Freports%2F140660](https://twitter.com/altae72/status/1042831670695538694?ref_src=twsrc%5Etfw%7Ctwcamp%5Etweetembed%7Ctwtterm%5E1042831670695538694&ref_url=https%3A%2F%2Fyaqeen.net%2Freports%2F140660) (20 December 2018).



## The Difficult Road to Reform

The strength and relevance of identity politics in Iraqi history have been cyclical rather than linear. Although it is too soon to declare the end of sectarianism in Iraq, the dynamics stemming from 16 years of failed governance and state-building have now made it more difficult to politicize – and indeed militarize – ethnicity or sect. The 2018 government formation process and the summer of protests revealed cracks in the post-2003 Iraqi order that has defined political life. Citizens are demanding more from their leadership, which can no longer hide behind ethno-sectarian arguments. The two major future trends will be the internal contestations of ethno-sectarian groups and the increasing role of the protest movement.

Thus far, these two trends have led to political stagnation as the new prime minister, Adil Abd al-Mehdi, has been unable to form a government; and to scenes of chaos as parliamentarians have used parliament as an extension of the protest movement to demonstrate inside the building and to disrupt backroom deals.

This paper has argued that the 2018 electoral cycle showed that the conventional political game in Iraq is changing. The country will find it difficult just to muddle through in the coming years. However, can reform emerge from this disorder? Or are these changes simply cosmetic? Will the greater post-2003 structure continue to govern the country? Thus far, the new prime minister has been a weak actor at the behest of political parties that seek to reinforce the *muhasasa* system. Unable to select his own cabinet, particularly the so-called sovereign ministries of the interior and defence, Mehdi has decided to embark on a path of gradual reform, notwithstanding pressure

from stronger actors linked to both Binaa and Islah that have provided him with his ministers. However, if his attempts to form his cabinet are any indication of the next four years of his premiership, Mehdi will find it difficult to navigate around the strong forces that put him in power.

Moreover, the *muhasasa* system might be under threat, but it is far from being eradicated. The 2018 government formation process, and in particular the electoral mobilization strategies, have shown the continued relevance of identities in politics. All sides gained most of their support from their own ethno-sectarian constituencies, and the make-up of the new government is based on the same considerations. The president is Kurdish, the prime minister is Shia and the speaker is Sunni. Moreover, the Sadr-Ameri compromise that guided government formation worked along identity lines to ensure representation based on demographic weight.

As a result, the demands of the protest movement have not been met through the formation of al-Mehdi's government. Although the 2018 process produced a non-Dawa party prime minister for the first time since the 2005 election, the weakness of state institutions – the executive, the judiciary, the legislature and the independent commissions – vis-à-vis the traditional parties remains a reality that will impede attempts to reform. With nowhere to go, Iraqis have lost faith in their ability to bring about improved governance through institutional means, be they elections or lobbying their political representatives. The protest movement has already begun its plans to march against the new government, which will face increasing difficulties over the next four years.



## List of Abbreviations

AAH	Asaib ahl al-Haq
CPA	Coalition Provisional Authority
GNI	Gross national income
IS	Islamic State
KA	Kurdistan Alliance
KDP	Kurdistan Democratic Party
KH	Kataeb Hezbollah
MOD	Ministry of Defence
MOI	Ministry of Interior
NDI	National Democratic Institute
NSC	National Security Council
PMU	Popular Mobilization Units
PUK	Patriotic Union of Kurdistan
SOL	State of Law Alliance
UIA	United Iraqi Alliance

## Key Leaders

Muqtada al-Sadr, head of the Sadrist movement  
Nouri al-Maliki, head of the State of Law Coalition  
Hadi al-Ameri, head of the Badr Organization  
Haider al-Abadi, former prime minister of Iraq  
Barham Salih, President of Iraq  
Mohammad al-Halbousi, Speaker, Iraqi Council of Representatives  
Adil abd al-Mehdi, Prime Minister  
Khamis al-Khanjar, leader, the National Axis  
Ayad Allawi, head of Wataniyya  
Abu Mehdi al-Muhandis  
Qais al-Khazali, leader of Asaib ahl al-Haq  
Faleh al-Fayahd, National Security Council chair





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