



The Waning Relevance of the Sunni-Shia Divide

Receding Violence Reveals the True Contours of “Sectarianism” in Iraqi Politics

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Several recent headlines and much commentary have heralded the “end of sectarianism” in Iraq and the region, and the dawning of a supposedly “post-sectarian” era.¹ Understandably, this has stretched credulity in some quarters, and with good reason: such phrases are simply too unwieldy and all-encompassing to hold analytic water.² In particular, “sectarianism” is a phrase that has been used to refer to so much, that any proclamation of its definitive end would be as implausible as announcing the end of politics or the end of history. “Sectarianism” is variously understood as referring to sect-coded violence, ethno-sectarian apportionment of political office, the empowerment of sect-centric parties, sect-coded prejudices, and much more. The problem here is not the permanency of “sectarianism,” but the maddening fluidity of the term: encompassing so much that it ends up meaning nothing. As a term, it is best discarded.³ If “sectarianism” means sect-coded violence and entrenchment at a societal level, as happened in Iraq in 2006–7, then for Iraq it is largely a thing of the past. But if the dominance of sect-centric political actors and the ethno-sectarian apportionment of political office also qualify as “sectarianism,” then it remains a part of the landscape—though in an altered form from earlier years.

Seeking to understand the evolution of sectarian identities and sectarian relations is analytically more fruitful than the circuitous debates around the meaning of “sectarianism.” This in turn entails studying the shifting social salience, political relevance, and utility of sectarian identities and relations. On this front, Iraq has seen significant change over the last fifteen years. And while the country still suffers from chronic instability and continues to wrestle with serious security threats, the sources of these problems have shifted somewhat. Specifically, the sectarian divide and issues relating to sectarian identity and sectarian relations no longer act as the chief drivers of political violence, instability, or political competition. Beyond Iraq, this has also been reflected in recent regional developments. These include the regional normalization of Iraq and its thawing relations with Saudi Arabia.⁴ Another example is regional powers’ reframing of their approach to the Syrian conflict, and in the demise of the contrived illusion of a “Sunni crusade” against the regime of Bashar al-Assad in Damascus: as of early 2019, several tentative steps have been taken toward the reintegration of Syria in regional politics.⁵

Instead of cynically conflating anti-Iranianism and anti-Shiism, regional powers are now seeking to create greater distance between the two. There is less stoking of fears of a

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“Shia Crescent,” and regional powers are no longer passively tolerating jihadist mobilization for Iraq and Syria. The reason for this shift involves concerns about jihadist blowback, and the risks of it feeding domestic sectarian violence.⁶ The shift also has the aim of better isolating Iran and its Shia Arab clients and allies from the broader spectrum of Arab Shiism. This approach has the potential of de-securitizing sectarian boundaries both domestically and regionally, even while traditional rivalries between the likes of Saudi Arabia and Iran persist and deepen.⁷

These recent developments have helped shift the vocabulary of conflict and contestation somewhat away from sectarian categories and have helped diminish (though not eliminate) the emotive force and ready utility of sectarian identities from what they were only a few years ago. Perhaps indicative of this is the recent life imprisonment of Bahraini opposition figure Ali Salman for collusion—not with Iran, but with Qatar.⁸ Of course, none of this is irreversible, nor has sectarian identity been reduced to irrelevance, but the landscape has nevertheless changed considerably. Accounting for these changes is important to understanding where Iraq and the region are today and where they might be heading. As such, rather than proclaiming the “end of sectarianism,” the aim of this report is to highlight, firstly, that sectarian relations have gone through several phases since 2003, and secondly, that today sectarian dynamics are no longer the chief driver of political instability—in Iraq or in the region. More broadly, this fluidity highlights the analytical limits of viewing Iraqi politics solely through the prism of communal identity. The political relevance of such identities (or their irrelevance) cannot be assumed or taken for granted. Moreover, sectarian identity does not operate in a vacuum. Sectarian dynamics unfold in national and regional settings that shape the meaning of sectarian identity and the parameters of sectarian competition. As such, sectarian identity in post-2003 Iraq is not a standalone factor but is part of a broader set of variables that operate in the context of the nation-state and the broader regional state system.⁹

The Enduring Appeal of “Sectarianism” and the Artificial State

Rather than examining the shifting sands of sectarian dynamics, there remains a tendency to simplify the subject by framing it through the undefined umbrella term “sectarianism.” In the case of Iraq, this approach has reified the three-way division of Iraqis into Sunnis, Shias, and Kurds (with some observers using “sectarianism” to refer to both Sunni-Shia and Arab-Kurdish dynamics).¹⁰ This oversimplified division overlooks the ever-intensifying intra-sectarian and intra-ethnic cleavages, and obscures a far more diverse reality. More importantly, the disproportional influence of the three-way division routinely blinds observers to the fluctuating relevance of sectarian and ethnic categories. This ties in with a longstanding approach to Iraq that views the country primarily through the prism of division and artificiality. In this view, “Iraq” and “Iraqi” are artificial categories imposed on unwilling Sunnis, Shias, and Kurds, whose group identities are “real” and perennially relevant. Although this line of thinking was especially pronounced in the years immediately before and after the U.S. invasion of 2003, it has an older provenance and continues to be propagated today.¹¹ More worrying and more consequential is the resonance of such views in policy circles—from colonial views of a Middle East divided into perpetually antagonistic groups, to more recent iterations such as Joe Biden and Leslie Gelb’s proposal to formalize Iraq’s three-way division by decentralizing it along Sunni, Shia, and Kurdish lines.¹²

This analytical framework is enduringly popular because it is simple. Its perpetuation in discussions about Iraq may also reflect the tendency of some analysis to take the Kurdish example as the model through which to understand sect-centricity in Arab Iraq.¹³ This, in turn, may be a result of the fact that, particularly since the 1990s, Iraqi Kurdistan has often been more accessible to researchers than Arab Iraq. The familiarity with Arab-Kurdish dynamics that this access creates, combined with the rise of sect-centric Arab Iraqi political actors (especially in exile in the 1990s), has in some cases led observers to imagine a false equivalence between

Kurdish nationalism on the one hand and sect-centricity in Arab Iraq on the other. Overlooked in the process is the fact that the former ultimately aspires to independence while the latter seeks to center a particular community at the political and cultural heart of Iraq. To paraphrase James C. Scott's comments on centralizing and decentralizing conflict, when groups battle over the meaning of a shared nation-state, they implicitly agree on what the prize is and so reaffirm the importance of the unit itself (Iraq). In this way their conflict is centralizing, whereas a faction battling to secede and establish a separate unit is a case of decentralizing or centrifugal conflict.¹⁴ Taking the Kurdish example as the template with which to understand identity in Iraq confuses these two forms of conflict, and validates the idea that the state's problems are best understood as the result of it being artificially imposed on primal and perennial sectarian and ethnic identities. This mistaken and problematic view of sectarian identity holds Iraq, and other Middle Eastern countries, to a standard that would never be applied to the West. After all, every state is an artificial creation, and intergroup tensions are not the product of a congenital inability to coexist. Rather, they are governed by a broad set of factors—such as the way that a state awards rights and privileges. This self-evident point is readily recognized when trying to understand racism, class conflict, or the controversies surrounding multiculturalism in the West. But it is just as readily ignored when it comes to “sectarianism” in the Middle East.

Finally, the persistence of the perceived centrality of “sectarianism” is undoubtedly related to the foundational role of ethno-sectarian identities in the establishment of the post-Saddam Hussein Iraqi political order, as well as the high visibility of sectarian dynamics as a driver of political conflict and spectacular political violence since 2003. Understandably, this has further encouraged the reliance on sectarian categories in analyses of Iraqi dynamics. However, the inflamed salience of sectarian identities at various junctures since 2003 should not blind us to the ebbs and flows of sectarian dynamics over the past fifteen years, which cannot be reduced or explained by reference to vague concepts such as “sectarianism.”

The Shifting Politics of Sect Since 2003

As central as sectarian identities were to the very foundation of the post-2003 political order, and as pivotal as Sunni–Shia cleavages have been in political contestation and political violence, the role, utility, and political relevance of sectarian identity have not stood static over the last fifteen years. Rather than relying on the frame of “sectarianism,” the politics of sect in post-2003 Iraq are better understood as having gone through several stages that can be loosely divided into two cycles:

First cycle

2003–5: Entrenchment

2006–7: Civil war

2008–10: Retreat

Second cycle

2011–12: Entrenchment

2013–15: Civil war

2016–18: Retreat

It is important to note the fundamental difference between the two cycles. The drivers of entrenchment and the broader political climate in 2003–5 differ in many respects from those of 2011–12. For example, the impact of the American occupation in the former and that of the Arab uprisings and the Syrian civil war in the latter fundamentally shaped perceptions toward sectarian identity and sectarian relations. Likewise, internal Iraqi dynamics and the positive regional shifts mentioned above differentiate retreat in 2016–18 from the earlier stage of retreat in 2008–10. The meaning, relevance, and political utility of sectarian identity are shaped by context and hence differ fundamentally from one stage to the next.

By taking these changes into account we can better grasp the shifting sands of Iraqi politics and the fluctuating political relevance of sectarian categories. Failing to do so leads to the all-too-common mistake of anchoring one's understanding of sectarian relations in too narrow a context. Most commonly, this sees sectarian relations framed in an unchanging way under the heading of "sectarianism," whereby sectarian identity is as relevant in 2018 as it was in 2005 with no recognition of the profound changes that have unfolded in the intervening period. To illustrate, one of the defining features of the latest elections was the intensification of intra-sectarian competition and the proliferation of cross-sectarian alliances. Yet despite this, and despite the fact that post-election lines of contestation were primarily intra-Shia and intra-Sunni, many headlines insisted on viewing the delay in government formation as a function of "sectarian agendas," or as the result of "Sunni–Shiite dispute."¹⁵

The stages of sectarian dynamics listed above illustrate the shifting political stakes of sectarian competition. They are also a reflection of the gradual stabilization of the post-2003 order and the consequent restriction of what is politically up for grabs. As I have argued elsewhere, for much of the past fifteen years the central driver of political instability in Arab Iraq has been the interplay between what can be termed Shia-centric state-building and Sunni rejection.¹⁶ The stages outlined above chart the evolution of that process: its ebbs and flows from inflammation and civil war to retreat and diminished relevance. By extension, the shifts from one stage to another are also indicative of the shifts in how sectarian identity and sectarian relations have been perceived and experienced since the U.S. invasion. Political contestation in the earlier stages was more zero-sum and more identity-based, with the very nature of the Iraqi state and the foundational rules of political life being decided. This is where the most basic and crudest level of Shia-centric state-building (the empowerment of Shia-centric political actors and the institutionalization of a vision for Iraq where they act as the senior partner) was still being contested. In these early years, sect-centric and ethnocentric actors believed they were in an existential struggle to ensure their place and survival in an Iraq whose contours had yet to be solidified. Since then, the prism of sectarian identity

has lost the capacity it once had to dominate political perceptions and calculations. Ultimately, the progression of sectarian politics across these various stages reflects the waning of the tension between Shia-centric state-building and Sunni rejection, with the ascendance of the former and the weakening of the latter.

The shifting stages of the politics of sect in Iraq also underline the normalization of the post-2003 order and of the structures underpinning post-2003 sectarian relations. What was contentious or shocking in 2005 is often no longer so today. For example, the assertion of Shia identity, something so zealously and provocatively exhibited for much of the past fifteen years, was at one time a contentious issue that reflected the contested claims of ownership of public space and of the national narrative.¹⁷ Today however, and for some time now, many aspects of Shia symbolism have by and large become an everyday banality. At the height of the war against the Islamic State, international journalism made much of the divisive potential of Shia flags and symbols that were displayed by the Iraqi military and allied paramilitary units.¹⁸ The reality, however, is that by that point these symbols had been a part of daily life for well over a decade, and had been normalized. That is not to say that the issue of symbolism has been resolved or that it has completely lost its divisive potential.¹⁹ Rather, it is only to point out that the parameters of the matter have shifted, and what is regarded as controversial or threatening in Iraqi sectarian dynamics has changed. Perhaps the most straightforward illustration of this normalization process is the changing attitudes, in Iraq and beyond, toward the empowerment of Shia-centric political actors, including those aligned with Iran. Initially, this was controversial enough to cause regional consternation and ultimately led to an internationalized civil war. Today, for good or ill, the political ascendance of Iraqi Shia-centric actors is accepted by domestic, regional, and international policymakers and political actors as an irreversible fact of the political landscape.

A key indicator of these shifts is changing threat perceptions—both elite and popular. A large part of normalization is the waning of fear. Fears of group extinction and fears of group encirclement were heavily sect-coded in the early years

after the U.S. invasion. This had a divisive social impact, as spiraling violence led people to seek safety in their own sectarian communities and to frame the sectarian Other as a threat.²⁰ Today, and particularly since 2014, this is no longer the case. The rise of the Islamic State weakened Sunni–Shia division in Iraq by presenting Iraqis with a more serious threat that transcended sectarian boundaries. Despite the Islamic State’s unambiguously genocidal stance towards Shias, the second phase of civil war was not sect-coded in the same way that the first was—not least because of the diversity of forces that fought against the Islamic State. Again, normalization and by extension the waning of fear are key elements to this: today, the sectarian Other may be loved, hated, or viewed with indifference—but it is no longer regarded as an existential threat.

Unlike in 2006–7, today an Iraqi may fear Sunni or Shia militants without viewing Sunnis or Shias as a threat. To illustrate, in July, 2016, Baghdad experienced its deadliest bombing to date, when more than three hundred civilians were killed in an Islamic State suicide truck bombing in the mostly Shia area of Karrada.²¹ Yet despite the backdrop of the wartime mobilization against the Islamic State, popular outrage at the atrocity was aimed not at Sunnis nor at Sunni neighborhoods but at the Iraqi government for its failure to protect civilians.²² This differs starkly from the grim patterns of 2006–7, when such an incident would have stoked fear of and anger toward “the Sunnis,” further fueling the tit-for-tat atrocities between Sunni and Shia armed camps.

Linked to the process of normalization is the perceived reversibility of the post-2003 order. In the first stage of civil war in 2006–7, the political order was young, insecure, internationally isolated, and directly linked to and dependent on the American occupation. In other words, its situation was precarious enough for its longevity to be doubted by its opponents. Today, a decade and a half later, memories and experiences of pre-2003 Iraq are dimming. Meanwhile, powerful interests spanning across sectarian, ethnic, and even international boundaries are firmly entrenched in Iraq and are vested in the survival of the state. This is a product of the two stages of the civil war and the ascendance of the state and its allied forces: where 2006–7 signaled the

irreversibility of the post-2003 order in the capital, 2013–15 did so on an Iraq-wide scale. Insurgency will undoubtedly persist and is likely to be a feature of the Iraqi landscape for years to come, but the idea of reversing the changes of 2003 or of overthrowing the political order is one entertained by a demographic that gets smaller and more extreme by the year.²³ Again, this is reflected regionally: Iraq today enjoys positive relations with all of its neighbors, regional interests are increasingly invested in Iraqi stability, and would-be spoilers have fewer potential regional patrons than ever before. None of this means that political instability is a thing of the past. Rather, it signals that its parameters have changed in line with the increasing complexity of the Iraqi state and of Iraqi political contestation, which has moved beyond broad-stroke foundational issues relating to the politics of sect and the balance of power between sect-centric political actors. These changing parameters have been evidenced in political messaging, electoral behavior, public opinion, and patterns of violence.

The Muhasasa System

A common refrain holds the “muhasasa” system (the apportionment of political office) as the epitome and cause of all that is wrong with post-2003 Iraq. The architects of the muhasasa system sought to establish ethno-sectarian proportional representation through the apportionment of political office according to the assumed demographic makeup of Iraq. This had the inevitable, entirely foreseeable, and highly divisive effect of elevating the political relevance of ethnic and sectarian identities and centering them at the heart of political life.²⁴ The resilience of the muhasasa system and its persistence into the present is often taken as evidence of the persistence of “sectarianism.”

There are several misconceptions in discussions of muhasasa. These include the belief that it causes systemic corruption or that it was created and imposed upon Iraqis by the American occupation authorities. But muhasasa is hardly a prerequisite for corruption, and indeed is somewhat incidental when compared to institutional weakness or the absence of the rule of law as causal factors. As for the conception of muhasasa, culpability is not the American occupation’s

alone but must also extend to the Iraqi opposition in exile, which, as early as 1992, had advocated ethno-sectarian apportionment as a formula for a just Iraqi political order.²⁵ The networks of patronage that dominate Iraqi economic and political activity are not a product of muhasasa even if they are shaped by it. After all, patron–client relations do not have to be predicated on muhasasa—indeed they were no less significant prior to 2003, except that the centers of patronage were more centralized. In any case, more important for our purposes is the tendency of analysis to restrict muhasasa to its sectarian dimension.

The muhasasa system was never just a muhasasa “ta’ifiyyah” (sectarian apportionment): it was always also a muhasasa “hizbiyyah” (party apportionment). These two components of the muhasasa system serve as important drivers of inter- and intra-sectarian competition, respectively. The former was more prominent in the earlier stages of the post-2003 era when the basic balance of power between sect-centric actors was being contested—in other words, when the contours of sectarian apportionment were being established. Over the last fifteen years, however, contestation within the muhasasa system has shifted increasingly toward party apportionment as a function of the political classes’ acceptance of the rules governing relations of power between sects. As one politician recently put it in a private conversation: “Today it is all about the parties. They [the political classes] have moved beyond muhasasa ta’ifiyyah because, especially after 2014, everyone knows their size and place.” Put another way, at the level of political elites, ethno-sectarian muhasasa and the political shares accorded to “Sunnis,” “Shias” and “Kurds” are, for the moment, reified and minimally contested. Even at a popular level, opposition is less animated by how political office is apportioned or how much is given to a particular sect, and is instead driven by wholesale rejection of the muhasasa system itself.

The increasing tilt of the lines of contestation animating the muhasasa system from sectarian to party apportionment has several implications for how we think about Iraqi politics today. Most obviously, it again reflects a process of normalization as sectarian relations of power are formalized and less contested: fewer divisions between sects in a less

contested sectarian muhasasa, and more divisions within sects in a more contested party muhasasa. One effect of this is a greater distance between the muhasasa system and broader society. A sectarian muhasasa is an elite bargain ostensibly aimed at governing sectarian relations by, among other things, ensuring an agreeable political share for the various sects and ethnicities that make up the polity.²⁶ In this way, sectarian apportionment shapes horizontal relations among both elites and people, thereby lending it a socially divisive element, as seen in the earlier stages of the Sunni–Shia division after 2003. By contrast, party muhasasa is more directly concerned with horizontal relations among elites. Short of these elites having genuine political constituencies, this party muhasasa has less of a social echo in that it is far more nakedly about the division of spoils among unrepresentative political actors. The increasing tilt towards a party muhasasa is a function of the normalization of the post-2003 order and of the culmination of the contest between Shia-centric state-building and Sunni rejection. In turn, this has driven the shift from identity politics to issue politics and is at the heart of the emergence of what Renad Mansour has argued is Iraq’s new fault line, namely that between the people and the ruling classes.²⁷

In 2019, excessive focus on “sectarianism” and the politics of the Sunni–Shia divide serves to unduly overshadow the far more relevant divide between elites and people. In some ways, consciously or not, the term “muhasasa ta’ifiyya” acts as a cover for and a diversion from what is today a far more significant “muhasasa hizbiyya.” Iraqi politics today are not about managing the coexistence of communities nor are they about establishing or tearing down a state. Rather, elite bargains today are about managing the coexistence and working arrangements of complicit elites. This reflects the reality that the political classes have made common cause through their mutual interests and collusion in an exclusionary system that has given them all a stake in its continuation. The political classes also share a common threat perception with regards to the burgeoning social pressure from below, as was dramatically illustrated over the summer of 2018.²⁸

Electoral Politics

Nowhere have these changes and the diminishing political relevance and utility of sectarian identities been more clearly visible than in electoral politics. In addition to provincial elections, Iraq has held five legislative elections since 2003: twice in 2005 and then again in 2010, 2014, and, most recently, in 2018. Surveying the political evolution of these elections, one of the most visible patterns is the shift from competition between sects to competition within sects. This is chiefly represented in the fragmentation of the grand ethnic and sectarian political blocs of 2005. In the earlier elections, the contest was about the fundamental political norms that would govern the post-2003 order: establishing the muhasasa system and determining the practical extent of communal representation and particularly of the respective shares of Sunnis, Shias, and Kurds. The more these broad and foundational issues were settled, the less contested inter-sect and inter-ethnic political competition became. By extension, this diminished the perceived need for sectarian solidarity and allowed for greater intra-sectarian and intra-ethnic competition, thereby intensifying the fragmentation of electoral politics with every electoral cycle.

Former speaker of parliament Mahmoud al-Mashhadani bluntly described this formalization and normalization of the ethno-sectarian division of office in a November 2018 television appearance: “Our share [Sunnis] is known: six ministries, nine commissions, and more than sixty other positions—special grades. So what do we care who comes and who is the largest bloc and who is prime minister? What do I care? Whoever comes, we will say: this is our share, give it to us. He cannot say no, because this is agreed upon.”²⁹

This perspective, of course, is a stark departure from the hotly contested debates surrounding demographics that proliferated in the early years following 2003.³⁰ Similarly, in the context of intra-Sunni rivalry during the government formation process in 2018, rather than opposing or challenging the system and rather than insisting on a greater share of positions (as was the case in earlier years), Sunni parliamentarian Mohammed Alkarboli underscored the system’s normalization by speaking its language. “The

Ministry of Defense is the right of a component [the Sunnis] and not an electoral entitlement,” he wrote in an October 2018 Twitter post. “Insisting on awarding it to an actor that does not represent the Sunni component while the other components receive their entitlements in sovereign ministries is to strike at the national project they spoke of in its infancy.”³¹

The elections of 2005 were the most zero-sum and most bluntly sect-coded: in January of that year the vote was dominated by three lists—Sunni, Shia, and Kurdish—who between them secured more than 87 percent of the vote. The Shia list alone secured more than 48 percent of the vote. In December 2005, 90 percent of the vote went to just five ethnicity- or sect-coded lists, with the largest share again going to the grand Shia coalition, which received more than 41 percent of the vote.³² Though fundamentally differing in stakes and lines of contestation, the 2010 election was also a tightly knit affair with just four lists sharing more than 81 percent of the vote.³³ Thereafter, former prime minister Nouri al-Maliki’s second term proved divisive not just in terms of Sunni–Shia relations but also in terms of dynamics between sects.³⁴ This was reflected in the unprecedented fragmentation of the 2014 elections. While there was hardly any overlap between Sunni, Shia, and Kurdish constituencies in 2014, the three were internally fragmented, with the Shia vote dominated by three lists, and the Sunni vote split mostly among four lists, in addition to smaller lists across the spectrum. In that sense, where 2005 was an inter-sect and inter-ethnic contest for position in the new order, 2014 was more akin to three separate intra-sect/intra-ethnic elections. Underlining the degree of fragmentation and the intensity of intra-sect/ethnic competition, in 2014 the highest share of the vote stood at 24 percent (compared to 48 percent in 2005), beyond which no other list or entity received more than 7.5 percent of the vote.³⁵

The fragmentation and the diminishing relevance of sectarian categories were even more evident in the elections of 2018. Whereas in January 2005 more than 87 percent of the vote was split among three lists, with the top list netting 48 percent of the vote, in 2018 the top nine lists shared 80 percent of the vote, with the top performer, the Sadrist-led Sa’iroun, netting only 14 percent. Furthermore, unlike 2014, many of the major

lists campaigned across ethnic and sectarian lines. Sa'iroun ran in all governorates except for Kirkuk and Kurdistan. The Nasr alliance, headed by then-incumbent prime minister Haider al-Abadi, ran in all governorates and even won in the Sunni-majority Nineveh governorate. The Fatah Alliance, led by the more powerful and Iran-leaning elements of the Popular Mobilization Units (PMUs), campaigned in all governorates of Arab Iraq.³⁶ And some lists, such as Ayad Allawi's National Coalition and Ammar al-Hakim's National Wisdom Movement (the Al-Hikmah list), even campaigned in the Kurdish governorates.³⁷

These dynamics were subsequently reflected in the government formation process, which defied ethno-sectarian compartmentalization. For example, the trademark backroom jockeying for ministerial positions that follows every Iraqi election yielded unexpected bedfellows. Perhaps most jarring to those who still viewed Iraqi politics through the prism of Sunni-Shia division (as opposed to elite collusion) was the umbrella Construction Bloc. This political alliance linked the (Sunni) National Axis, former prime minister Maliki's State of Law, and the PMU-led Fatah Alliance. This is especially remarkable given the fact that for many years and until very recently, Maliki, the Fatah Alliance, PMU leader Hadi al-Amiri, and the PMUs more generally were the hate-figures par excellence for many of the Sunni politicians that today sit alongside them. Likewise, the likes of Maliki and many in the Fatah Alliance had long hurled accusations of aiding the Islamic State and of enabling terrorism at the same Sunni political actors they have allied with today.

This cross-sectarian collusion between what had been regarded as implacable enemies is another marker of the evolution of a more transactional Iraqi politics, shaped by political interests and pragmatism.³⁸ Similarly, the banality of the apportionment of the highest positions among Shia, Sunni, and Kurdish representatives is evidenced in the cross-sectarian and cross-ethnic collusion that underpinned the nominations for these positions. For example, the nomination of the new parliamentary speaker in September 2018 (a position reserved for Sunnis), Mohammed al-Halbusi, was supported by Amiri. However, contrary to what some

casual observers assumed, this was not proof that Halbusi was pro-Iranian, nor did it mean that he was a Shia lackey.³⁹ On the contrary, Halbusi's reliance on Amiri reflected a pragmatic strategy to outflank his Sunni rivals and secure the parliamentary speakership.⁴⁰ This situation echoes the broader dynamics of government formation in 2018 where, rather than Sunni and Shia politicians disagreeing over a position, we find rival cross-sectarian alignments pushing their respective Shia and Sunni nominees.

The fact that the relevance of sectarian categories has diminished in Iraqi politics should not be taken to mean that Iraq's political problems are over. That the prism of sectarian identity is not what it was does not mean that Iraq is any closer to addressing the structural drivers of political dysfunction. Likewise, if sectarian dynamics lose their capacity to drive conflict and instability, it does not follow that other drivers will not persist or that new ones will not emerge. From muhasasa, to corruption, to political violence, to weak rule of law and shortcomings in governance, these and many more structural issues continue to plague Iraq even if they are less sect-coded today.⁴¹ As such, what this report is describing is more the *evolution*, rather than the resolution, of instability and dysfunction.

Political Behavior and the Parameters of Populism

One way to gauge the shifting politics of sect is by charting what passes for a populist message in the different stages of retrenchment and conflict outlined above. Here, elections are again a useful indicator. In 2014, Sunni politicians campaigned on little besides the theme of Sunni victimhood, whereas in 2018 there was very little in terms of sect-coded campaigning. Further, those that did try to play the card of sectarian identity—Maliki and Osama al-Nujaifi, for example—were poorly rewarded at the polls.⁴² Likewise, the perceived exigencies of Shia-centric state-building in 2005 propelled the coalescence of a unified Shia alliance and a high Shia voter turnout.⁴³ However, by the elections of 2014 and much more so those of 2018, things had changed: Shia empowerment was no longer having to contend with a serious existential threat, security had improved, and

existential fear had waned. Consequently, the *raison d'être* of political Shia sect-centricity had diminished. Rather than sect-coded appeals to solidarity, entitlement, or victimhood, the language of populism in 2018 was the language of reform and anti-elite anger. While this is unlikely to be translated into an actionable reform agenda in the foreseeable future, it does reflect the shifting parameters of populism.

These shifts in public opinion are, in turn, reflected in public discourse. A cartoonishly blunt demonstration of this can be found in the tonal changes of Shia cleric and public figure Sheikh Salah al-Tufaili's sermons. Shortly before the provincial elections of 2013, Tufaili attracted much attention and controversy when he urged his listeners to vote for their sect. Noting the widespread popular alienation from the political system and the systemic failures of the political classes, Tufaili warned his congregation against the dangers of voter apathy by making reference to the previous regime's suppression of Shia rituals and by frankly urging his listeners to defend Shia gains since 2003:

Who do you want us to give [political power] to?
To [senior Ba'athist and Saddam Hussein's deputy]
Izzat al-Douri so that Umayyad rule returns?⁴⁴
... Go out [and vote] in support of the madhhab
[Shi'ism]... Despite all the government's faults...
despite that, may God reward them: at least [the
government] is one that calls for Ali wali-u-Allah
[the Shia call to prayer]—even if not truthfully... Did
you ever dream that in Iraq you would have live-
feed and [broadcasts of] mourning rituals?⁴⁵

That was in December 2012, in a context of rising security challenges and increasing instability.⁴⁶ Regionally, the uprising in Bahrain and, more so, the Syrian civil war created a sense of sectarian crisis across the Middle East, further incentivizing sectarian entrenchment. Domestically, violence was again rising in the context of a poisonous political atmosphere that was dominated by then prime minister Maliki's increasing authoritarianism, and especially his increasingly fraught relations with the Sunni political classes.⁴⁷ In short, there was enough uncertainty, violence, fear, and sectarian entrenchment in Iraq and beyond for the language of Shia empowerment and the imperatives of its

defense to resonate with sections of the Shia electorate—hence the alleged Ba'athist coups that some Shia voices had warned of in every prior election.⁴⁸ In that sense, Tufaili's sermon was a reflection of the broader context and the popular mood among some sections of Shia Iraq.

After 2014, there was a shift in the parameters of populism. There emerged a belief that Iraq's security challenges, serious though they might be, were no longer an existential threat. This new belief was a result of how the challenge of the Islamic State was met after 2014: the rise of the PMUs against the Islamic State and the resulting sense (part real, part myth) of popular agency in the war and in Iraqi security; the popularity, legitimacy, and eventually the successes of the war against the insurgent group; and the renewed international investment in Iraq's survival. Together, these factors created a belief that Iraq's security challenges, serious though they might be, were no longer an existential threat. This had a direct effect on the relevance of Shia political sect-centricity and on the resonance of the language of Shia empowerment. To illustrate, in a sermon from March 2016, the same Tufaili struck a very different tone—one that was in step with recent shifts in popular discourse. After expounding on the theft, corruption, and failures of governance that abound in Iraq, Tufaili addressed the political classes: "You made us yearn for that man [Saddam Hussein]. Despite all the sorrow, prisons, fear, and death [in Saddam Hussein's time], let him come back—we've had enough! Let him come back." Then, addressing the congregation: "Perhaps half of you would vote for Saddam if he returned!"⁴⁹ He even went on to praise the public distribution system of food rationing in Saddam's time, contrasting it with the shortcomings of the system today.

This nostalgia for Saddam Hussein (an increasingly common phenomenon) need not be taken literally, but it does highlight the shifting parameters of populism and of political Shia sect-centricity.⁵⁰ In the early years after the American invasion of 2003, such longing for the Saddam Hussein era, even if plainly hyperbolic, was generally too politically incorrect for Shia actors and audiences, particularly in a public setting. Yet as the above example shows, this is clearly no longer so. In most cases the figurative yearning for a resurrection

of Saddam Hussein can be read as an act of protest and performative irreverence through which to express the profound and widespread disillusionment with the political classes. The perceived security and irreversibility of the post-2003 order, and of Shia political dominance within it, facilitate the normalization of such behavior in Shia quarters. The waning of the existential threat (or perceptions thereof), and particularly of sect-coded challenges to the existing political order, weaken the relevance of political sect-centricity, and lessen the perceived need to defend sectarian boundaries or uphold sectarian solidarity.⁵¹ All of this further underlines the diminished political relevance of sectarian identities and the evolution of political contestation (and political instability) beyond the prism of zero-sum sectarian competition.

The Politics of Sect after 2014

The events of 2014 and their immediate aftermath have been pivotal in the evolution of sectarian relations in Iraq. These events include the fall of Mosul, the subsequent war against the Islamic State, the change of leadership in Iraq, and the reorientation of Iraq's regional politics in a more benign direction. Again, this does not mean an end to insurgency or political violence, but it does make sect-coded civil war of the sort witnessed prior to 2014 unlikely. The first phase of the civil war in 2006–7 was sect-coded in a way that 2013–15 was not. This was primarily due to the intra-Sunni divisiveness of the phenomenon of the Islamic State, and the broad cross-sectarian, cross-ethnic, and even international cooperation (rivalries and strategic contradictions notwithstanding) that went into the war against that group. This made it far more problematic to sect-code the war that followed the fall of Mosul than was the case with 2006–7. This blurring of sectarian boundaries reflects the reification and relative stabilization of the post-2003 order (for now) and the diminished political relevance of the Sunni–Shia divide. As such, if Iraq were to go through another bout of civil war, it is unlikely to be significantly sect-coded, due to the intensified intersection of shared interests and cross-sectarian political alignments. Evidence of this can be glimpsed in power relations and in patterns of violence since 2014. Despite the stubborn assumptions of many an observer, it was inaccurate to frame the campaign in Iraq against the Islamic

State as “Sunni–Shia” or as just “sectarian.” Rather than a Sunni–Shia war, it was a war between the Islamic State and its allies against the state and its allies, with the latter being far too layered and heterogeneous for clear-cut sect-specific labeling, despite being obviously Shia-led. As early as 2014, and even prior to the fall of Mosul, there were warnings that the rise of the Islamic State was threatening to turn intra-Sunni violence into a long-term problem.⁵² And indeed, in areas liberated from the Islamic State, intra-Sunni violence and tribal vengeance have been a more persistent issue than sectarian violence.⁵³ The grim human rights situation in liberated areas and the primacy of vengeance over justice is too systemic and implicates too broad an array of actors to be reduced solely to the prism of sectarian violence.⁵⁴

Ultimately, the war against the Islamic State served to move Iraq beyond Shia-centric state-building and Sunni rejection, by elevating the former and weakening the latter. The cataclysmic scale of the phenomenon of the Islamic State left Sunni-centric political actors who had long held ambivalent views toward the Iraqi state with little option: they had to accept the political order and to secure their interests by working with the relevant state-aligned powerbrokers. In the first few years after 2003, the insurgency was strong enough and the state's survival precarious enough that Sunni-centric political actors felt it prudent to have one foot in each and often acted as a conduit between the two. For example, in 2005, Sunni-centric politicians convinced insurgents to allow the December elections to take place unhindered in Sunni areas by convincing them that real Sunni political influence would follow a robust Sunni turnout.⁵⁵ Later on, some Sunni-centric politicians maintained relations with insurgent groups, including the Islamic State's former incarnation, the Islamic State in Iraq.⁵⁶

In some ways this is to be expected in contexts of civil war, corruption, and weak institutions. Indeed, collusion with the Islamic State and its fellow travelers, and corruption in general, are hardly the preserve of Sunni-centric actors.⁵⁷ However, particularly in the earlier years after the American invasion, the ambivalence of Sunni-centric political actors toward the post-2003 state meant that their insurgent links had more to them than transactional greed. Rather, for some,

and as evidenced by initial reactions to the fall of Mosul, it was more a case, as mentioned above, of having a foot in insurgency and a foot in government, and leaning according to the perceived balance of power between the two and according to the perceived room for political progress. Hence, Maliki's disastrous second term (2010–14) and the profound sense of Sunni victimhood and resentment that it nurtured saw several mainstream Sunni-centric politicians voicing support for insurgency in 2013 and 2014, and even positively couching the fall of Mosul in terms of revolution and liberation.⁵⁸ However, events since 2014 have altered political calculations in a manner more aligned with the political order and the relations of power underlining the Iraqi state.

Khamis al-Khanjar, a politician from Anbar governorate, provides a stark illustration. In the immediate aftermath of the fall of Mosul, when the political order briefly looked precarious enough to conceivably fall, Khanjar declared an openly anti-state position: "Our aim is not just the overthrow of [then-prime minister] Maliki. We want to overthrow this oppressive, sectarian order... The revolutionaries control half of Iraq and they are at the gates of Baghdad."⁵⁹ However, the territorial defeat of the Islamic State, the survival of the political order, and the practicalities of Iraqi politics quickly saw Khanjar returning to the political fold. Today, he is politically aligned with none other than Maliki, the former prime minister, in the aforementioned Construction Bloc. More than that, this political constellation is sponsored by the Fatah Alliance, the coalition representing the more Iran-leaning and more prominent factions of the PMUs. Until recently, these factions had featured heavily and very negatively in the political rhetoric of Khanjar and others, who framed the PMUs as distinctly anti-Sunni and anti-Iraqi forces.⁶⁰

The End of Shia-Centric State Building and Sunni Rejection? That such U-turns in political positioning are a reflection of opportunistic political cynicism is obvious enough. More importantly however, they are also a reflection of the waning of Sunni rejection and of the limits of Shia-centric state-building. This ties in with the themes of normalization, state-stabilization, the shifting parameters of populism, and

the shifting relevance of sectarian identities. As existential contestation of the state subsides, and as serious contestation of the balance of power between sect-centric actors wanes, so too do political sect-centricity and, by extension, the political utility and relevance of the sectarian divide. For example, mainstream Sunni-centric political discourse prior to 2014 used phrases such as "Maliki's army" and the "Safavid army" to frame the Iraqi security forces as illegitimate, anti-Sunni, and anti-Iraqi. But today, the parameters of populism and of political correctness forbid such a stance. To illustrate, when the operation to liberate Mosul from the Islamic State was being debated in parliament in 2016–17, the consensus position was to praise the army, while voicing concerns regarding the intense destruction that accompanied the operations.

Like their Sunni-centric counterparts, Shia-centric politicians are having to adapt to the diminished political utility of sectarian identity in Iraqi politics. Now that Shia political ascendance is secured in Iraq and accepted regionally, intra-Shia politics and issue politics can better come to the fore. Gone are the days when Shia-centric political actors could stoke fears of recalcitrant Sunnis, murderous "takfiris," or closeted Ba'athists.⁶¹ Hence, despite broad support for the war against the Islamic State, no amount of wartime jingoism was capable of preventing the emergence of a robust protest movement against perceived government failings in Baghdad and other Shia-majority cities in 2015.⁶² Indeed, it has long been clear that political leaders can no longer distract from their failures by pointing to the security situation or blaming the sectarian Other.

Does this mean the end of sect-centricity? Not at all; rather, it underlines its evolution. Further, it signals the normalization of the balance of power between sect-centric actors and, by extension, the normalization of the main contours of Shia-centric state-building: ensuring that the central levers of power are in Shia hands (and more so, Shia-centric hands), and institutionalizing a vision of Iraq that frames Iraqi Shias as the "big brother" or senior partner in Iraq's multi-communal framework. This insistence on Shia seniority is sometimes framed arrogantly or condescendingly as a sense of entitlement: "The junior partner [Sunnis] must recognize

the Shia as the senior partner,” as one Iraqi member of parliament put it in 2016.⁶³ Alternatively, it is framed paternalistically or patronizingly as a burden or a sense of duty: “The clear majority in Iraq is the Shia,” Muqtada al-Sadr wrote in 2013. “This requires Shias to be the big brother [“al-akh al-akbar”] to all, and it falls to them to ensure unity and to show kindness.”⁶⁴ In either guise, a sense of being the senior partner enjoys considerable currency among Iraqi Shias. And since 2014, the idea has become less open to contestation.

The broader acceptance and normalization of Shia-centricity is reflected in the evolution of its expression. In that regard, it is instructive to compare the cultural output and messaging of the Mahdi Army in 2006–7 and that of the PMUs since 2014. In 2006–7, the anthems, songs, and poetry associated with the Mahdi Army were often an assertion of either Shia pride or of Sadrist pride.⁶⁵ By contrast, PMU anthems and poetry today are far more likely to emphasize Iraqi pride. Despite its unmistakable Shia-centricity, the vocabulary used in PMU messaging is very much focused on identifying with the Iraqi polity and asserting a core narrative of Iraqi patriotism defined by a fight against the Islamic State. This fight is cross-confessional, but unambiguously Shia-led.⁶⁶ In 2006–7, Sadrist and especially Mahdi Army messaging was often irreverent, taboo-busting, Shia-centric, and controversial. Today, one of the main objectives of the PMUs’ messaging is the construction of an image of mainstream respectability. To that end, the PMUs’ narrative is one of national salvation: they frame themselves as a legitimate military, political, and sociocultural force that aims to shape Iraq’s future far beyond the fight against the Islamic State.⁶⁷ Mahdi Army messaging, by contrast, seemed to revel in its outcast status and in the Sadrist ability to project power and strike fear into people. Unlike the PMUs, the Mahdi Army never cared much for normalization, institutionalization, or mainstream respectability, nor was it interested in playing a nonmilitary role prior to its “freeze” in 2007, when Sadr ordered the Mahdi Army to suspend military operations. By contrast, the PMUs have more far-reaching ambitions and have expended considerable effort highlighting their nonmilitary activities—from medical services, to Asa’ib Ahl al-Haq’s abortive plan to establish a university, to opening a

Hashd martyrs’ museum in central Baghdad, and so forth.⁶⁸

Charting this evolution of Shia militancy and Shia-centricity highlights the shifting parameters of sectarian identity, the normalization of once-controversial issues, and the evolution of political contestation and threat perceptions. By extension, it illustrates the shift from a more insecure Shia-centricity concerned about survival in a zero-sum, sect-coded civil war to a more secure and confident stance that seeks to assert and further normalize the role of senior partner on a national level. In this new role of senior partner, Shia-centric leaders seek to move beyond the relatively narrow confines of a securitized sectarian divide. Ultimately this is a product of the post-2014 landscape and of the cumulative effect of the war against the Islamic State. In what is undoubtedly an overstatement, Wagih Abbas (a member of parliament, TV presenter, and one of the most unabashedly Shia-centric public figures in Iraq) described 2014 as a pivotal moment of empowerment and finality. “In 2014, the question of Iraqi history was resolved,” he said in an interview. “2014 is the moment that [Iraqi] Shias emerged out of taqiyyah,” he added, referring to the practice of dissimulation that is adopted for fear of persecution. Iraqi Shiism, in this view, has moved from an apologetic stance to a more assertive one.⁶⁹

This degree of certainty is never advisable when thinking about Iraq’s future or about the vicissitudes of sectarian relations. The core cause of the elevation of the political relevance of sectarian identities was the manner in which the American invasion of 2003 disturbed the balance of power between sect-centric actors both in Iraq and in the broader region. The political and military contestation that followed and the sect-coded fears and ambitions they engendered have considerably receded in Iraq with the normalization of post-2003 hierarchies of power. Today, Iraqi and regional developments seem to be veering away from the prism of sectarian identity. However, another black swan event that allows for the contestation and renegotiation of the relations of power between sect-centric actors could nevertheless reverse recent trends.

The gains made since 2014 and the relative stabilization of the Iraqi state may ultimately be squandered, as were the

gains made in Iraq's brief moment of optimism in 2009–10. The changes being described here are not necessarily permanent. Indeed, permanence is a problematic concept where identity is concerned: the politics of sect have gone through several stages and will continue to evolve in line with broader sociocultural and political conditions. Nevertheless, even if sectarian dynamics take a turn for the worse, it is almost impossible for them to perfectly revert to what they were in earlier years. The entrenchment and civil war of 2003–7 were caused by extraordinary circumstances that cannot readily be recreated: foreign invasion and occupation, state collapse, a backdrop of decades-long isolation, and sect-coded legacy issues. The Iraqi state has grown more complex in its revival after being destroyed in 2003, and today political alignments and political contestation reflect a complexity that can no longer be contained in the prism of “sectarianism”—however defined.⁷⁰ In Iraq, the war against the Islamic State created an exceedingly complex landscape marked by fragmented and layered security and governance structures. While certain Shia-centric actors retain outsized leverage in these hierarchies of power, they are nevertheless part of a larger picture marked by bargaining, cooperation, and competition between a range of actors whose alignments and calculations are governed by far more than their communal identities.⁷¹

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Notes

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13 For example, Peter Galbraith, *The End of Iraq: How American Incompetence Created a War Without End*, (New York: Simon and Schuster, 2006).

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28 Harith Hasan, "The Basra Exception," *Diwan, Carnegie Middle East Center*, September 19, 2018, <http://carnegie-mec.org/diwan/77284?lang=en>; Fanar Haddad, "Why Are Iraqis Protesting?" *Al Jazeera English*, July 19, 2018, <https://www.aljazeera.com/indepth/opinion/iraqis-protesting-1807181316968.html>.

29 "Sa'et Mukashafa Former Head of the Council of Representatives of al-Mashhadani" (Arabic), YouTube, November 7, 2018, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ioeMo2uJmeo>. In the same interview Mashhadani emphasizes the fact that, beyond sectarian identity, muhasasa today is a function of family links, tribal connections and party affiliation.

30 In particular, a fairly common view among Sunni Arab politicians in the early post-2003 era rejected the notion that Sunni Arab Iraqis were a minority. This position was voiced by mainstream Sunni politicians as well as more extreme voices; from religious leaders such as Harith al-Dhari (former general secretary of the Association of Muslim Scholars), to politicians such as Khalaf al-Ullayan, Mohsen Abdel Hamid (former head of the Iraqi Islamic Party) and Osama al-Nujaifi, to extremists such as Salafi jihadist preacher Taha al-Dulaimi. In fact, as early as August 2003 Dulaimi was describing the idea that Sunnis are a minority as a lie. See Taha al-Dulaimi, "The Truth: Population Numbers and Percentages of Sunnis and Shias in Iraq" (Arabic), published online August 2003, re-published in 2009, <https://ia601608.us.archive.org/19/items/adel-0044/Aqidah05778.pdf>.

31 From his Twitter account, October 24, 2018, <https://twitter.com/mohamdalkarbolli/status/1055133844972683265>. Translated from Arabic by the author.

32 For the elections of 2005, see the relevant pages of the Iraqi Independent High Electoral Commission: <http://www.ihec.iq/page6/page18.aspx> and <http://www.ihec.iq/page6/page16.aspx>, both accessed January 13, 2019; Adam Carr's election archive, <http://psephos.adam-carr.net/countries/i/iraq/>, accessed January 13, 2019; Dodge, *Iraq*, 44–48.

33 In theory, the elections of 2010 saw the muhasasa system challenged by the top two contenders. On the one hand, incumbent prime minister Nouri al-Maliki's State of Law Coalition attempted to break with muhasasa and the politics of sect, and run independently on a strong-man security-first platform. On the other hand, the Iraqi National Movement (also known as the al-Iraqiya List), headed by former prime minister Ayad Allawi, sought to do the same but on an anti-Islamist platform. Following a contested outcome, Maliki secured a second term with the aid of an Iran-brokered reconstitution of the Shia alliance and all concerned, including Allawi, reverted to form in a "consensus government" that apportioned political office among the key political actors—in other words, back to muhasasa. For the elections of 2010, see the relevant pages of the Iraqi Independent High Electoral Commission's website, including <http://www.ihec.iq/page6/page13.aspx>, accessed January 13, 2019; Carr's election archive, <http://psephos.adam-carr.net/countries/i/iraq/>, accessed January 13, 2019; Kenneth Katzman, "Iraq: Politics, Elections and Benchmarks," *Congressional Research Service*, March 1, 2011, 9–19, 25, https://www.everycrsreport.com/files/20110301_RS21968_755bf620139afe0896cb6b2d4d5a6fd6bc7d65a8.pdf; "Iraq's Uncertain Future: Elections and Beyond," *International Crisis Group, Middle East Report* no. 94, 2010, <https://www.crisisgroup.org/middle-east-north-africa/gulf-and-arabian-peninsula/iraq/iraq-s-uncertain-future-elections-and-beyond>.

34 Maliki's second term had the double effect of increasing internal division within Sunni and Shia political coalitions while at the same time fostering cross-sectarian and cross-ethnic efforts to weaken Maliki. The most notable example of this

was the failed attempt in 2012 to unseat Maliki through a vote of no confidence. The effort was spearheaded by the Sadrists, Ayad Allawi's al-Iraqiya, and the Democratic Patriotic Alliance of Kurdistan. See Faleh A. Jabar, Renad Mansour, and Abir Khaddaj, "Maliki and the Rest: A Crisis within a Crisis," Iraq Institute for Strategic Studies, June 2012, <http://iraqstudies.com/books/featured3.pdf>. For the fragmentation of the Iraqiyas List in this period see Stephen Wicken, "Iraq's Sunnis in Crisis," Institute for the Study of War, May 2013, 9-23; "Iraq's Secular Opposition: The Rise and Decline of al-Iraqiya," International Crisis Group, Middle East Report no. 127, July 31, 2012, <https://www.crisisgroup.org/middle-east-north-africa/gulf-and-arabian-peninsula/iraq/iraq-s-secular-opposition-rise-and-decline-al-iraqiya>.

35 For the elections of 2014, see the relevant pages of the Iraqi Independent High Electoral Commission's website <http://www.ihec.iq/page6/page10.aspx>, accessed January 13, 2019; and Adam Carr's election archive <http://psephos.adam-carr.net/countries/i/iraq/>, accessed January 13, 2019.

36 The PMU is an umbrella term for the mostly Shia (and certainly Shia-dominated) paramilitary groups that were mobilized in the war against the Islamic State and that have since been formally institutionalized as part of Iraq's security structures. The formations of the PMU vary in their ideological leanings and in their proximity to Iran. For details see Inna Rudolf, "From Battlefield to Ballot Box: Contextualising the Rise and Evolution of Iraq's Popular Mobilisation Units," International Centre for the Study of Radicalisation and Political Violence, May 2018, <https://icsr.info/wp-content/uploads/2018/05/ICSR-Report-From-Battlefield-to-Ballot-Box-Contextualising-the-Rise-and-Evolution-of-Iraq%E2%80%99s-Popular-Mobilisation-Units.pdf>; Fanar Haddad, "Understanding Iraq's Hashd al-Sha'bi," Century Foundation, March 5, 2018, <https://tcf.org/content/report/understanding-iraqs-hashd-al-shabi/>; Renad Mansour and Faleh A. Jabar, "The Popular Mobilization Forces and Iraq's Future," Carnegie Middle East Center, April 2017, <http://carnegie-mec.org/2017/04/28/popular-mobilization-forces-and-iraq-s-future-pub-68810>.

37 For the elections of 2018 see the relevant pages of the Iraqi Independent High Electoral Commission's website, <http://www.ihec.iq/HOME/IconFiles/pageC3>, accessed January 13, 2019; Adam Carr's election archive <http://psephos.adam-carr.net/countries/i/iraq/>, accessed January 13, 2019; and Renad Mansour and Christine van den Toorn, "The 2018 Iraqi Federal Elections: A Population in Transition?" LSE Middle East Centre, July 2018, http://eprints.lse.ac.uk/89698/7/MEC_Iraqi-elections_Report_2018.pdf.

38 Needless to say, political interests and pragmatism are often regarded as a euphemism for political cynicism. Iraqi public opinion was taken aback by the unexpected alignment of political actors who had previously expended much energy demonizing each other as Islamic State supporters or murderous Iranian militiamen. This fed into the wider popular alienation from the political classes. See Helene Sallon, "In Iraq, The Revolt of Generation 2018," Worldcrunch (originally in French in *Le Monde*), October 13, 2018, <https://www.worldcrunch.com/world-affairs/in-iraq-the-revolt-of-generation-2018>.

39 For example, "Iraq Elects Pro-Iran Sunni Parliament Speaker," Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty, September 16, 2018, <https://www.rferl.org/a/iraq-elects-pro-iran-sunni-as-parliament-speaker/29492394.html>; and "Iraq Parliament Elects Pro-Iran Candidates," France24, September 15, 2018, <https://www.france24.com/en/20180915-iraq-parliament-elects-pro-iran-candidates>.

40 Ibrahim al-Marashi, "Iraq's New Leaders Can't Be Reduced to a U.S. vs Iran Binary," Middle East Eye, October 31, 2018, <https://www.middleeasteye.net/columns/iraq-s-new-triumvirate-navigating-exile-power-and-iran-796203352>.

41 For a concise overview of the challenges and internal contradictions facing the incoming government (none of which are particularly sect-coded) see Kirk H. Sowell, "A Fractured Iraqi Cabinet," Sada, Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, November 8, 2018, <https://carnegieendowment.org/sada/77674>.

42 For an overview of Sunni campaigning in the elections of 2014, see Inside Iraqi Politics, iss. 84 (April 30, 2014). For the 2018 campaign see Inside Iraqi Politics, iss. 174, 176, and 177.

43 In the words of an International Crisis Group report, voters sought to ensure "the realisation of the Shiite majority's dream of ruling Iraq," and "a historical opportunity for the Shiites." See "The Next Iraqi War? Sectarianism and Civil Conflict," International Crisis Group, Middle East Report no. 52, February 27, 2006, 29, <https://www.crisisgroup.org/middle-east-north-africa/gulf-and-arabian-peninsula/iraq/next-iraqi-war-sectarianism-and-civil-conflict>.

44 Reference to the seventh- and eighth-century Umayyad dynasty, which in Shia lore is regarded as the epitome of injustice, oppression and anti-Shiism.

45 The sermon was delivered in December 2012. See "The Night of 25 Muharram 1434—Sheikh Salih al-Tufaili" (Arabic), YouTube, December 20, 2012, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=xlrFXJzGdYQ>.

46 For a snapshot of the security situation in that month, see Joel Wing, "Iraq's

Insurgency Tries to End November 2012 with a Bang," Musings on Iraq, December 3, 2012, <http://musingsoniraq.blogspot.com/2012/12/iraqs-insurgency-tries-to-end-november.html>. That same month, Maliki ordered the arrest of minister of finance Rafi' al-Issawi's security detail and the raiding of Issawi's offices, setting off a chain reaction of instability that would lead to the emergence of widespread protests in Sunni-majority areas of Iraq, and ultimately to the renewal of full-scale insurgency in the spring of 2013. This in turn paved the way for the Islamic State takeover of 2014. For the protest movement and the ensuing insurgency see Joel Wing, "Understanding Iraq's Protest Movements: An Interview with Kirk H. Sowell, Editor of Inside Iraqi Politics," Musings on Iraq, May 7, 2013, <http://musingsoniraq.blogspot.sg/2013/05/understanding-iraqs-protest-movements.html>; and Stephen Wicken and Jessica Lewis, "From Protest Movement to Armed Resistance: 2013 Iraq Update #24," Institute for the Study of War, June 14, 2013, <http://iswresearch.blogspot.com/2013/06/from-protest-movement-to-armed.html>.

47 For Maliki's second term in office, see "Iraq Between Maliki and the Islamic State," Project on Middle East Political Science, July 9, 2014, https://pomeps.org/wp-content/uploads/2014/07/POMEPS_BriefBooklet24_Iraq_Web.pdf.

48 Maliki's messaging in 2013 and 2014 (both election years) was heavily invested in the theme of defending Shia interests. Pro-Maliki social media accounts would even refer to him as "Mukhtar al-'Asr" (the Mukhtar of our age)—a reference to Mukhtar al-Thaqafi, a seventh-century figure who led a rebellion ostensibly to claim vengeance for the killing of the Prophet's grandson and third Shia imam, Hussein ibn Ali, at the battle of Karbala.

49 "Sheikh Salah al-Tufaili—the Night of 21 Jumadi al-Akhira 1437h—Kut" (Arabic), YouTube, March 31, 2016, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=rBphcvyOshY>.

50 See Marsin Alshamary, "Authoritarian Nostalgia Among Iraqi Youth: Roots and Repercussions," War on the Rocks, July 25, 2018, <https://warontherocks.com/2018/07/authoritarian-nostalgia-among-iraqi-youth-roots-and-repercussions/>.

51 Similar examples can be found from 2006–9, where the climate of 2006 created the space for an aggressive and highly sect-coded populism while the relative stabilization of 2009 encouraged a more pan-Iraqi, civilianized, and ecumenical populism. For a stark illustration of Sadrist cleric Hazem al-Araji calling for the murder of "Wahabis" in 2006 while striking a far more ecumenical tone in late 2008, see Fanar Haddad, *Sectarianism in Iraq: Antagonistic Visions of Unity* (London: Hurst and Company, 2011): 188–89, 202.

52 Wa'il Ni'ma, "Anbar Fears 'A War of Vendettas' and Its Men Are Ready to Expel the Islamic State If There Is a Change in Head of Government" (Arabic), Al-Mada, June 4, 2014, <https://almadapaper.net/Details/106910>.

53 See for example, Kamal al-Ayash, "Anbar Tribes Exact Revenge upon Iraqis Who Worked with Extremists," Niqash, October 13, 2016, <http://www.niqash.org/en/articles/security/5378/>; Kamal al-Ayash, "Anbar's New Anti-Extremist Militias Get Bigger, Cause New Problems," Niqash, November, 2016, <http://www.niqash.org/en/articles/security/5417/>.

54 For an excellent report on the human rights situation in liberated areas of Iraq and the fatal challenges facing those accused of Islamic State affiliation or of being related to anyone with such affiliation see Ben Taub, "Iraq's Post-ISIS Campaign of Revenge," New Yorker, December 24, 2018, <https://www.newyorker.com/magazine/2018/12/24/iraqs-post-isis-campaign-of-revenge>. The report's occasional portrayals of a campaign of revenge aimed at Sunnis are contradicted by the many examples it gives of locally perpetrated predation and locally driven targeting of suspected Islamic State members and their families.

55 This created a post-election problem as Sunni-centric actors—politicians and insurgents alike—had vastly overestimated Sunni demographics. As reported by ICG: "Adnan Dulaimi [the head of the Sunni electoral coalition Tawafuq] publicly cried out: 'What should I tell the resistance now? How can I deliver on my promise?'" See "The Next Iraqi War?," International Crisis Group, 32.

56 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/>.

57 For example, corrupt Iraqi officials accept bribes from the Islamic State to free their imprisoned members, as has long been known and as was recently proven in Islamic State documentation. See Husham Alhashimi's October 29, 2018 Twitter post, <https://twitter.com/hushamhashimi/status/1056904129170288641>. Also see Patrick Cockburn, "More than Just Revenge: Why ISIS Fighters Are Being Thrown Off Buildings in Mosul," Independent, July 17, 2017, <https://www.independent.co.uk/news/world/middle-east/isis-mosul-iraq-fighters-killed-thrown-off-buildings-reasons-corruption-revenge-patrick-cockburn-a7845846.html>.

58 A month after the fall of Mosul, Osama al-Nujaifi—at the time one of the most prominent Sunni-centric politicians—continued to describe what was

happening as a revolution, while accepting that terrorists were taking advantage of it. 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/?utm_term=.02df7906e956.

59 The Full Interview of Khamis al-Khanjar with al-Hadath Channel" (Arabic), YouTube, June 28, 2014, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=47kuLOVnOC8&t=752s>.

60 At one point al-Khanjar and other Sunni leaders viewed the PMUs as an existential threat and promised to fight them. See for example (from 2015), "Khamis al-Khanjar We Will Strongly Fight the Hashd and Whatever the Sacrifices if the Hashd Enters Anbar" (Arabic), YouTube, May 9, 2015, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=8tjgws0FJcE>. Regarding the recent convergence of political interests between Khanjar and Hadi al-Amiri, the head of the Fatah Alliance see "MPs Reveal Khanjar's Coalition Deal with al-Amiri" (Arabic), NRT Digital Media, October 2, 2018, <http://www.nrtv.com/ar/News.aspx?id=4993&MapID=2>.

61 A "takfiri" is literally a Muslim who accuses another Muslim of apostasy. In this case it is used as a slur against extremist Sunnis who accuse Shias of being apostates.

62 Harith Hasan, "The Parameters of the Social Protests in Iraq and Nature of Shia Division" (Arabic), Al Jazeera Center for Studies, August 17, 2015, <http://studies.aljazeera.net/mritems/Documents/2015/8/17/201581712140930734Iraq-Shiite.pdf>; Ali Taher, "The Social Protest Movement in Iraq after July 31, 2015: Mechanisms of Formation and Future Implications" (Arabic), King Faisal Center for Research and Islamic Studies, October 2015; Jabar, "The Iraqi Protest Movement."

63 Iraqi member of parliament and television personality Wagih Abbas, interview with the author, Baghdad, December 2016.

64 Muqtada al-Sadr writing in Mohammad Sadiq al-Sadr (with commentary by Muqtada al-Sadr), *Al-Ta'ifiyyah fi Nadhar al-Islam* (Sectarianism in the Judgment of Islam) (Beirut: Al-Basa'ir, 2013), 58.

65 These were not the only themes and a Shia-centric Iraqi nationalism was also a common theme (as it is today). See Fanar Haddad, "Sectarian Relations in Arab Iraq: Contextualizing the Civil War of 2006-2007," *British Journal of Middle Eastern Studies* 40, no. 2 (2013): 115-38.

66 James Garrison, "Popular Mobilization Messaging," International Centre for Counter-Terrorism—The Hague, April 2017, <https://icct.nl/wp-content/uploads/2017/04/ICCT-Garrison-Popular-Mobilization-Messaging-April-2017-1.pdf>.

67 For an example of how the PMUs and their supporters view themselves see Majid Hamid Abbas al-Hadrawi, "The Role of the Religious Marji'iyah in the Defense of Iraq: The Case of the Political Friday Sermons of 2014" (Arabic) *Al-Ameed Journal* 7, no. 1 (2018): 22-83. Further underlining the mainstreaming of the PMUs, the author is an assistant professor at the University of Kufa and the journal is published by the Shia Endowments.

68 See general coverage in www.al-hashed.net. For the Hashd martyrs' museum see, "In Its First Opening—the Arrival of Visitors in the Hashd Martyrs' Museum in Mutanabi Street in Baghdad" (Arabic), September 14, 2018, <http://al-hashed.net/2018/09/14/في-اول-حجرات-تفتتح-ال-مؤسسة-ال-اشهداء>. A most bizarre example that nevertheless further highlights the extent of the PMUs' normalization is the reported idea of setting up an official PMU soccer team. See Mustafa Saadoun, "Iraq's PMU Militia Wants Its Own Soccer Club," *Al-Monitor*, October 18, 2018, <https://www.al-monitor.com/pulse/originals/2018/10/iraq-sport-football-popular-mobilization-units.html>.

69 Abbas, interview with the author.

70 This is even more glaring on the level of regional politics, where the illusion of Sunni and Shia camps has long been unsustainable. For an excellent treatment of recent transformations in regional politics see Marc Lynch, "The New Arab Order: Power and Violence in Today's Middle East," *Foreign Affairs*, September/October 2018, <https://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/middle-east/2018-08-13/new-arab-order?cid=soc-tw-rdr>.

71 These dynamics are captured well in a recent report that provides a granular look at security and governance in northern Diyala governorate. See Zmkán Ali Saleem, Mac Skelton, and Christine van den Toorn, "Security and Governance in the Disputed Territories under a Fractured Gol: The Case of Northern Diyala," LSE Middle East Centre Blog, November 14, 2018, <http://blogs.lse.ac.uk/mec/2018/11/14/security-and-governance-in-the-disputed-territories-under-a-fractured-gol-the-case-of-northern-diyala/>. Likewise, see Erica Gaston and Andras Derzsi-Horvath, "It's Too Early to Pop the Champagne: The Micro-Politics of Territorial Control in Iraq," *War on The Rocks*, October 24, 2017, <https://warontherocks.com/2017/10/its-too-early-to-pop-champagne-in-baghdad-the-micro-politics-of-territorial-control-in-iraq/>.