THE DYNAMICS OF THE SUNNI-SHIITE RIVALRY IN IRAQ

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ABSTRACT

The article examines how Sunni–Shia sectarian divisions affect Iraq's security and national unity within a volatile regional setting marked by ongoing external interference. The study uses a comprehensive qualitative approach, including documentary research, geopolitical analysis, and PEST analysis, to identify the main causes of instability and the country's internal weaknesses. It also looks into how systemic dysfunctions arise from sectarian rivalry, weak institutions, and the role of non-state actors in governance and decision-making. Three possible scenarios are considered: stagnation, controlled decentralization, and conditional national reconciliation. Each depends on reducing outside interference, reshaping internal political structures, and professionalizing the security forces. The results indicate that the state's survival depends on moving beyond sectarian divisions, creating inclusive governance, and integrating Iraq into a stable, balanced regional geopolitical system.

Keywords: sectarian division, Sunni–Shia conflict, state cohesion, systemic vulnerability, national reconciliation.

Introduction

Contemporary society is facing an interconnected, evolving world marked by rapid change and development. These shifts occur at both individual and societal levels, leading to significant alterations in security governance and international relations. The overall phenomena influencing the security environment demonstrate a shift in how the world is divided and contribute to replacing the international perspective with a more intranational focus, thereby adding multidimensionality to the concept of security. Currently, this environment is highly dynamic and unpredictable, with intensified globalization manifesting in various ways and carrying significant potential to spread geographically (Decision 22/2020). The theory presented in this paper emphasizes the importance of a crucial yet poorly understood link between inter- and intra-state conflict—specifically, how external interventions can fragment sectarian divisions and contribute to issues such as rebellions, civil war, and the rise of terrorism.

Following the withdrawal of U.S. forces in 2011, Iraq was left to stand alone in uniting its country amid three dominant ethnic, linguistic, and religious groups with their own political agendas. The current geopolitical struggle in Iraq can be seen as an effort to manage the political aftermath left by Western powers. As a result, Iraq remains fragile due to unresolved sources of instability, with its main ethnic groups—Sunnis, Shiites, and Kurds—disagreeing on the country's political structure, identity, and future. The ongoing conflict is not solely due to insurgency and terrorism but also stems from disputes among ethnic and religious groups, which continue to be the most complex issues Iraq faces. Recognizing and respecting ethnic and cultural diversity remains one of the most urgent challenges for the Iraqi state today, requiring attention at the constitutional and institutional levels (Sherko, 2013).

The roots of the conflict

Iraq was established with the help of the three Ottoman provinces of Mosul, Baghdad, and Basra at the end of World War I, in 1921. These three provinces have never been governed as a single cohesive unit, and their attachment has remained problematic since their merger. Great Britain played a central role in creating the Iraqi state, as a result of the Sykes-Picot agreement, following the end of the First World War. British interests in Iraq encompassed political, economic, and strategic considerations, making it significant for the development of the Middle East. To unify Iraq under a trusted leader, the British installed King Faisal I as the constitutional monarch. He was a Sunni Arab, and his installation as monarch placed him under the influence of various ethnic and religious groups, including Sunni and Shia Arabs, Kurds, Christians, Jews, Yazidis, and Turks. Despite a dominance by the Sunni elite over the entire population, the monarchy marked a period of stability for the country. While there were numerous uprisings by different ethnic groups, the monarchy overcame these revolts, and the nation's institutions were developed further while its borders were clarified. Although many achievements were made, there was a distinctive social polarization between the land-owning elite and the rest of the population, which contributed to the fall of the monarchy after a military coup led by General Abdul-Karim Qasim in 1958. Subsequently, the first two years of the republic saw a significant rise in nationalism and the implementation of various reforms, including limiting the power of religious courts. However, within the borders, an opposition bloc formed that exploited differences among the free officers, which is why the freedom created by the opposition and the failed coup attempts led to the rise of a repressive government led by General Abdul-Karim Qasim. This government was eventually overthrown by the Ba'ath Party, which received help from a non-Ba'athist army officer, Abdul Salam Arif. His military government pursued a rapid policy of nationalizing industry, which later caused economic stagnation. His death in 1966 marked the start of another coup d'état by the Ba'ath Party and ultimately the dictatorship of Saddam Hussein. Under this regime, the party's ideology was strictly enforced upon the population, blurring the lines between party and government by the end of the 1970s. Ultimately, the Ba'athist regime led to the politicization of differences among Iraqi communities through discrimination and ethnic favoritism (Lockhart, 2014).

Iraq has always been a deeply divided country. The issue of Sunni-Shiite Arab sectarianism has been a constant, with the identities of these two groups often influencing politics. Under Saddam Hussein's leadership, Shiites were gradually pushed out of the Ba'ath Party, forming their own organizations to oppose the regime, such as Da'wa in the 1970s and the Supreme Council for the Islamic Revolution of Iraq in the 1980s. Additionally, Shiite Arabs opposed Saddam after the Gulf War (1990-1991), and their subsequent repression added to sectarian tensions. These ethnic and sectarian divisions shaped the resistance to Saddam, with the Iraqi National Congress emerging as an opposition umbrella created after the Gulf War, supported by the United States. It lacked a true

national foundation, instead being a coalition of ethnic and sectarian parties. Consequently, these identity-based divisions continued to drive the electoral process, which was at the core of the post-occupation crisis (Ottaway, Kaysi, 2012).

At the same time, neighbors of the Iraqi state fully exploit ethnic and sectarian rivalries to advance their own interests. Türkiye is the country most involved in Iraq, seeking to strengthen relations with all parties. Contrary to previous actions, before the U.S. invasion, Türkiye was a strong opponent of Kurdish autonomy, supporting Saddam Hussein. They have always feared that Iraqi Kurdish autonomy could inspire their own Kurdish population to similar actions or provide aid to Turkish Kurdish rebels. After the president's removal, Turkish acceptance of Kurdish autonomy unexpectedly increased due to a new foreign policy focused on building good relations and expanding trade ties with neighbors, or perhaps because of the weakened central government in Iraq following the occupation. Although Türkiye has tried to stay neutral in the Sunni-Shia conflict, the polarized atmosphere after U.S. troop withdrawal and the rise of the Rule of Law Coalition led to accusations that Türkiye supported Sunni politicians.

At the start of establishing the mandate in Iraq, Sunnis and Shiites shared a common goal: opposing foreign influence. However, the Sunnis worried that the Shiite leadership might reignite sectarian divisions and push toward a theocratic government. Initially, conflicts mainly erupted in areas with a Shia presence, responding to the growing power and influence of the central government during Iraq's transition from a mostly tribal society to a more developed state. As tribal rebellions increased, the force used to suppress them also grew harsher, leading to ruthless crackdowns. This heavy-handed approach by the Sunni-led government resulted in a temporary ceasefire in the southern tribal region (Lockhart, 2014).

The 1950s and 1960s experienced multiple revivals of Shiite groups, as the regime's strong secular stance and support for left-wing policies provoked a significant backlash from conservative Shiites, along with a religious revival among young Shiites. The emergence of the Shiite Islamic group Da'wa, led by Muhammad Baqir Al-Sadr, shifted the focus toward reshaping Islam and its teachings to address the needs of the modern world, while also aiming to protect and promote these ideas. It later evolved into a political party committed to establishing an Islamic state, driven by an increasing desire for a stronger Shiite identity—growing in direct response to Sunni dominance and discrimination against Shiite groups. Notably, the concern about Sunni

elite dominance only materialized after the American invasion and the overthrow of Saddam Hussein's regime in 2003. The ongoing mistreatment of Shia Arabs by Sunni Arabs throughout the 20th century ultimately led to a particularly violent sectarian conflict, as religiously oriented Shiite parties became the leading force in Iraqi politics after the invasion.

Rivalry for internal hegemony

The West has been preoccupied with Islam ever since Samuel P. Huntington predicted a so-called clash of civilizations, which turned into a self-fulfilling prophecy following the terrorist attacks of September 11, 2001. This tendency to overestimate the role that religion has is particularly pronounced in the analysis of the sectarian division between Sunnis and Shiites, which the unitary conception mentions as a war within Islam, the two communities being rivals since time immemorial. What is true is that the rift between the two communities has deep historical roots, starting shortly after the death of the Prophet Muhammad, being centered on the issue of legitimate succession. Today, however, religion is only a tiny part of a highly complex geostrategic and political picture. The sectarian wars that are currently taking place are due to modern nationalism, not Islamic theology. These sectarian conflicts have turned into proxy wars between Saudi Arabia and Iran, which are two distinctly nationalist actors pursuing their own strategic rivalries in places where the government is collapsing. Thus, the instrumentalization of religion, as well as the sectarianization of political conflicts, is a fair way to address the problem rather than to project religion as the driving force and main cause of the situation. Sunnis and Shiites have coexisted harmoniously for most of their history, based on a minimum political order, which has ensured the livelihood and security of both communities (Taşpinar, 2018).

During the 1980s, most political analysts believed Iraq was deeply divided along sectarian lines. Although Sunnis were a minority, they were seen as ruling Iraq and systematically discriminating against the Shiite majority. For many years, Sunni Arabs from a small area in the Golden Triangle—around Baghdad, Ar Rutba, and Mosul—held power. In the 1980s, Saddam Hussein was not only from the Sunni branch but also served as vice chairman of the ruling Ba'ath Party. During this time, key security, defense, and military positions were mostly held by Sunnis. Although the Shiite majority was

mainly in the south, the idea of intersecting conflicts was challenged by the behavior of Iraq's Shiite community during Iran's counter-invasion in 1982 and the subsequent fighting. Even during major military failures, Shiite Arabs continued to defend Iraq and the Ba'ath Party, despite Iranian propaganda urging them to join an Islamic revolution. As a result, by the late 20th century, loyalty was primarily driven by nationalism rather than sectarian identity. It is important to note that Iraqi Shiites are Arabs, not Persians, and have long been enemies of Persia. The Iraqi government skillfully exploited this ancient enmity by using propaganda that framed the war as part of a long-standing struggle between the Persian and Arab Empires. This kept the majority of Iraq's population, including Sunnis and Shiites, rooted in religious practice and faith. Before the war, the Ba'ath Party moved to integrate the Shiite community, creating a demand for labor that could only be met through recruitment of Shiites. By early 1988, it seemed likely that, once the war ended, Shiites would become full citizens assuming the Ba'ath Party survived the conflict (Metz, 1990).

In the lead-up to 1979, Iraq did not pose a threat to Iran. However, after the Islamic Revolution that same year, Tehran was left without Western support and with a weakened military, while Arab countries felt threatened by Iran's revolutionary agenda. Taking advantage of this situation, Iraq launched a campaign to annex the province of Khuzestan. The war between the two countries lasted for eight years and resulted in many casualties. A significant aspect of this conflict is that Iraq is home to the world's second-largest Shiite community, after Iran, and many of its members are supporters and allies of Iran. This is especially important considering that the rest of Iraq's population is mainly Sunni, and aligns more closely with Saudi Arabia's influence (Bercean, 2017). Therefore, the conflict between Iraq and Iran directly stems from the geopolitical shifts caused by the rise of revolutionary Shiism in the region. The long-standing Sunni-Shiite divide is crucial for understanding events across the Muslim world. Iraq's invasion of Iran was motivated by Saddam Hussein's concern that involving the Shiite population in the revolutionary movement could lead to the disintegration of his state. In fact, the events of 1991, when the US withdrew support for the Shiite uprising after previously helping to trigger it, fostered strong anti-American sentiment among Iraqis. This sentiment was further reinforced by the effects of the international embargo on Iraq, which remains evident today in Shiite opposition to the US presence in Iraq (Lazar, 2004).

Dynamics of the security environment

It is important to recognize that the entire disagreement over the identity, ownership, and legitimacy of the Iraqi state, which incidentally predates the US-led invasion of 2003, was the root cause of political violence in post-war Arab Iraq. The politics during this period were mainly driven by competition between Sunni and Shiite forces, focused on sectarian lines, which explains the ongoing cycle of Shiite state-building as well as Sunni rejection of this project. As long as violence continues, the mistrust that characterizes politics and sectarian relations will keep benefiting external actors. Both the creation of a Shiite-centric state and Sunni rejection of the post-2003 order stem from processes that took place throughout the twentieth century, including efforts to homogenize the nation, promoted by successive Iraqi governments, and the rise of a sect-based Shiite opposition in exile. Therefore, the sectarianization of the Iraqi state was not unavoidable, but the regime change following the American invasion sped up the independence of new actors and solidified the sectarian-oriented nature of existing ones (Haddad, 2016).

"Throughout its existence, the modern Iraqi nation-state has struggled to adequately manage community pluralism."
Haddad, 2016

The security environment linked to the Iraqi issue is closely tied to the concept of sectarian identity. In such a context, sectarian identity itself becomes exaggerated, influencing people's political and social perceptions. Although the various causes of conflicts in this region are controversial, what matters is the tendency to view them as driven by sectarian identity. This has made this aspect particularly influential in how political decision-makers and the public in the post-American invasion Arab world perceive the conflict. This influence is evident in the prominent role of sectarian sentiment in local communication and in understanding regional geopolitical rivalries. Therefore, it can be said that no single factor, nor simply the existence of sectarian groups, fully explains the sectarianization of the Iraqi state after 2003 (Haddad, 2016).

For a clearer understanding of the dynamics of the security environment from the Sunni-Shia rivalry perspective, it is useful to mention the two components of the muhasasa system: *muhasasa ta'ifiyya* (sectarian distribution) and *muhasasa hizbiyya* (party distribution).

These two elements are key drivers of intra- and inter-sectarian political competition. Over time, the first has been the most prominent, especially after 2003, when the basic sectarian power balance was challenged. Analyzing Iraq's election process reveals a clear pattern of shifting from inter-sectarian to intra-sectarian competition. These dynamics became even more evident during government formation, often defying ethnic and sectarian divisions. A concrete example is the struggle for ministerial posts following the elections, which resulted in unexpected alliances between Sunni and Shiite politicians typically accused of collusion with Daesh and Iran (Haddad, 2019). The post-DAESH Iraqi government now faces the challenge of eliminating sectarianism and identity politics, which arose due to external influences that weakened the country economically, militarily, and politically. If these group rivalries remain unresolved, Iraq risks ongoing instability and the possible emergence of another faction that could divide the country again, similar to previous divisions (Timreck, 2024).

Intervention of Shiite militias

One of the responses developed to address the Sunni threat caused by the terrorist group Daesh was carried out through the Popular Mobilization Forces (PMF), a series of non-governmental combat groups. These militias, mostly made up of Shiites, reported directly to Shiite leaders in Iraq and Iran. Although they were formed to fight DAESH, they soon worsened issues related to identity politics. This is evident in Mosul, a city taken over by Daesh in 2014, which exemplifies the height of sectarian tensions and the dominance of certain factions within the army and the PMF. As a Sunni-majority city, the use of the PMF for its liberation from Daesh highlighted sectarianism and identity politics within the military. These militias often recruit members based on identity, many of whom are supported by Iran, which seeks to expand its influence. While the PMF has played a key role in freeing cities like Mosul, their unchecked presence in Iraq weakens efforts to rebuild and increases the country's vulnerability to Iranian influence. Therefore, to reduce the pervasive influence of sectarian politics on Iraq's defense, the PMF should be fully disbanded-either by integrating members into the official security forces or by removing them from the military entirely (Timreck, 2024). Within these militias, three main Shiite factions exist, each with different goals and loyalties: those loyal to Ayatollah Khamenei of Iran, Ayatollah Al-Sistani of Iraq, and the Iraqi cleric Muqtada Al-Sadr.

Although these three factions are Shiite, the pro-Sistani and pro-Sadr factions categorically support the government and show a desire for integration into the army, while the pro-Khamenei militias seem resistant to integrating into the state. Thus, their unregulated presence, with many directly reporting to Iran, clearly contributes to weakening the Iraqi authorities and creating instability, which allows them to restore security in their preferred way. Over time, encouraged by military successes against Daesh, the PMF significantly extended its influence beyond battlefield support and, ultimately, faced accusations of human rights violations, both as revenge for Daesh attacks and to collect money from the families of those they kidnapped. One such militia is the Asa'ib Ahl Al-Haq (League of the Righteous), established in 2005 during the U.S. invasion in connection with General Qasem Soleimani, the former commander of Iran's Quds Forces. Following a suicide attack in January 2016 on a café owned by Shiite citizens in Diyala governorate, several militias, including this one, killed and kidnapped Sunni men, while destroying Sunni mosques and properties in Muqdadiya. As the subsequent report shows, there were no prosecutions or convictions of PMF members involved in these attacks, with fears of reprisals against the Sunni population remaining high (Timreck, 2024).

Prime Minister Haider Al-Abadi's victory in Mosul in 2017 was a significant achievement for the Iraqi army. Although this liberation was carried out in coordination with American forces, the role of the militias was debated. Initially, it was decided that the PMF would not be involved in the effort to free Mosul, but Baghdad dismissed the concerns of the Nineveh council and included these additional forces. In this context, identity politics played a crucial role, especially since the sectarian identity of those participating in the fight against Daesh was already a point of contention. With a Sunni majority, the residents of Mosul were genuinely apprehensive about integrating the PMF and their allies, the Kurdish Peshmerga. Because rebuilding Mosul would be a complex and lengthy process requiring national unity, Prime Minister Abadi believed that many PMF volunteers fought for Iraq, while others were driven by different interests. This is why he aimed to bring these militias under state control (Timreck, 2024).

"The Sunnis had no choice but to defend themselves and use weapons. They have reached a point of being or not being."
Tariq Al-Hashimi,
former vice-president of Iraq

Following the loss of power under Saddam Hussein and the confrontation with mass destruction after Daesh, the Sunnis have failed to reach a consensus on the best way forward. Without a strong identity and willingness to participate in politics after a period of unchallenged rule, they are forced to find their voice and contend with the increasingly powerful Shiites. In fact, Sunni leaders are hesitant to support Prime Minister Haider Al-Abadi's government in Baghdad due to perceptions of corruption and inadequate Sunni representation. However, without a Shiite ally, they risk losing their political influence entirely. An example of a successful Sunni coalition is the Iraqiya bloc, which was the main favorite among Sunnis, winning the most seats in parliament in 2010. This coalition managed to appeal to both Sunni and Shiite supporters because of its non-sectarian stance and focus on issues beyond sectarian rhetoric that dominated politics at the time. It set a precedent for addressing the Iraqi issue, unlike efforts to create Sunni unity under the guidance of Jordan, Türkiye, the U.S., or the UAE, which ended without consensus following Daesh's rise. Ultimately, the Shiites condemned the coalition for its sectarian exclusivity, leaving Sunnis deeply divided and significantly weaker heading into the upcoming elections (Timreck 2024).

Security services

Structural reforms in Iraq's security services are extremely difficult but essential to strengthen the country's national security. One of the biggest challenges for Mohammed Shia Al-Sudani's government is restructuring Iraqi security institutions, which include the Joint Operations Command, the Ministry of the Interior, the Ministry of Defense, and the intelligence services. To ensure the stability and sovereignty of the state, as well as the enforcement of laws, it is crucial to implement sweeping reforms and new policies at the level of national security institutions—especially if Iraq is to regain its role as a key pillar of stability and security. Iraqi security institutions face multiple issues directly linked to sectarianism in Iraqi politics. Most current institutions are highly politicized, with leadership appointed by political parties based on the electoral balance within the political blocs of Iraq's Council of Representatives. Consequently, these leaders tend to prioritize the agendas of the parties that supported their appointments, which hampers the ability of national security institutions to uphold professional standards and pursue national goals. For example, the Ministry of Defense avoids supporting military production because arms dealers offer generous commissions, keeping the country reliant on foreign arms imports. Due to political appointments, many security leaders lack the necessary qualifications. For instance, the Ministry of Interior in Al-Sudani's government is managed by military officers with no experience in security, law, or policing. The intelligence services are run by criminal law judges with no background in intelligence work. Since 2003, Iraq's national security policy has been trying to move beyond traditional approaches. In addition to the lack of expertise, endemic corruption affecting the entire Iraqi state further undermines security efforts. Overall, Iraq's security situation remains fragile, with intelligence services failing to effectively eliminate major threats such as DAESH cells. Key structural challenges for Al-Sudani's security reform include the absence of political consensus, uncertainty about the future of the government, the weakening of the administrative system, and the lack of professional coordination among national security agencies (Al-Zubaidi, 2023).

Emerging trends in the security environment

Beginning with the sectarian divisions among Iraqi citizens, one of the major problems affecting Iraq today is the violent activity of terrorist groups (DAESH), Iranian-backed militias (Kata'ib Hezbollah, Asa'ib Ahl Al-Haq, Harakat Al-Nujaba, Badr Organization, Saraya Al-Khorasani), nationalist Shiite factions (e.g., Saraya Al-Salam), Kurdish groups operating on Iraqi territory (e.g., Kurdistan Workers' Party/PKK, Sinjar Defense Units/YBS, Peshmerga), Sunni tribal groups (in opposition to the central government due to insufficient resources and marginalization), local tribal militias (cooperating with Al-Qaeda or DAESH, with the aim of protecting their own interests), as well as political and paramilitary entities (Popular Mobilization Committees/PMF, Sunni Provincial Councils, Coordination Framework, Sadrist Bloc, Kurdish Regional Government/KRG).

Although the overthrow of Saddam Hussein's regime and the elimination of Osama bin Laden and his followers were intended to usher in an era of prosperity for Iraq, alliances were reshuffled. Iraq is now plagued by a fierce insurgency, lacking an effective government and basic services. The Iraqi conflict is ongoing, with human and financial costs for the US and its allies continuing to increase. Therefore, developing a long-term strategy is crucial because the counterterrorism problem in Iraq will not vanish after US military withdrawal. Jihadists worldwide have found fertile ground here to develop

new skills, build networks, and train for future conflicts, aiming to fight both in the next war and to defeat the US and its allies. Much of the violence in Iraq resembles a civil war between Iraqi communities, with jihadists often leading efforts to provoke sectarian violence. Such violence seeks to undermine the government (Bayman, 2007). In September 2024, the Iraqi and American governments announced that the Coalition against Daesh would conclude its military mission in Iraq by September 2025. The negotiations began following armed clashes between Shiite militias, known as the Islamic Resistance in Iraq, and the US, while also reflecting internal pressure for US forces to withdraw (Loft, Brooke-Holland, 2025).

Future prospects

Ethnic and sectarian division remains a fundamental issue at the national level, but it also contributes to the emergence of all other political, economic, socio-cultural, and technological problems. This issue must be fully understood in relation to all structures of Iraqi society to help restore the essential functions of the state. While security stability cannot be guaranteed categorically in the future—regardless of political negotiations or agreements—the numerous challenges Iraq has faced in the past should serve as a basis for understanding future challenges threats.

From a political perspective, there is a risk of increasing misunderstandings among the various political groups that have recently reached a consensus on how they should operate. However, due to external influences and divisions between ethnic and sectarian groups, tensions between Sunni and Shiite factions might intensify, especially regarding the implementation or approval of laws, given the limited Sunni representation in the Iraqi Parliament. We should also remember the parliamentary elections scheduled for late 2025, where political clashes among different factions are likely to surface. Additionally, from a political standpoint, it is important to consider the agenda of the new Trump administration, as it could significantly impact Iraq's future, with Washington threatening to escalate security and economic pressure. Moreover, considering Iraq's geographical position between Iran, Saudi Arabia, Türkiye, and Syria, it can be expected to continually face external pressures. In 2025, Iraq will need to prepare for another round of parliamentary elections, whose results could reshape the political landscape, as they have in previous years. Looking ahead at existing sectarian divisions, it is likely that no single candidate will secure a majority in this fall's elections, leading to a series of

private negotiations to establish a new government. Many Iraqis may feel their voices are ignored, fueling further discontent, conflict, and violence. This cycle of weak governance and polarization is likely to persist society.

Another problem Iraq has faced in recent years is the escalation of Turkish military operations in Iraq and the Kurdistan Region of Iraq / KRI to fight the PKK. Although the decision to disband the terrorist group is being carried out, the Baghdad government is expected to play a key role in overseeing the disarmament process of the terrorist organization (Butler, Spicer, 2025). At the same time, it is important to highlight the political violence directly linked to the Iranian-led Axis of Resistance in Iraq, Yemen, and Syria. Violence among Shiites resurfaced with the 2023 provincial elections, when Prime Minister Muhammad Shia Al-Sudani's position was challenged. A year later, he moved toward rapprochement with Türkiye and agreed to a plan with Washington for the gradual withdrawal of U.S. troops, while also emphasizing the strengthening of Iraqi forces against Daesh. However, the resurgence of the terrorist group and the rise in attacks by pro-Iranian militias against the U.S. and Israel strained the government, especially as Israel threatened to conduct strikes if attacks came from Iraqi territory (ACLED, 2024).

Although there has recently been a decline in violent attacks in Iraq, one issue that continues to be of interest for the future is the terrorist phenomenon, which is only one aspect of sectarian problems within Iraq. Even though violent conflicts have lessened, we must remember that DAESH has been defeated but not completely vanquished. Therefore, the potential resurgence of DAESH remains a future concern, as evidenced by reports of its activities in mountainous and desert regions. One advantage they have is the camps where family members of former jihadist fighters reside, which DAESH could exploit to create new factions. Additionally, considering the prisons in neighboring Syria, managed by the Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF), we must also consider the possibility that thousands of DAESH fighters could be released, potentially crossing into Iraq. Taking all these factors into account, it is clear that the militias in Iraq have a justified reason for maintaining influence at the security level, as well as the benefits derived from sectarian divisions.

Another element of interest is the expansion of Türkiye's position within Iraqi borders, particularly in Kurdish and predominantly Sunni areas. These developments are directly linked to Iran's goal of reducing Turkish influence, and the actions taken on Iraqi territory present a problem that needs resolution. With the

potential to become a battleground between Ankara and Tehran, Iraq could face major clashes between Iranian-backed militias and Sunni factions, including the KDP and Turkish-backed opposition forces.

And, last but not least, the biggest and most crucial problem, which has existed from the start and will likely continue in the same way, remains the issue of sectarian divisions between Sunnis and Shiites. These tensions have kept growing, primarily in the political realm, fueled consistently by a series of unresolved disputes. Therefore, as Iran pulls out from Iraqi territory, conflict escalation will probably happen more rapidly. While a unified state where these sectarian divisions can be healed and coexist peacefully is desired, the chances for a future resolution seem unlikely, especially through amicable means. Since foreign interventions from the beginning, all the years that have passed have deepened the divide that may never be bridged again, influencing whether the Iraqi state can ever be restored achieved.

Conclusions

Following the events of 2003, Iraqi politics revolved around the identity communities of the exiled opposition: Sunnis, Shiites, and Kurds. Over the ensuing decades, as factions vied for power, none managed to set aside their identity-based visions when recruiting leaders or members from other communities. Despite numerous attempts by Iraqis to challenge sectarian power structures, these factions have always successfully defended a system where identity overwhelmingly surpasses all other political considerations. It has become evident that what benefits sectarian factions often does not serve the broader population living in mixed communities, whose livelihoods and security depend on national stability. Consequently, these sectarian divisions are primarily reflected within the political sphere, which is why the ongoing sectarianism of Iraqi factions differs from the preferences of most Iraqis, who mainly seek security and efficient services on a national level instead of community-based advantages. Today, Iraq stands as a nexus of historical, geopolitical, and identity crises, all of which threaten internal stability and regional influence. The current cycle persists because those factions holding most resources after Saddam Hussein's fall viewed ethno-sectarianism as the simplest route to power. Despite facing increasingly difficult challenges to the ethno-sectarian system over time, they were supported by an electorate frightened by armed groups threatening their communities based on identity, as well as factions distributing resources according to existing divisions community.

The existing rivalries among ethno-sectarian groups have worsened due to ongoing foreign interventions, fragile and fragmented governance, societal polarization, corruption, and the expanding influence of non-state actors, all exacerbated by the unstable security and political environment. The sectarian divisions of the past fifty years have shown that they mainly formed as reactions to external threats, serving as responses to community solidarity. By the time the U.S. withdrew in 2011, these divisions had become deeply rooted and increasingly confusing. Each militia and major political group identified with a sectarian or ethnic label, drawing members exclusively from one community. These groups often held conflicting views on nationalism and sectarianism. Sunni Arab communities produced sectarian extremists such as Al-Qaeda and Daesh, alongside Sunni Arab nationalists and reformers. Shiite factions included a mix of Islamists and Islamist-nationalists, who were distinguished more by their opinions on territory, economy, and security than on politics and identity. Despite major differences, Shiite factions often invoked nationalist rhetoric and sought to align themselves with non-Shiite groups. Ultimately, all Iraqi factions supported the status quo established by the Americans— a sectarian system where power is shared and positions are allocated primarily based on identity, then faction. This system contradicts the overall interests of Iraqis, who need effective governance, security, and strong state institutions to effectively address ongoing challenges crises.

Although efforts to rebuild democracy have been launched relatively recently, they have continually faced a lack of consensus on Iraq's future. Sectarian divisions have contributed both to conflicts and to hindering the development of a shared civic identity. A moment of sectarian unity occurred during the rise of nationalism when Iraq was struck by Daesh. Fully shocked by the terrorist group's brutality and the concurrent collapse of many Iraqi institutions, citizens united against a common threat. Several Shiite volunteers from the south fought far from home, in provinces like Nineveh and Anbar, with the goal of freeing Sunnis from Daesh control. These fighters, regardless of community affiliation, organized themselves to combat terrorism. This showed that the Iraqi state could potentially organize in a similar way, aimed at serving common interests and maintaining security and stability. However, the nationalist surge during the fight against terrorism did not symbolize a revival of state institutions. Instead, many Iraqis feared trusting a strong national government that could inspire a sense of chauvinism.

In conclusion, the crisis in forming the government highlights and confirms the ongoing problem of sectarian divisions in Iraq, serving as a clear example of how the sectarian system prevails over the popular desire for a less sectarian society. These divisions have always existed and have never diminished, mainly because controlling power in the state is their primary goal. Despite its complexity, sectarianism between the two main communities, Sunnis and Shiites, continues to be a powerful force behind conflict and insecurity, fueling all the political, economic, social, cultural, and technological problems that Iraq currently faces facing.

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