

**Sectarian Polarization and its impact on Societal Security in
post-2003 Iraq**
Assist. Lecturer. Hewa Abdulkhaleq Ahmed
**Department Of Political Systems & Public Policy, College of
Political Sciences,**
Salahaddin University-Erbil
Correspondence: Hewa.Ahmed@su.edu.krd
ORCID 0000-0002-1426-4889

الاستقطاب الطائفي وأثره على الأمن المجتمعي في عراق ما بعد ٢٠٠٣
م.م. هيوأ عبد الخالق احمد
جامعة صلاح الدين-اربيل، كلية العلوم السياسية، قسم النظم السياسية والسياسة العامة
جهمسر گيرى تايفه گيرى و كاريگيرى لهسر ناسايشى كومه لگيرى له عيراقى دواى
٢٠٠٣
م.م. هيوأ عبد الخالق احمد
بهشى سيستمه سياسييه كان و سياسه تى گشتى، كولنژى زانسته سياسييه كان، زانكوى
سه لاحدين-هولنر
Correspondence: Hewa.Ahmed@su.edu.krd
ORCID 0000-0002-1426-4889

ملخص: تستكشف هذه الدراسة التأثير العميق للطائفية على المشهد السياسي والديناميكيات الاجتماعية في العراق منذ غزو عام ٢٠٠٣ وتشير إلى أنَّ الهوية الطائفية أصبحت العلامة الأساسية للمنافسة السياسية، مما أدى إلى جغرافيا رمزية تتميز بـ "حدود الدم" التي تؤدي إلى تفاقم الاختلافات المجتمعية. لم يؤد صعود الطائفية إلى تأجيج العنف المدني فحسب، مما أدى إلى خسائر كبيرة في الأرواح والنزوح، بل حول مفهوم المواطنة إلى ذاتية طائفية، مما أدى إلى طمس الحدود بين المجالين العام والخاص، حيث تحدد الدراسة تأثير إنشاء الكانتونات الطائفية، مما قد يؤدي إلى تجزئة المجتمع وزيادة التقلبات في العراق. وتؤكد الدراسة أن الأمن القومي قد يلقي بظلاله على شرعية الدولة، مما يعقد قدرة القادة على الحفاظ على السيطرة وسط تصاعد التوترات الطائفية. علاوة على ذلك، يتم فحص العوامل الاقتصادية التي ساهمت في هذه الأزمة، مثل الاعتماد على النفط والتضخم، مما يسلط الضوء على كيفية تفاقم هذه العناصر في تفاقم المظالم المجتمعية وتأجيج الاضطرابات المدنية، وفي الختام، تدعو الدراسة إلى إعادة تقييم المبادئ داخل مجتمع تعددي وتقتترح الحاجة إلى حلول عملية لمعالجة الندوب العميقة

للـعنـف الطائفي. ويفترض أنه بدون تغييرات سياسية كبيرة والتزام بالتخفيف من حدة الطائفية، فإن مسار دولة العراق وأمنه قد يؤدي إلى التفكك والصراع. الكلمات المفتاحية: الاستقطاب الطائفي- الأمن المجتمعي- عراق مابعد ٢٠٠٣- الطائفية- العنف الطائفي

Abstract:

This study explores the profound impact of sectarianism on the political landscape and social dynamics in Iraq since the 2003 invasion. It argues that sectarian identity has become the primary marker of political competition, resulting in symbolic geography characterized by "blood borders" that exacerbate societal differences. The rise of sectarianism has not only fueled civil violence, resulting in significant loss of life and displacement but has also transformed the concept of citizenship into sectarian subjectivity, blurring the boundaries between public and private spheres, as the study identifies the impact of creating sectarian cantons, which may lead to a fragmented society and increased volatility in Iraq. It emphasizes that national security may overshadow state legitimacy, complicating leaders' ability to maintain control amid rising sectarian tensions. Moreover, economic factors contributing to this crisis, such as oil dependency and inflation, are examined, highlighting how these elements exacerbate societal grievances and fuel civil unrest, and in conclusion, the paper calls for a reassessment of principles within a pluralistic society and suggests the need for practical solutions to address the deep scars of sectarian violence. It assumes that without significant political changes and commitment to mitigating sectarianism, the trajectory of Iraq's statehood and security may lead to disintegration and conflict.

Keywords: Sectarian Polarization - Societal Security - Post-2003 Iraq - Sectarianism - Sectarian Violence

پوخته:

نعم تـويزينهـويه كاريگـري قـوولي تايفهـگـري لهـسـر ديمـعـي سـياسـي و دايـناميـكي كـومـهـلايمـتي له عـيـراق له دـواي سـالي ٢٠٠٣ تـاوـتـوي دـهـكـات. دـهـيـويـت بـيـسـمـيـنـيت كـه نـاسـنـامـهـي تايفهـگـري بـوـوتـه نـيـشـانـهـيـهـكي سـهـرـهـكي كـيـبـر كـيـي سـياسـي، كـه بـوـوتـه هـوي جـوگـر افـيـايـهـكي سـيـمـبـولي بـه "سـنـوـر مـكانـي خـويـن"، نـهـمـش جـيـاـوا زـيـهـكـاني كـومـهـلـكا زـيـاتـر

1. Introduction

Civil society and political life in Iraq since 2003 appear irrevocably sectarian despite the secularization of the Ba’thist regime. An ethno-sectarian political system has emerged and triumphed, transforming citizens into sectarian subjects and mobilizing populations along sectarian lines. The question of why sectarianism triumphed so thoroughly in Iraq since 2003 fundamentally shapes understanding of state and society dynamics in Iraq, as well as an exploration of policies that might mitigate sectarianism in Iraq and throughout the region. Sectarianism has dominated political contestation, constituting communal differences as the primary marker for each collective political identity – that is the political identities formed and shared by members of specific sectarian or ethnic groups. It has invoked a symbolic geography of 'blood borders'* across which sectarian identity assumes pre-political and primordial qualities. Sectarianism has provided an interpretative framework for civil violence that explains the deaths of thousands of Iraqis and the displacement of millions more. Sectarianism has transformed

citizenship into sectarian subjectivity, blurring the boundary between public and private and rendering the non-sectarian a site of suspicion. Sectarianism has been successful in thinking, saying, and doing precisely this while also transforming the timeless contention between the 'two sects' of Shi'ism and Sunni-ism into a politicized and hyper-masculine eternal clash.

The framing of the sectarian question is initially considered. This is followed by the argument that the depth and scope of sectarianism in post-2003 Iraq can only be understood through a consideration of four factors: the emergence of a sectarian political opportunity structure that privileged sectarian discourse, the rise of sectarian political entrepreneurs, who emulated the first factor; the framing of sectarian narratives and the crafting of sectarian discourse and political identity that resonated and mobilized; and, finally, the availability of discursive and force-based means for thinking, saying, and doing sectarianism. These arguments advance understanding of both the specificity of post-Ba'th Iraq and, more broadly, the extent and depth of sectarianism.

2. Framework for Methodology

This study uses a qualitative research methodology to investigate the dynamics of sectarianism in Iraq after 2003 by fusing political opportunity structure theory with discourse analysis. The study uses secondary sources like scholarly publications and reports from international organizations in addition to primary sources like political speeches, party manifestos, and media coverage. By examining how language and symbolism are used to mobilize sectarian groups, discourse analysis is used to dissect sectarian narratives and political identities. The political opportunity structure framework also aids in the analysis of how institutional and structural elements provide opportunities for sectarian actors to further their objectives. A thorough grasp of sectarianism's discursive and structural aspects is made possible by this dual approach

3. Literature review

Several studies that we reviewed emphasize the intricate interaction of history, politics, and social dynamics in the construction of sectarian identities and conflicts in Iraq. Where some scholars emphasize the continuity of Ba'thist secularism, and its breakdown after 2003 (Faleh A. Jabar 2003), others highlight the instrumentalization of sectarian differences in the apparatus of political power (Fanar Haddad 2011). Reidar Visser (2013) examines the emergence of sectarian political entrepreneurs who mobilize sectarian emotions as political leverage. Scholars like Abbas Kadhim (2012) claim that the literature also looks at how discourse and violence are used to produce and disseminate sectarian narratives. This body of work provides a basic understanding of the mechanisms through which sectarianism has become entrenched in Iraq's political and social fabric.

4. Historical Context of Sectarianism in Iraq

The factors prompting sectarian polarization in Iraq are not new: Iraq has been susceptible to sectarianism for decades prior to 2003, which in some cases became violent by the end of the 1990s. Nevertheless, it was following 2003 that sectarianism shifted from fringe to mainstream. Though often conflated, sectarianism is neither Islamism nor violence. Rather, sectarianism is a broader category: the politicization of religious difference, in this case Shiite and Sunni Islam. Sectarianism can be cultural, social, political, economic, and violent, but not all sectarianism is Islamism or violent. As an umbrella term, one can speak of various phenomena as sectarian: discrimination on the basis of sect, hate speech, inflammatory and disrespectful discourse, propaganda, identity politics, ethnocentrism, exclusion, violence, etc¹

Following the US invasion of Iraq in 2003, Iraqi society descended into sectarianism. The US invasion is still regarded as a "historical turning point" between intercommunal violence, including "sectarian identities, nationalist movements, tribalism, revenge, and

¹ Fanar Haddad, *Sectarianism in Iraq: Antagonistic Visions of Unity* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2011), 45.

extremist movements like al-Qaeda," and peace. It is important to distinguish between immediate context-specific causes and long-term structural factors when analyzing sectarian identities in Iraq. Despite being a significant aspect of Iraqi governance since the 1920s, sectarianism gained prominence in the country's society after 2003. The long-running, bloody war between Iraq's Sunni Arab populace and the Shi'a-dominated government and the rise of local self-defense groups organized by Iraqis were the two main causes of this change. The post-2003 order, which was marked by a regime change that nationalized sectarianism, collapsed in part because of the new social divisions based on sectarian identity. By dismantling the Iraqi military and security forces and enacting de-Ba'athification, which disproportionately resulted in unemployment and disenfranchisement among Sunni Arabs, Shi'a-dominated governments politically marginalized Sunni Arabs. Sectarian militias arose on both sides as a result of these developments, including Sunni organizations like the Islamic Army and Al-Qaeda in Iraq and Shi'a militias like the Mahdi Army and the Badr Organization. These developments led to Sunni insurgency and alienation..^{1, 2}

The sectarianism was a most salient aspect of Iraq's governance; with a long-standing ministerial quota system since the 1920s, it was hardly deployed in politics or society. Sectarian identities became rigid and almost synonymous with social identities only

* In a 2006 article in the "Armed Forces Journal, retired U.S. officer" blood borders Ralph Peters coined the term "Blood Borders" and suggested a new map of the Middle East that reflected the distribution of ethnic groups and sects rather than the borders established by European colonial powers following the fall of the Ottoman Empire.

¹ Haidar Reda Mohamad, *Understanding the Rise of Sectarianism in Post-2003 Iraq: Mobilization of the Religious Rhetoric by the Political Leadership and the Role of Traditional Social Identities* (Chiba University, Graduate School of Humanities and Studies on Public Affairs, Doctoral Program, 2020), pp. 5-8.

² Laudisio, Andieleigh. Sunni and Shi'i Sectarian Violence in Iraq During the Reconstruction Period (2003-2005): Implications for Democracy and Dialogue. Temple University, 2023, PP.6-10.

after 2003. Historical accounts of the "realization," "inventing," or "creating" of a sectarian identity mostly agree that sectarian identities were beneath the surface or fluid in Iraq until just before the 2003 US invasion. Iraq was not a cohesive state or nation until that point. Instead, it was a sprawling multi-ethnic, multi-tribal, and multi-sectarian empire. However, with the fall of the Ottoman Empire and the British colonization, segmentary identities morphed into national ones, and pan-Arabism and pan-Turkism at the state level.¹

At the national level, there was a discursive and policy shift from tribes, ethnicity and sect-based categorical hierarchies essential for surveilling and controlling the population to national building by centralization and territorialization. The promise of the quotas was the institutionalization of divisions based on politics, territory, ethnicity/sect, and competition for state resources and services. This created the grounds for the unmaking of the post-2003 order: Sunni resistance's capture of the discontent and anger at the US occupation, wrongs by the government and loss of dignity; local arms competition due to the collapse of the state, and provision of an alternative to hand arms protection; and the emergence of a Sunni Arab identity/political/sectarian community as a process in socialization into ethnocracy.²

In making sense of the previous order and its unmaking, the sectarianization process is taken for granted and widely narrated. Iraqis are seen as moving from an assabiyah/identity-less state to a tribal/ethnic/sectarian society. However, this has left a big hole. On the one hand, it does not explain why sectarianism as a standalone should explain an archaeological puzzle of Shi'a domination after the US invasion. On the other hand, it hardly addresses an

¹ Aldoughli, Rahaf. "Departing 'Secularism': boundary appropriation and extension of the Syrian state in the religious domain since 2011." *British Journal of Middle Eastern Studies* 49, no. 2 (2022), pp.9-11.

² Dodge, Toby. "Beyond structure and agency: Rethinking political identities in Iraq after 2003." *Nations and Nationalism* 26, no. 1 (2020), pp.1-4.

epistemological puzzle of sectarianism, which is meaningful only when Arab identity is deemed and historicized; hence, understanding sectarianism requires situating it -the sectarianization process in the broader and contested narratives of history. However, the rigorous understanding of sectarianism/sectarianization is beyond this piece's scope and need.^{1, 2}

Nonetheless, the sectarianism gradualism narratives essentially stand in order to theorize upon Iraq's contemporary Sunni Arab sectarianism and to historicize Shi'a sectarianization, the unmaking of forced liberalization and Arabization, the gradualism of sectarianism, depoliticization of Sunnism in and by the post-2003 order, In such accounts, sectarianism is primarily seen as a top-down project, and politicization of sectarian identities among social actors requires pre-existing sectarian identities. However, this is hardly convincing in making sense of the after-2003 sectarian intentions, discourses, activists, and participation of social actors, then agency.³

4.1. Pre-2003 Sectarian Dynamics

Iraq has a long history of sectarian dynamics dating back to the Ottoman Empire, during which restrictions were applied to discourage Shi'ism and Shia political systems saw their powers dispersed across regions and local powers.⁴ However, Sunni and Shi'a sectarianism was largely kept at bay during the Ba'athist multi-sect rule. The Baathist party was understood the need to emphasize

¹ Menshawy, Mustafa. "The irony of sectarianism: Sectarianizing by desectarianizing in Syria." *Digest of Middle East Studies* 31, no. 2 (2022), p.4.

² Valbjørn, Morten. "Observing (the debate on) sectarianism: On conceptualizing, grasping and explaining sectarian politics in a new Middle East." *Mediterranean Politics* 26, no. 5 (2021), pp.7-10.

³ Mabon, Simon. "Desectarianization: Looking beyond the sectarianization of Middle Eastern politics." *The Review of Faith & International Affairs* 17, no. 4 (2019), p.24.

⁴ Bektaş, Erhan. "The Ottoman Response to Missionary Activities of Iranian Shiite Ulema: The Case of Iraq in the Nineteenth Century." *Osmanlı Mirası Araştırmaları Dergisi/Journal of Ottoman Legacy Studies* 6, no. 16 (2019), p.11.

Arab nationalism to build a political identity. The Ba'athist understanding of nationhood was constructed in opposition to inherent challenges stemming from Iraq's plurality, geographical fragmentation, fractious ethnicities, multi-religiosity, and a tortuous path to national modernity. In order to transcend a multitude of loyalties, Saddam put himself at the helm of a suppression machine whose *modus operandi* was 'Fear.' Sectarianism lay dormant yet persistent among various communities, particularly among the Shi'a, and Influenced by the Iranian Revolution of 1979, Shia resistance to Saddam Hussein's Ba'ath regime grew stronger starting in the 1980s. Although they organized, organizations such as the Islamic Dawa Party were unable to topple the government. The 1980 execution of prominent cleric Muhammad Baqir al-Sadr served as a metaphor for the harsh suppression of Shia activism by the regime. Shia initiatives did not lessen Saddam's authority during the Iran-Iraq War, despite Iranian backing. Sectarian tensions in Iraq increased after the 1991 Shia uprising following the Gulf War was brutally put down.^{1, 2}

Sectarian differences and tensions resurfaced once the Ba'athist hegemony was seriously challenged following the US-led invasion in 2003. The invasion transformed the country politically, economically, and socially, but above all, it tore apart a structure that had kept sectarian fanaticism at bay. The regime change engineered by the United States was the most radical change Saudi Arabia had not envisaged. The SOI protest resulted in the emergence of an anti-American insurgency that affected not only Iraq but the entire region. Sunni extremist groups took the lead in mobilizing public hatred towards the Americans. Once the red line was breached and non-combat service members targeted, the Shi'a

¹ Ibid., 17. 4, p.26.

² Shanahan, Rodger. "Shi'a Political Development in Iraq: The Case of the Islamic Da'wa Party." *Third World Quarterly* 25, no. 5 (2004): 943–54. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/3993703>.

followed suit and, having tasted blood, opted for pre-emptive action.^{1 2}

4.2. Impact of the 2003 Invasion

The 2003 invasion and the subsequent regime change of Ba'athist Iraq had devastating impacts on the state as well as on Iraqi society. The absence of a legitimate power that was accepted with consensus by Iraqis left the state with no authority in the eyes of all groups. The absence of an enabling environment for civil government gave way to the militia groups. As the military state collapsed, all kinds of arms fell into the hands of official and unofficial groups. The armed struggle against the occupying forces or the newly formed sovereign government justified the emergence and proliferation of armed groups, leaving Iraqi society open to fragmentation along sectarian lines.³

The dissipation of the centralized Power of the state allowed fragmentation along ethnic, sectarian, religious and regional lines. As these identities became paramount, citizens became divided into ethno-religious sects in a sectarianized political order. The loyalties of citizens shifted from nationalism and territoriality to sectarianism, confessionalism and other primordial identities.⁴

The regime change led to a complete transformation of Iraq's political system, with competition now being based on membership of sectarian-geographical enclaves, in which parties were formed and had illegal arms. The political Power that each party formed in parliament followed that of the armed group it had. These armed groups operated beyond the law, arresting, torturing and killing

¹ ظاهرة العنف والاستقطاب الطائفي في العراق بعد عام ٢٠٠٣ وأثرهما في " ناظم نواف إبراهيم، . جامعة بغداد، مجلة دراسات دولية، ٦٣، (٢٠١٥-٠١)، صص ١٦٣-١٦٨. "الاستقرار السياسي

² Khidhir, Zainaddin Mawlood. "The Changing Dynamics of the Perception of US Foreign Policy towards Kurds in Syria: Developing Relations in Light of Ignorance, Cooperation and Desertion (2011-2020)." PhD diss., Budapesti Corvinus Egyetem, 2025, p.2 .

³ Ibid., 26, 1, p.4

⁴ Alaaldin, Ranj. "Sectarianism, governance, and Iraq's future." Brookings Doha Center Analysis Paper 24 (2018), pp. 14-15.

citizens at whim, creating a state of terror in which anarchy reigned. The law enforcement and judiciary authorities were utilized to repress political opponents, and the rights and freedoms of a sizeable segment of the citizenry were abrogated. Each group's informal power extended beyond society and politics to vast swathes of the economy, with monopoly and control of key resources such as oil. With the collapse of the state, the new political classes and militia groups looted the assets of Iraqis and plundered their resources. At this stage, a resource war broke out within the ruling elite and political class, with each faction attempting to reconstruct the state to use its resources to its advantage.¹

Amidst protests against sectarian quotas, of which the regime that followed the 2003 invasion was unprecedentedly accused, the rise of the Islamic State of Iraq in 2014, and the Levant marked a turning point in Iraq's sectarian struggle. The emergence of such a formidable threat revived earlier parties, whose primary project was framed against the prospects of Iraq collapsing under terrorist control, to argue that sectarianism was a threat to society and promoted solidarity and reconciliation between and within groups.²

5. The Rise of Sectarian Polarization

On the fateful April 9, 2003, in the course of the Iraq war, the United States captured Baghdad, marking the end of the regime of Saddam Hussein and the collapse of the Iraqi state. Almost immediately after the downfall of Saddam's regime, The National Museum in Baghdad was looted, which was the first act of destruction. Under the eyes of neighboring US troops, priceless artifacts in the center of human civilization, some of which had been preserved for millennia—even during the US siege of Baghdad—

¹ Cannard, Jonathan. "The Infrastructures of Occupation: Iraq, 2003–2012." (2022), p.4, 5.

² Muntasser, M. H. "State-building and Ethnic Pluralism in Iraq after 2003." Журнал политической философии и социологии политики «Полития. Анализ. Хроника. Прогноз» 1 (104) (2022), PP.115-118.

were looted or destroyed. In a matter of days, the warnings that US Secretary of State Colin Powell had previously given to the UN came to pass: although the war eliminated the threat of WMDs, it also brought about a more complicated and profound problem: sectarian conflict in Iraq. Ethnic and religious groups swiftly occupied the power vacuum left by the US and its allies' dismantling of numerous institutions and state structures. Long-standing communities that had lived together for centuries were under pressure from the invasion to reorganize along more distinct sectarian lines. Both the standing of post-Saddam Sunni Arabs and the legitimacy of the recently formed Shiite-led government were seriously threatened by Sunni-Shia sectarianism.¹

Sectarianism, Islamic sectarianism in particular, has become not just the justification of sectarian violence but also the primary framework for the analysis of the political crisis and the violence in post-2003 Iraq and the Middle East.² Sectarian conflicts were deemed to be "ancient hatreds" exacerbated. This purely primordial view of sectarianism viewed human beings as being nothing but their sectarian identities and thus deprived them of agency in the course of history. Listening to the media coverage, especially in and around 2006-7, outsiders could easily be misled to think that Shiite Arabs and Sunni Arabs have been engaged in a full-fledged sectarian civil war in Iraq for centuries. The rationale provided by this worldview was that radical Islamism embraced by al-Qaeda in Iraq (AQI) and its violent acts against Shiite Iraqis stemmed from the Takfiri ideology of Sunni Islam, which predates its emergence. the idea of sectarianism and sectarian violence, highlighted at the expense of other concepts, was approved as the best explanatory

¹ Jacoby, Tim, and Nassima Neggaz. "Sectarianism in Iraq: the role of the coalition provisional authority." *Critical Studies on Terrorism* 11, no. 3 (2018): pp.481- 483.

² Ibid., 17, no. 4, P.23.

framework and, thus, the appropriate set of solutions to the disintegration of Iraq.¹

5.1. Political Factors

With the change in the political system in Iraq, a new trajectory has been established for the country. The regime has changed from authoritarian to democratization, but the transition has not entirely removed the authoritarian element. Thus, it has not been changed below from either democratic or authoritarian elements. The beginning of democratization has created opportunities for improving socio-economic development in Iraq. However, there are situations such as increased insurgent and terrorist actions, displacement of individuals, ethnic cleansing, increasing incidents of transnational crime and drug smuggling, interruption of public services, and increased corruption in government institutions, roads, and electricity, which undermine that potential. The above cases of insecurity from the beginning of the new era in Iraq are mostly based on a new reality, which is the sectarianization of politics. On the other hand, the security situation in today's Iraq is more stable than in the immediate aftermath of the US-led invasion in 2003, but more complex and unsatisfactory.²

One of Iraq's most important developments in the past decade has been creating a political system based on democratization in a territorial state. However, a new political system emerged after the regime had been changed in April 2003. However, there have been considerable differences between before and after the change, particularly in state-level per capita GDP and individual-level freedom of expression. The changed regime in Iraq has not entirely Davidson since formerly the system had been authoritarian but formed a democracy, albeit with an authoritarian element. Moreover, security and order in Iraq regarding human life and

¹ Abdulmajid, Adib. "Islam and Sectarianism: The Major Split and Its Manifestations." *Journal of Humanities Insights (JH)* 6, no. 2 (2022), p.12.

² Kingma, Kara Leigh. "Democratic Transitions in Divided States: The Case of Iraq." (2012), pp.4-9.

property safety and the public order in the country have deteriorated since the change. The establishment of democratization with the recognition of liberty and rights has created opportunities for improving socio-economic development in Iraq's democracy. However, post-2003 Iraqi experiences of a transitory state have shown that the initiation of democratization could coexist with or be overshadowed by the increase of other unrelated sins in the first place.¹

5.2. Social Factors

The research conducted within this article found five patterns that explained the sectarian Polarization in Iraq more than 15 years after the American-led invasion. First, the entrance of the American troops stirred up an almost dormant sectarian issue. Second, the new political arrangement further fueled the situation. Third, clerical authorities employ sectarian discourse in politics and society. Fourth, da'awa [calls for religion] and terrorism spread sectarian discourse through the mass media. Finally, the brutal nature of sectarian violence has spurred a vicious cycle of anti-sect sentiment on both sides of the sectarian divide. Each of these points will be examined in turn. It was suggested that in Iraq, the social over-polarization between Shi'a and Sunni would create various security challenges to social stability due to the lack of cohesion among minorities as the prevalence of risks, distrustful relationships, violence, segregation, and self-censorship.²

Under standard settings without any significant threat, most Shi'a and Sunni would define their identities broadly, such as Arab or Iraqi or down to individual levels, they mostly share common values

¹ Ibid., 1 (104), pp. 113, 116, 125.

Look at: Palani, Kamaran, and Shivan Fazil. "Fluid state-building in the Kurdistan Region of Iraq: Taking advantage of the 2003 US-led invasion." *International Peacekeeping* 30, no. 5 (2023).

² Antosh, Catherine R. "The drivers of sectarian violence: A qualitative analysis of Lebanon, Iraq, and Turkey." PhD diss., Dissertation: James Madison University, 2016, pp.1-4.

of civility, ethics, norms and morals, national traditions, culture, and national history.¹

A study from 2024 shows that most Iraqi Shi'a and Sunni people define themselves broadly, mostly as Arabs or Iraqis, and share values like civility, ethics, norms, morals, national traditions, culture, and history. But this broad national identity changes depending on how stable and safe the country is. When there are threats or sectarian tensions, sectarian identities become stronger. Polls show that a lot of Iraqis still value their Iraqi identity, but about half of them feel more strongly about their ethnicity or sect, especially when there is political or media-driven sectarian competition. This shows how hard it is to find a balance between a broad national identity and sectarian realities.²

5.3. Economic Factors

From the moment that the Americans overthrew Saddam, the new state had no corporate memory or personnel trained in civil administration. Instead, Iraq's erstwhile civil servants and public sector professionals – those who constituted the non-sectarian mosaic of the former regime – fled or were purged. Moreover, it refrained from taking custody of state property or deploying the central banking system to regulate the currency and the banks³. Hence, in contrast to the authoritarian age of the Ba'ath, when the economy was ruled by the self-aggrandizing programmed of an extensive and fast-expanding regime elite, the first years of the post-Saddam dispensation allowed the formerly downtrodden and disenfranchised to seize large chunks of the state-enabled private economy, social institutions, and public resources and to empty the

¹ Gresham, J. N. "Civil Society Iraq: Location Influences on Outgroup Perception (June 2004), pp.15-17.

² Krmanj, Sherko. 2024. KurdishGlobe. 2. Accessed 6 11, 2025. https://kurdishglobe.krd/reasons-for-excluding-sectarian-and-national-categories-in-the-2024-iraqi-census-implications-for-kurds-and-sunnis/?utm_source=perplexity.

³ Ibid., 26. 1, pp.11-13.

treasuries of the state banks All that became indivisible pockets of sectarianized tribally based patronage and welfare funds. It was a time of pillage and feral capitalism¹.

The dramatic fluctuations of the oil price that independent Iraq experienced shaped the political economy of post-2003 Iraq and therefore entered the account of security and political dynamics. History suggested that oil dependency provided endemic conditions of economic crisis, civil violence and implosion, armed conflict and eventual societal destruction. Oil price booms fueled rapidly inflating expectations and bottlenecks, thus generating non-functionality and osmotic corruption. The increased revenues from the world oil markets led to rampant spending frenzies. The emergence of a rentier state with dubious legitimacy, where hope preceded corruption, inefficiency, and failure, was rooted in the ill-financed expansionary spending patterns to cope with a consumer crisis exacerbated by rampant inflation. Rising salaries and public consumption were quickly countered by an informed campaign of tight monetary policies and their side effects, which spurred external comparison and comparison-based frustration. There were systemic disequilibria between public and private, with an institutional standstill that led to a collapse of aspirations into blind-and-bear sentiments. Crude repression was inevitable. Males aged between 15 and 39 became the bearers of crisis, consulted with despairs and ideas of suicide, and proffered misattributed and popularised discourses of rage.^{2, 3}

6. Case Studies of Sectarian Violence

To evaluate the security situation in Iraq after the regime change in 2003 and to explain the relations between sectarian Polarization and community security in post-2003 Iraq, two sectarian-wave cases of

¹ - GSDRC, "Who are the elite groups in Iraq and how do they exercise power?" (2019), pp. 2-4.

² Romsom, Etienne. "Global oil theft: impact and policy responses." UNU-WIDER Working Paper 16 (2022), pp. 5,7, 25.

³ Watts, Michael John. "Hyper-extractivism and the global oil assemblage." *Our extractive age: Expressions of violence and resistance* (2021), pp.16-20.

violence are examined in detail. The first case of sectarian violence was the bombing of the al-Askari shrine in Samarra in 2006. The second case is a Shia militia revenge attack on the Sunni Arab community in Sadriya in 2007. These two cases of violence illustrate the polarized nature of post-2003 Iraqi communities. Unlike before 2003, macro and micro factors can induce and shape violence in ways conducive to sectarian Polarization, Inadequate and biased security conditions and the relative strength of sectarian actors can activate structural Polarization and provide the capacity to commit violence.¹

At the micro-level, Samarra and Sadriya, two urban neighbourhoods with a mix of sectarian groups because of the asymmetrical construction of community security in post-2003 Iraq. The unequal treatment in the provision of security was in favour of the Shia-led government and segmented the communities along the sectarian line. Shrinking non-violent relationship conditions at the grassroots level resulted in unprecedented sectarian violence against the outgroup, furthering the alienation, suspicion, and hatred between groups in the community, At the macro level, Samarra witnessed the demolition of the "Mulid" observance fringe that amalgamated both sectarian groups. At the same time, the massive attack on the Shiite community in Kadhmiyah preceded the Sadriya incident. The switched narratives of these primary violence events at the national level were manipulated by oleographic media representations and political actors with larger sectarian divides, inciting reactions in proportion to the degree of sectarian identification of the groups involved.²

6.1. The Civil War (2006-2008)

On February 22, 2006, the Samarra Mosque, with the tomb of Imam Hadi, an al-Shi'a shrine, was bombed by Islamists in Iraq. In retrospect, the bombing was not a point of a sectarian conflict, although it was the event that triggered the civil war. In March

¹ Antosh, Catherine R. "The drivers of sectarian violence..", p.80.

² Ibid., 17, no. 4 (2019), pp. 29-31.

2005, the death of Muhammad Baqir al-Hakim, who was then at the peak of his popularity among the Shi'i community, was attributed to Sunni insurgents. The hypothesis that the old regime supporters had retaliated against the Shi'a was not far-fetched but one-sided. Five years after the regime change, the civil war showed clear social divisions in the important cities of Baghdad, Samarra (Salah ad-Din), and Mu'tanah (al-Qadisiya). The old government in Iraq protected the Alawi Arab Sunni aristocracy, which claimed to have been in charge of the Shi'i peasantry for 4,000 years. Shi'i elites have called this historical imbalance "systemic oppression" or "sectarian aristocracy," which shows how deeply rooted Sunni dominance is in political and social structures. In 2005, Shi'i Arabs gained a political right from democracy to counteract the ostracism previously imposed by the Alawi Arab regime. In the Spring of 2006, large Shi'i crowds converged on Samarra in a show of strength, claiming to restore revered sites and insulting Arab nationalists. Just before the elections, in January 2005, a consensus between Shi'i clerics and the United States Ambassador was reached regarding a Shi'i candidate for a prime minister's post in the Shia-dominated government. Shi'i Arabs' efforts to annihilate secular Sunni elites and symbolic sites in the years following the regime change led to a violent civil war that lasted until 2008.¹

The Persian influence indicated Shi'i predominance, which had gripped Baghdad like an iron hand since 2005. Shi'i dominance was exhibited in connection to ethnic cleansing. Shi'i communities vanished as the Sunni-dominated government and State Ministry of National Security employed terror tactics using the prior regime's military equipment. In the Shi'i community, partisan ambivalence toward the government established a collective security institution of networks and armed groups to eliminate Sunni-dominated cities remained polyglot but were distinguished by Shi'i Arab communities. It was easy for the Sunni-dominated government to mount a counterattack After the Shi'i-led suppression of Sunni's

¹ Kingma, Kara Leigh. "Democratic Transitions in Divided States, pp.71-74.

areas, it became easier for the Sunni-dominated opposition to mount a counteroffensive too. Meanwhile, Shi'i presence was entirely removed from key contested locations such as Samarra and Al-Kharabia. The distribution of displaced and attacked people in the Shi'i-Sunni borders revealed that the attackers were Shi'i Arab networks and partly allied with the Mahdi Army*. The civil war in Iraq was triggered by a fragmented Sunni resistance, which spiralled into dramatic sectarian violence against the Shi'i-led government.¹

6.2. Post-Civil War Violence

In October 2005, in a pre-referendum speech to a group of people at Ba'quba's military base, General David Petraeus honored Iraqis for the "evolution of their relationships and exchange of political power," asserting that despite the fears, bloodshed, and destruction that occurred during the summer of 2005 regarding the referendum on the constitution, in the end, everything went relatively smoothly.² In his speech, the General called for the involvement of all Iraqis in shaping and planning Iraq's future. However, carefully analyzed research of events in Iraq finds this optimistic speech distortive and sabotage to the publication of information that would clothe the real situation of Iraq. It neglected the truth that those in authority are the ones who are heating political sectarian Polarization and using it to carry out more and more despicable acts to achieve their interests.³ During the months before the referendum on the constitution, Iraq underwent appalling shedding of blood and destruction. It produced unimaginable horror stories, which should show how detestable, rejected, and horrible a situation is.

*In 2003, Muqtada al-Sadr founded the Mahdi Army, a Shi'a militia that was heavily involved in sectarian violence and the Iraqi insurgency. Although it was disbanded in 2008, its influence lives on in later groups (Dodge, Toby, Iraq: From War to a New Authoritarianism. Routledge, 2013, p. 85).

¹ Ibid., 17, no. 4 (2019), P.28.

² Kingma, Kara Leigh, "Democratic Transitions in Divided States: The Case of Iraq" (2012). Electronic Theses and Dissertations. 848. <https://digitalcommons.du.edu/etd/848>.

³ Antosh, Catherine R. "The drivers of sectarian violence, 2016, p.13-16.

6.3. Recent Conflicts and Incidents

The recent conflicts in Iraq dating from 2006 onward are among the most violent of the post-2003 period. Most incidences were bomb blasts, mortar shelling, and armed confrontations, while others included kidnapping, abduction, and blockades. Most conflicts occurred in the Baghdad Governorate. Iraq is also subject to sporadic, ongoing conflict events beginning post-2003, stemming mostly from dissension between the central and regional governments and including corruption and protests against it, public services, and price hikes.¹

After highly anticipated Coalition Provisional Authority (CPA) elections were held on January 30, 2005, unrest brimming with sectarian-based violence once again ripped across Iraq, and Several violent attacks were perpetrated against Shi'ites, beginning with the attack on Askariya Shrine on February 22, 2006. This incident reignited speculation regarding apocalyptic events within Mesopotamia and hastened factionalization amongst not only al-Qaeda but also Shi'ite militias. Shi'ite militia retaliated by targeting Sunni mosques and neighbourhoods, with hundreds of civilian deaths reported daily. The civil war erupted. In the face of rapidly deteriorating security, the US added fuel to the fire, deploying more troops to Iraq and allowing Shi'ite paramilitary forces an increasing role in counter-insurgency campaigns. Non-state actors became the actual stakeholders of community security.²

7. Impact on Community Security

The impact of sectarian Polarization on community security in the study has been examined by applying the three-layer model of community security threats. Sectarian identity and sectarian Polarization were treated as a source of identity threat that interacts with gender, interpersonal trust, and social capital. Finally, since the

¹ Davies, Shawn, Garoun Engström, Therese Pettersson, and Magnus Öberg. "Organized violence 1989–2023, and the prevalence of organized crime groups." *Journal of Peace Research* 61, no. 4 (2024), p.678.

² Ibid., 17, no. 4 (2019), pp.26-29.

intensity and nature of the threat may differ from one region to another, communal security threats were examined in different sectarian settings. This study's two most important findings are: Overall, the results reveal a significantly negative impact of sectarian Polarization on community security threat perception. However, the effect is less significant in rural areas and among Shi'a. In addition to the taboo nature of the cults and rituals, one possible explanation for lowering threat perception among Shi'a is that because they had suffered most from sectarian violence, they might have been better able to cope with it by burying it deep down. Finally, on average, highlighting better community security was found among individuals with higher trust in outgroups and a higher sense of being treated equally.^{1, 2}

The model for community security is constructed on the three-layered typology of community security threats. The most direct identity threats to communities, which sometimes remain vague throughout the paper, are listed at the topmost layer. Although such identity threats are intentionally injected into them by policymakers who wield better Power, scholars also pointed out that inter-group competition creates tension and stress in people's subjective identification with one's group. In other words, identity threat is an issue that affects the most basic and primal level of human beings, the "us" and "them" dichotomy. Without rejecting group likeness or outgroup denial, this level of identity threat may falter upon extraordinary shocks. The most severe threat perception can be found among the Shi'a at this level. The extent to which outgroup perceptions are negatively influenced by location, over which civil society organizations provide their services, is not interpretable. On the one hand, the model results suggest a mitigation effect of

¹ Ali, Shahid. "The specter of hate and intolerance: sectarian-jihadi nexus and the persecution of Hazara Shia community in Pakistan." *Contemporary South Asia* 29, no. 2 (2021), p.200.

² Al-Jarf, Reima. "Sectarian language and perception of the "Other" after the Arab Spring." *Bulletin of the Transilvania University of Braşov, Series IV: Philology & Cultural Studies* 15, no. 2 (2022), pp.37-41.

ethnopolitical location in Iraq on distrust of outgroups, i.e. Shi'a trust of Sunni and vice versa. On the other hand, the possibly negating effect of civil society on outgroup trust during the transitional, mechanism-free, and power-vacated period should be treated as important contextual information.^{1, 2}

7.1. Effects on Local Governance

Beyond human security problems, local governance has also been affected by the emergence of sectarianism in allocating positions and operationalizing local coordination and services. Details regarding post-2003 Iraq's local governance and how it corresponds to sectarianism and polity stability concerns are discussed. Following the downfall of Saddam's regime, the 2003 local governance model significantly differed from the one adopted under the previous regime. Nevertheless, the new model was soon affected by the political and social impacts of the post-2003 transition period. Therefore, several features of the local governance environment merit discussion. Local governance risk refers to local governance failure that causes societal unrest or harms individuals, communities, or their livelihoods. Besides the hazards of the local governance environment that adversely impact governance and safety, a risk emerges relating to governance processes and significant local post-war reconstruction investments. Lack of accountability has increased the corruption and arbitrariness risk of elected city councils and mayors. The refusal of city councils to work within their jurisdiction may have an impact on social security.³

The governance environment in post-2003 Iraq has a adversely effect on social safety. However, the impacts of the 2015 invasion of Mosul and the events that followed, such as the peaceful

¹ Gresham, J. N. "Civil Society Iraq(jun, 2004), p. 1- 4.

² Haddad, Fanar. "Sectarian identity and national identity in the Middle East." Nations and Nationalism 26, no. 1 (2020), p.126,127.

³ Al-Mawlawi, Ali, and Sajad Jiyad. "Confusion and contention: understanding the failings of decentralisation in Iraq." (2021), p.16 – 18.

separation of Iraqi Kurds from Baghdad, in a broader context than local governance effects. Accordingly, Numerous international(NGO) and local Civil society organizations have highlighted the destabilizing effects of sectarian divisions in Iraq. Following the events in Mosul, Sunni governance and security managers were subjected to sustained repression. On several occasions, tribal leaders managing security in Sunni cities were alleged to be linked with extremist groups or active supporters. They report humiliating arrests, detainment, or torture. Most prosecutors are from a different sect. Hence, the prosecution of Sunni officials for their roles prior to the attack has frequently been conducted unfairly, leading to broad preemptive consideration of the populace such, the promulgation of anticorruption and justice has been adversely sectarianized.¹

7.2. Impact on Civil Society

Sectarian echoes cannot justify the violent displacement of populations of various sects in Iraq. Instead, it has been caused by the accusations, incitement, and convictions of political elites and some preachers, who have historically sought to neutralize their opponents and remove them from the political scene. Consequently, sectarian Polarization has emerged as an acute challenge to the Iraqi political regime. Sectarianism threatens to create deep-rooted and permanent factions by ostracizing sects from one another's resources, exchanges, and markets of communication, in addition to social realms. It strips them of any common interests and pushes them into a zero-sum game, regardless of the political arrangements made in the future. As they view one another in diametrically opposed terms, such categorizations define the actors' identities and prompt them to act accordingly. The post-2003 regime in Iraq has been formed on a mostly institutional representation of sects and thus has emphasized the role of the sect when defining its members, who are seen through a sectarian lens and institutional

¹ Qaddour, Jomana. "Iraq's Constitutional Moments and the Institutionalization of Ethno-Sectarianism." *Emory Int'l L. Rev.* 36 (2022), pp.239-250.

considerations. The sectarian state in Iraq has depoliticized, disenfranchised, and destituted non-sectarian identities and interests.¹

Significant instability and disorder have occasionally been exacerbated by the some Formal and informal institutions put in place to maintain peace and safeguard the integrity and fair representation of particular minority religious sects.. Kith and kin regulations, legislature and law enforcement agencies, contracts and bureaucracies, financial transactions and currencies, relocations, verifications, validations, and naturalizations have all served conflicting violence, looting, and punishment trends. Fighting over socio-political dominances and resource allocations in terms of a sect rather than a social group or locality has been used to reconstruct an intra-sect authority and prevail over potential intra-sect dissent. Thus, frustration, anger, and estrangement have grown among populations.²

7.3. Challenges to Law Enforcement

Since 2003, Iraq has experienced numerous challenges to the legal enforcement system. One of the legal enforcement institutions, al-Nowaab, assumed legal authority, along with the Mahdi Army, to respond to crimes and violation cases against the Shia population. However, this response was highlighted by intensive sectarian violence. Due to the massive sectarian Polarization and violence, it was so difficult for the police to intervene. Nomadic and untreated street violence continued between and within communities. As sectarian Polarization heightened, armed groups seriously considered the police forces to maintain security. After 2003, the police were perceived as an institution that played a fundamental role in either protection or violence against communities, depending

¹ Robin D'Cruz, Benedict. "The social logics of protest violence in Iraq: explaining divergent dynamics in the Southeast." (2021), pp.6-10.

² Renad Mansour, The Logic of Intra-Shia Violence in Iraq (Washington, DC: The Century Foundation, 2022), accessed May 16, 2025, <https://tcf.org/content/report/the-logic-of-intra-shia-violence-in-iraq/>

on the individual soldier's or officer's religious or sectarian affiliations. In the initial years after 2003, the police either exited or were eliminated from the violence. However, the legal enforcement system did nothing about community policing and protection during this period.¹ Despite a massive increase in violence, the years following the US invasion were defined by local policing, with the police acting either passively or only on official requests. Iraqis began to address communal grievances and restore order through committees affiliated with the Mahdi Army. Without the police, these committees addressed local needs, from blood feuds to petty crime. Shiite and Sunni committees exchanged intelligence on car bombers and interrogated suspicious persons. While some local policing mechanisms exploited communal differences to emphasize sectarian and ethnic tensions, many acted as neutral law enforcement entities, arming them against the police. The police felt either obsolete and powerless before the local Power or indolent regarding the collective grievances and violence in immediate communities. In both cases, policing mechanisms were challenged and demanded in local communities².

8. Responses to Sectarian Polarization

The analysis identifies that religion is central to political organization in the Middle East, as in other regions, and regional events shape the local context and communities. In the context of divided societies where sectarian divisions begin to hold political, social, and economic significance, sectarian identities risk becoming all-encompassing and worth holding onto. For many, and particularly groups on the periphery of state and society, sect-based identities offer some protection in a precarious environment, akin to identities based on ethnicity or group strength. Within the context of

¹ Waxman, Matthew C. "Police and national security: American local law enforcement and counterterrorism after 9/11." *J. Nat'l Sec. L. & Pol'y* 3 (2009), pp.378-380.

² Aziz, Sahar F. "Policing terrorists in the community." *Harv. Nat'l Sec. J.* 5 (2014), pp.4-10.

this work, the designation of an outgroup (Shi'a or Sunni) as an existential threat to the community or "the sanctities" capitalizes on this. Moreover, by building on the argument presented in the Journal of Democracy, the work argues that many of the events were not novel but were continuations or re-shapings of trends already established before the 2003 invasion.¹

The work identifies that at times of extreme communal crisis, regimes attempt to reshape the regional politics they are situated in. Particular adherence to deviant Pan-Arab norms that placed control in the hands of secular regimes was abandoned outside state control, which saw sectarian and religious depictions dominate. As the latter recede with new crises, regimes pivot again to regional politics that follow a different logic. In a reproach to quoted earlier, it could be said that the consequences of such events can only be impacted on a regional or international level. In both instances, it is assumed that Iraq is an aberration in the regional politics of the response to the Arab Spring. Nation states (rather than elites) are heard discrediting events in as much as regimes agree to appear to watch passively, but indeed, analyzing the Islamic State and the 2003 war through a sectarian lens means nothing is ever fundamentally altered.²

8.1. Government Initiatives

In the aftermath of the US invasion of Iraq and with the breakdown of the state's monopoly on violence in cities like Baghdad, the relationship between criminals and community security became increasingly relevant. Criminals often took advantage of the ensuing instability and fought each other over the spoils of the collapsed state and its businesses. Patrolling neighbourhoods for security became the focus of militias, both Sunni and Shia, former members of the police and military, and insurgents turned militia groups. With the breakdown of the state, political bases for Sunni community security were established in the formation of insurgent

¹ Bishara, Azmi. *Sectarianism without sects*. Oxford University Press, 2022, p.59.

² Ibid., 17, no. 4 (2019), pp.26-29.

groups, many of which entered into extended conciliatory periods with US forces. Accommodation and compromises often led to increased violence among groups. Therefore, focusing on the changing neighborhood of 2003 Baghdad through the lens of community security provides important frameworks for understanding the nature of force, legitimacy, politics, and order in post-colonial states like Iraq. Election day, January 30, 2005, was met with small violence, and national elections were held across Iraq for the first time in 50 years. Twenty-five ministers representing the newly formed Shi'a political coalition, the United Iraqi Alliance (UIA), were appointed. The coalition included the Iraqi Supreme Council for Islamic Revolution (ISCI), the party that, with the organization of Ayatollah Ali Sistani, filled the Shi'a void left by the collapse of the Ba'athist regime in 2003. With the provincial reshaping of Power and political geography following opposition from Sunni political parties and groups to UIA and Prime Minister Ibrahim al-Jaafari, the 2005 elections brought about a period of brutality and transformation of communities from swaths of mixed neighborhoods into sectarian enclaves. Division in politics, and by extension in violence, were fortified, creating a sectarian political order. Declining neighborhood security furthered adherence to one's most closely related nominally, but more importantly, politically sect-enclave groups. The declining safety of movement, the targeting of individuals and families, exclusion from political representation, increased in-transit Shia-on-Sunni violence, group denigrations, targeting of group symbols of identity, and loss of business opportunities due to politics all translated into violence among groups and politics. The consolidation of sect-focused politics in Iraq brought forth the exponentially violent eye for an eye logic of violence—a macro interactive process of retaliatory cycles, whose outcome is the continued decay of civic order.^{1, 2, 1}

¹ Kingma, Kara Leigh. "Democratic Transitions in Divided States, pp.71-73.

² حارث حسن القراوي، "أزمة العراق الطائفية: إرث من الإقصاء"، مؤسسة كارنيغي للسلام الدولي، ٢٣ نيسان/أبريل ٢٠١٤،

8.2. International Interventions

International involvement in Iraq has been omnipresent since the invasion. In addition to the US-UK invasion and the subsequent occupation, regional states and the United Nations have been involved to varying degrees, resulting in a lack of consensus on policies and procedures. This matter is often referred to as 'sovereignty at odds.' Due to the cascading nature of events involving international actors and issues, this section examines the actions of external actors outside Iraq instead of internal domestic and political issues and institutions. The central countries and organizations examined and analyzed their relevance to Iraq, including the US and UK, Iran, Syria, Saudi Arabia, the Arab League, and the United Nations (UN), particularly emphasizing the first five. The focus will mainly be on how these actors and organizations have taken action in Iraq, with less focus on bi-partisan actions and results.²

The UN Security Council and the UN underwent a 're-embedding' experience in Iraq after the 'bitter failure' of their previous foreign policy in the late twentieth century, as issues such as Kosovo, Iraq, Rwandan, and East Timor involved massive military involvement to re-establish international order. The most important action and decision regarding Iraq began with a since-rescinded Security Council resolution in 1990 demanding Iraq withdraw from Kuwait. Soon thereafter, a Ford administration diplomatic ruling permitted a multilateral force to attack Iraq, resulting in the UN sanctioning of military action in January of 1991. Most relevant to the US-UK

<https://carnegieendowment.org/research/2014/04/iraqs-sectarian-crisis-a-legacy-of-exclusion>

أنجيلا كين، "مع الحكومة الجديدة، العراق يكمل مرحلة انتقاله السياسي التي استمرت ثلاث سنوات، رغم العنف وعدم الاستقرار"، بيان صحفي للأمم المتحدة، ١٥ حزيران/يونيو ٢٠٠٦، <https://press.un.org/en/2006/sc8751.doc.htm>

² Costantini, Irene, and Dylan O'Driscoll. "Twenty years of externally promoted security assistance in Iraq: Changing approaches and their limits." *International Peacekeeping* 30, no. 5 (2023), pp.563, 569-573.

invasion of post-2003 Iraq was the 'competing resolution' battle of the fall of 2002.¹

Due to the close historical relationship between Iraq and Syria, their foreign policy actions regarding each other are often mutually constitutive. The Ba'athist regime in Iraq came to Power in 1968 partly due to its creation of an anti-imperial alliance with Syria. After the breakdown of Iraq-Syria relations in 1970, Syrian policy at the government level largely seemed reactive. Recently, however, Syria has attempted to increase its influence in Iraqi territory and politics, leading to concerns of an escalating conflict similar to Lebanon's civil war.²

8.3. Community-Based Approaches

What distinguishes violence by the elite from violence for the sake of the elite is that the latter, pervaded by a moral vision of the social order, cannot be interrupted by dialogue and compromise. On the other hand, the violence by the elite is driven by an unending craving for Power, wealth, and status, where all means are justifiable. The regime under Saddam Hussein and its territorial-nationalistic agenda of Arabisation, accordingly, seemingly took on this category. Disenfranchisement ignited that resentment, and when the regime collapsed, historical vengefulness heightening community insecurity sparked an escalated bidding for violence and revenge, pulsating on sectarian-ethnic identifications, international support, and sectarian cleansing, captivation, and exaction.³

Amid the emotive outpouring of grievance, horror, disorientation and physical brutality against civilians, there was intractably deterministic violence, arousing cognitions, folklores, and

¹ Harima, Aki. "Theorizing disembedding and re-embedding: Resource mobilization in refugee entrepreneurship." *Entrepreneurship & Regional Development* 34, no. 3-4 (2022), p.282.

² Fawcett, Louise. "The Iraq War 20 years on: towards a new regional architecture." *International affairs* 99, no. 2 (2023), p.571.

³ Zachary Laub. "The Sunni-Shia Divide." Council on Foreign Relations. Updated June 19, 2014. Accessed May 16, 2025. <https://www.cfr.org/backgrounder/sunni-shia-divide>.

narratives, which tapped into pre-existing 'grievance structures' and served as reservoirs that nourished sectarian violence. Words like 'safari' appeared on graffiti walls, denoting a cohort of militia warriors. The dissenter was no longer just perceived as a political adversary but was also morally deemed a threat, an alliance of religious and ethnic peril. Sectarian reminiscence, together with the imposition of belonging labels and subsequent ascription of malicious traits, directly served as cognitive constructs for demonizing other group constituencies, inflating prejudicial attitudes, and justifying inter-group violence, from beheading-in-the-street videos to massive bomb explosions outside mosques.¹

Intense proclivity toward violence was accompanied by its mitigation into a slow past or inherited collective bargain on virtues associated with violence and demonization, sedating sectarian retaliation and cleansing. Millennial dating and apocalyptic foreboding surfaced with textual reference, mythologizing the slaughter of evil demi-gods as the final epoch of reckoning. When the violently linked militia asserted control over people with low incomes in certain areas, communities gradually withdrew from the nakedly imbricated sectarian violence that yearned for revenge. The militia-provided short-term safety and stability prompted adaptation. This interpretation underscores the point that social elitism was reminiscent of until sectarian chasms of hatred and violence effaced the interlaying social coexistence and sociocultural intimacy, leaving spaces for distrust, disillusionment and demonization.²

9. The Role of Media in Sectarian Polarization

The urgent need for accountability in the media sector in Iraq is evident. Exploring ways to support trusted journalists who investigate sectarian narratives, false news, and the portrayal of

¹ Harling, Peter. "Iraq: When Tribes Could Make or Unmake Peace." PeterHarling.com, January 1, 2011. Accessed May 16, 2025. <https://peterharling.com/2011/01/01/456/>.

² Carpenter, Ami C. "Havens in a Firestorm: Perspectives from Baghdad on Resilience to Sectarian Violence." Civil Wars 14, no. 2 (2012): pp.182–204.

parties in Iraq's social or insecurity problems. Pressuring key actors to separate political parties from the media system and provide a budget to promote non-partisan NGOs in the media field. Stopping party-affiliated funding of media outlets and banning the media from displaying the logos of political parties and figures with a heavy fine. Support journalists in promoting diversity in Iraqi society. Raising the coverage of women's issues in the media is currently limited by patriarchal discourse. Reducing the coverage of religious groups and working to portray the intersectional perspective of diversity in Iraq, enabling citizens to distinguish the different aspects of parties, groups, or sects and publishing informative material for community members about conscription, the details of the new currency, and essential rights. When journalists focus on tribal disputes in their regions, officials often intervene to stop the discourse. However, political and sectarian focus is essential for coverage. Their focus fuels Polarization, civil war, and social conflict. Key actors can limit the media discourse to social and developmental concerns. Relevant discourses can be supported, and specialized alternative media can be funded. Providing space and facilitation within public institutions for civil societal organizations to work. Legislating a law that provides clarified authority for a public agency with mandatory Power to hold accountable and sanction parties involved in sectarian polarization narratives and institutions. Providing alternatives for young university graduates in media education programs and strengthening the educational system in the country with a focus on tolerance and acceptance.¹

9.1. Media Representation of Sectarian Issues

It is well documented that in the aftermath of the change of regime in 2003, Iraq witnessed a rapid increase in the number of TV stations and newspapers that represent various political parties,

¹ Knights, Michael. "Iraqi Civil Society and the Funding Crisis." 2020.

<https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/iraqi-civil-society-and-funding-crisis>

communities, and sects. The high competition for viewers and sales that followed gave rise to sensationalist media coverage and a polarizing media representation of sectarian issues. The proliferation of channels and newspapers resulted in a further fragmentation of already divided public opinion, competing channels and newspapers went all the way to accusing others of being infidels, supporters of the former regime, or apostates outright opposed to Islam and the Prophet. Outbidding competition on the sectarianism of its coverage, each outlet would accuse the other of being biased against Sunni, Shiite, or other sects. The respective coverage of contemporary issues by the sectarian media represented this competition. Furthermore, instances have been documented of explosives and shoot-outs with incumbent authorities being leveraged for maximum ratings and inverts to settle scores with rivals. In a few instances, it was evident that specific attacks provided momentum for communities that felt under siege. By contrast, authorities countered this by claiming that the media had switched loyalties.¹

Polarization of the media was accompanied by rifts in public perceptions of individual stations. Pre-election surveys showed that only a few channel or newspaper brands have a distinct sectarian following. Most channels, however, exhibit a much more mixed audience, bringing some evidence towards the counterargument. Polling was also conducted to uncover the patterns of visibility and sharing of sectarian media items of various types. In aggregate, evidence was presented that 62% of the Rathidese polled had seen at least one sectarian media item during the preceding week and 17% had at least one video on the topic. Finally, social network analysis was applied to use the fellow-feel share relations stemming from the shared audience and probability of sharing a competing item. Analysis of its results, supported by social-psychological theories,

¹ Wollenberg, Anja, Sarah El Richani, and Maral Jekta. "In Defense of the Iraqi Media—Between Fueling Conflict and Healthy Pluralism." *Global Media Journal-German Edition* 7, no. 1 (2017), pp.1-4.

suggests that homophily and opinion challenges each explain witness-driven sharing of open competitive content, as envisioned by the counterargument. Contextual effects of media are viewed as not too far-reaching; however, individual estimates of PR and CT based on channel choice lend further credence to this view.¹

9.2. Social Media and Polarization

Scholarly interest in the relationship between social media and Polarization has gained prominence, explicitly focusing on the role of social media in elite and mass polarization. The extent to which the dual nature of social media spreads hatred and aggression is emphasized, with case studies and statistical analysis showcasing awareness and political threats purported through social media framing the understanding of this debate. Social media was the apparent answer to collective action, born from the desire to promote causes, hold leaders responsible, and organize dissent. The initial wave of social media activism was exemplified by "X network revolutions," with the Arab Spring protests between late 2010 and early 2011 being the most discernible visible example of organized engagement², The Internet, particularly social media, allowed citizens to organize massive protests against entrenched regimes. However, the Arab Spring also illustrated the dual nature of social media: it provided the means for individuals to collect, engage, and mobilize in opposition to their regimes, but it also provided regimes with a wealth of tools to retaliate against political threats, whether this consisted of shutting down access entirely or targeting dissent with social-media-enabled violence.

In short, social media dominates current imaginations about how elites and the masses engage. Questions regarding how institutions function, how labour is organized, and how individuals promote political awareness; the answers are presumed to begin or end with

¹ Ibid., 7, no. 1 (2017), pp. 7, 15.

² Vorst, Eric Charles. Trolling Twitter. University of Missouri-Saint Louis, 2017, pp.6-10.

social media.¹ Within the political science literature, social media shapes theories and generates analyses. Most notably, debates over the relationship between elite Polarization and mass polarization are framed in terms of social media and its effects. It can organize public dissent and facilitate the sharing of important information, but it can also be turned against political threats and used to spread false and inc

endiary information. Social media also creates forums for rational debate and can be used to spread hatred and aggression. The dual nature of social media shapes a robust and similarly varied understanding of how this Power gains traction and affects the democratic process, which relies on healthy and inclusive participation. Mass Polarization can be characterized as affective, expressed along a partisan "us vs. them" dichotomy. Polarization among political elites remains pronounced even as the US Congress fails to approach traditionally high standards of legislative productivity, with elite rhetoric increasingly hardened and animosities deepened.²

10. Conclusion

In conclusion, the polarization of the media in Iraq is not merely a symptom of deeper political and sectarian divides but a mechanism that actively reinforces them. As shown by the variations in public perception, selective media exposure, and the segmented consumption patterns across sectarian lines, media outlets have evolved into instruments of identity politics rather than platforms for inclusive dialogue. Although a few stations maintain a clearly sectarian following, the presence of mixed audiences among others suggests that space still exists for pluralistic narratives. However, the prevalence of sectarian media content—consumed, shared, and

¹ Jain, Niharika. " MeToo: Polarization and Discourse in the Digital Age." (2019), p.2.

² Theocharis,...et al. "Does the platform matter? Social media and COVID-19 conspiracy theory beliefs in 17 countries." new media & society 25, no. 12 (2023), p.3416-3422.

internalized by large segments of the population—demonstrates the media's powerful role in shaping collective memory and reinforcing in-group biases.

The emphasis of this text lies in sectarian Polarization, a trend that had been underway since the mid-1990s. Scholars have argued that sectarian and ethnic identities had been politically constructed in the context of exclusionary state policies. They were subsequently reinvented as a new political elite hawked these identities to ordinary people as the basis for their political participation. However, unlike in the 1990s, sectarian Polarization became more evident throughout the national political battlefield after 2003. The key themes began with the broader picture of sectarian Polarization as exhibited in the political arena. Sadri observed an era of renewed sectarianism in Iraq in the post-2003 moment, particularly following the emergence of the first democratically elected government, particularly among political elites.

Differences in arguments about whether sectarian identities had been constructed or existed before the Ba'ath regime stemmed from contrasts in conceptualizing basic terms. According to the latter school of thought, one is engaged with evolving national identity as a modern, fragmenting process of state, nation, and territoriality, which theoretically could give rise to ethnic and sectarian identities and conflicts. However, there were diverse trajectories of political and social evolution, resulting in wide variation in nation-building and state-building outside of a Eurocentric, Western Enlightenment perspective. Iraqi sectarian Polarization in the post-2003 era was to be explained as a new state of an old identity. Focusing on three dimensions - political representation, public discourse, and social organization - revealed how sectarian Polarization had spilt over into different aspects and actors of Iraq's public life. Political actors, activists, and the media all played a role in the constellations of sectarian Polarization that plagued post-2003 Iraq.

References:

- Abdumajid, Adib. "Islam and Sectarianism: The Major Split and Its Manifestations." *Journal of Humanities Insights (JH)* 6, no. 2 (2022): 11-23.
- Alaaldin, Ranj. "Sectarianism, governance, and Iraq's future." *Brookings Doha Center Analysis Paper* 24 (2018): 1-29.
- Aldoughli, Rahaf. "Departing 'Secularism': boundary appropriation and extension of the Syrian state in the religious domain since 2011." *British Journal of Middle Eastern Studies* 49, no. 2 (2022): 360-385.
- Ali, Shahid. "The specter of hate and intolerance: sectarian-jihadi nexus and the persecution of Hazara Shia community in Pakistan." *Contemporary South Asia* 29, no. 2 (2021): 198-211.
- Al-Jarf, Reima. "Sectarian language and perception of the "Other" after the Arab Spring." *Bulletin of the Transilvania University of Braşov, Series IV: Philology & Cultural Studies* 15, no. 2 (2022): 29-46.
- Al-Mawlawi, Ali, and Sajad Jiyad. "Confusion and contention: understanding the failings of decentralisation in Iraq." (2021).
- Antosh, Catherine R. "The drivers of sectarian violence: A qualitative analysis of Lebanon, Iraq, and Turkey." PhD diss., Dissertation: James Madison University, 2016.
- Aziz, Sahar F. "Policing terrorists in the community." *Harv. Nat'l Sec. J.* 5 (2014): 147.
- Bektaş, Erhan. "The Ottoman Response to Missionary Activities of Iranian Shiite Ulema: The Case of Iraq in the Nineteenth Century." *Osmanlı Mirası Araştırmaları Dergisi/Journal of Ottoman Legacy Studies* 6, no. 16 (2019): 505-514.
- Bishara, Azmi. *Sectarianism without sects*. Oxford University Press, 2022.
- Cannard, Jonathan. "The Infrastructures of Occupation: Iraq, 2003–2012." (2022).
- Carpenter, Ami C. "Havens in a Firestorm: Perspectives from Baghdad on Resilience to Sectarian Violence." *Civil Wars* 14, no. 2 (2012): pp.182–204.
- Cohen, Ronald, and Judith D. Toland, eds. *State formation and political legitimacy*. Taylor & Francis, 2024.
- Costantini, Irene, and Dylan O'Driscoll. "Twenty years of externally promoted security assistance in Iraq: Changing approaches and their limits." *International Peacekeeping* 30, no. 5 (2023): 562-584.
- Davies, Shawn, Garoun Engström, Therese Pettersson, and Magnus Öberg. "Organized violence 1989–2023, and the prevalence of organized crime groups." *Journal of Peace Research* 61, no. 4 (2024): 673-693.
- Dodge, Toby. *Iraq: From War to a New Authoritarianism*. Routledge, 2013.
- Dodge, Toby. "Beyond structure and agency: Rethinking political identities in Iraq after 2003." *Nations and Nationalism* 26, no. 1 (2020): 108-122.

- Fanar Haddad, *Sectarianism in Iraq: Antagonistic Visions of Unity*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2011.
- Fawcett, Louise. "The Iraq War 20 years on: towards a new regional architecture." *International affairs* 99, no. 2 (2023): 567-585.
- Gresham, J. N. "Civil Society Iraq: Ethnic, Religious, and Location Influences on Outgroup Perception." (2004).
- Gresham, J. N. "Civil Society Iraq: Location Influences on Outgroup Perception (June 2004)." (2004).
- GSDRC, "Who are the elite groups in Iraq and how do they exercise power?" (2019).
- Haddad, Fanar. "Sectarian identity and national identity in the Middle East." *Nations and Nationalism* 26, no. 1 (2020): 123-137.
- Harima, Aki. "Theorizing disembedding and re-embedding: Resource mobilization in refugee entrepreneurship." *Entrepreneurship & Regional Development* 34, no. 3-4 (2022): 269-293.
- Harima, Aki. "Theorizing disembedding and re-embedding: Resource mobilization in refugee entrepreneurship." *Entrepreneurship & Regional Development* 34, no. 3-4 (2022), p.282.
- Jacoby, Tim, and Nassima Neggaz. "Sectarianism in Iraq: the role of the coalition provisional authority." *Critical Studies on Terrorism* 11, no. 3 (2018): 478-500.
- Jain, Niharika. "MeToo: Polarization and Discourse in the Digital Age." (2019).
- Khidhir, Zainaddin Mawlood. "The Changing Dynamics of the Perception of US Foreign Policy towards Kurds in Syria: Developing Relations in Light of Ignorance, Cooperation and Desertion (2011-2020)." PhD diss., Budapesti Corvinus Egyetem, 2025.
- Laudisio, Andieleigh. *Sunni and Shi'i Sectarian Violence in Iraq During the Reconstruction Period (2003-2005): Implications for Democracy and Dialogue*. Temple University, 2023.
- Mabon, S., Nasirzadeh, S., & Alrefai, E, *De-securitization and Pragmatism in the Persian Gulf: The future of Saudi-Iranian relations*. The International Spectator, (2021).
- Mabon, Simon. "Desectarianization: Looking beyond the sectarianization of Middle Eastern politics." *The Review of Faith & International Affairs* 17, no. 4 (2019): 23-35.
- Menshawy, Mustafa. "The irony of sectarianism: Sectarianizing by desectarianizing in Syria." *Digest of Middle East Studies* 31, no. 2 (2022): 131-150.
- Mohamad, Haidar Reda. *Understanding the Rise of Sectarianism in Post-2003 Iraq: Mobilization of the Religious Rhetoric by the Political Leadership and the

- Role of Traditional Social Identities*. Chiba University, Graduate School of Humanities and Studies on Public Affairs, Doctoral Program, 2020.
- Muntasser, M. H. "State-building and Ethnic Pluralism in Iraq after 2003." *Журнал политической философии и социологии политики* «Полития. Анализ. Хроника. Прогноз» 1 (104) (2022): 110-130.
- Palani, Kamaran, and Shivan Fazil. "Fluid state-building in the Kurdistan Region of Iraq: Taking advantage of the 2003 US-led invasion." *International Peacekeeping* 30, no. 5 (2023): 642-667.
- Qaddour, Jomana. "Iraq's Constitutional Moments and the Institutionalization of Ethno-Sectarianism." *Emory Int'l L. Rev.* 36 (2022): 237.
- Robin D'Cruz, Benedict. "The social logics of protest violence in Iraq: explaining divergent dynamics in the Southeast." (2021).
- Romsom, Etienne. "Global oil theft: impact and policy responses." *UNU-WIDER Working Paper* 16 (2022): 1-47.
- Theocharis, Yannis, Ana Cardenal, Soyeon Jin, Toril Aalberg, David Nicolas Hopmann, Jesper Strömbäck, Laia Castro et al. "Does the platform matter? Social media and COVID-19 conspiracy theory beliefs in 17 countries." *new media & society* 25, no. 12 (2023): 3412-3437.
- Valbjørn, Morten. "Observing (the debate on) sectarianism: On conceptualizing, grasping and explaining sectarian politics in a new Middle East." *Mediterranean Politics* 26, no. 5 (2021): 612-634.
- Vorst, Eric Charles. *Trolling Twitter*. University of Missouri-Saint Louis, 2017.
- Watts, Michael John. "Hyper-extractivism and the global oil assemblage." *Our extractive age: Expressions of violence and resistance* (2021): 207-248.
- Waxman, Matthew C. "Police and national security: American local law enforcement and counterterrorism after 9/11." *J. Nat'l Sec. L. & Pol'y* 3 (2009): 377.
- Wollenberg, Anja, Sarah El Richani, and Maral Jekta. "In Defense of the Iraqi Media—Between Fueling Conflict and Healthy Pluralism." *Global Media Journal-German Edition* 7, no. 1 (2017).
- Harling, Peter. "Iraq: When Tribes Could Make or Unmake Peace." *PeterHarling.com*, January 1, 2011. Accessed May 16, 2025. <https://peterharling.com/2011/01/01/456/>.
- Kingma, Kara Leigh, "Democratic Transitions in Divided States: The Case of Iraq" (2012). *Electronic Theses and Dissertations*. 848. <https://digitalcommons.du.edu/etd/848>.
- Knights, Michael. "Iraqi Civil Society and the Funding Crisis." *Washington Institute for Near East Policy*, June 2020. <https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/iraqi-civil-society-and-funding-crisis>.

Krmanj, Sherko. 2024. KurdishGlobe. 2. Accessed 6 11, 2025.

https://kurdishglobe.krd/reasons-for-excluding-sectarian-and-national-categories-in-the-2024-iraqi-census-implications-for-kurds-and-sunnis/?utm_source=perplexity.

Renad Mansour, The Logic of Intra-Shia Violence in Iraq (Washington, DC: The Century Foundation, 2022), accessed May 16, 2025, <https://tcf.org/content/report/the-logic-of-intra-shia-violence-in-iraq/>.

Shanahan, Rodger. "Shi'a Political Development in Iraq: The Case of the Islamic Da'wa Party." Third World Quarterly 25, no. 5 (2004): 943–54. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/3993703>.

Zachary Laub. "The Sunni-Shia Divide." Council on Foreign Relations. Updated June 19, 2014. Accessed May 16, 2025.

<https://www.cfr.org/background/sunni-shia-divide>.

ناظم نواف إبراهيم، "ظاهرة العنف والاستقطاب الطائفي في العراق بعد عام ٢٠٠٣ وأثرهما في الاستقرار السياسي" مجلة دراسات دولية، ٦٣، (٢٠١٥-٠١)، ١٤٧ - ١٧٦.
حارث حسن القراوي، "أزمة العراق الطائفية: إرث من الإقصاء"، مؤسسة كارنيغي للسلام الدولي، ٢٣ نيسان/أبريل ٢٠١٤،

<https://carnegieendowment.org/research/2014/04/iraqs-sectarian-crisis-a-legacy-of-exclusion>

أنجيلا كين، "مع الحكومة الجديدة، العراق يكمل مرحلة انتقاله السياسي التي استمرت ثلاث سنوات، رغم العنف وعدم الاستقرار"، بيان صحفي للأمم المتحدة، ١٥ حزيران/يونيو ٢٠٠٦، <https://press.un.org/en/2006/sc8751.doc.htm>