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## SECTARIAN RELATIONS AND SOCIO-POLITICAL CONFLICT IN IRAQ

Harith Hasan Al-Qarawee



The invasion of Iraq in 2003 inaugurated a new phase, marked by fierce sectarian division, which strongly questioned the pillars on which the Iraqi 'national' community was built. Examining the dynamics and factors that led to these consequences will help us to understand these events within their historical context rather than viewing them as part of an endless phenomenon. The so-called 'sectarian conflict' in Iraq was not incited by religious differences. It was a clash largely shaped along sectarian lines because of the lack of inter-communal communication and effective means of mediation. The paper focuses on the internal dynamics that led to heightened sectarianism in Iraq, starting with the historical background of political sectarianism in the first part, followed by inter-communal relations in post-2003 Iraq in the second part and concluding in the third part with recent dynamics.

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The invasion of Iraq in 2003 was an event of great historical significance, whatever the interpretation given to it. It inaugurated a new phase, marked by fierce sectarian division, which strongly questioned the pillars on which the Iraqi 'national' community was built. As the authoritarian regime collapsed, leading to the dismantling of core state apparatuses, the integrity and continuity of Iraq was put into question. The drastic changes that Iraqi society and politics had undergone in the past three decades created a unique context exacerbating the politicization of sectarian identities. Examining the dynamics and factors that led to these consequences will help us to understand these events within their historical context rather than viewing them as part of an endless phenomenon. The so-called 'sectarian conflict' in Iraq was not 'sectarian' in the sense of two groups fighting each other because of different religious doctrines. It was a clash largely shaped along sectarian lines because of the lack of inter-communal communication and effective means of mediation. Foreign occupation had deeply destructive effects, not only in terms of material infrastructure and the state's disintegration, but also regarding social trust and cohesion. These conditions paved the way for more violent confrontations, encouraged by rivalry over power, space, resources and narratives.

The Iraqi constitution of 2005 was inspired by principles of democracy, institutionalism and inclusive politics. However, the political process has not been entirely successful in setting up functional institutional frameworks capable of solving socio-political conflicts and soothing inter-communal relations. There are three main reasons for the persistence of 'sectarianism' and the inability to overcome its ramifications: first, the Iraqi constitution was written and political institutions were installed in a context of antagonism and without the necessary consensus required to legitimize the new 'social contract'; second, the heightened dependence of the new Iraqi politics on conceptual and institutional formulas emphasizing 'communality' led to an increasing sectarianization of these politics; third, internal and regional politics are increasingly intertwined and inclined to empower transnational sectarian solidarity and further weaken national identities. The growing impact of the Sunni-Shi'a divide on political loyalties and regional politics is raising doubts about the very existence of the nation-state in this region.

In this paper, I focus on the internal dynamics that led to heightened sectarianism in Iraq, starting with the historical background of political sectarianism in the first part, followed by inter-communal relations in post-2003 Iraq in the second part and concluding in the third part with recent dynamics.

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## 1. Political Sectarianism in Iraq: Historical Background

There is no single definition of what ‘sectarianism’ means in its Iraqi context<sup>1</sup>. The concept is still lacking clarity and coherence, especially since its Arabic equivalent *Taifiya* has a negative connotation and is being rhetorically used to discredit opponents. Additionally, there is confusion stemming from the occasional failure to distinguish between religious sectarianism and political sectarianism. In the former, an individual can be loyal to his/her religious doctrine without translating this loyalty into a political view; while the latter is understood as a political perspective that prioritizes allegiance to ‘sectarian’ identity over other national or sub-national identities. In this paper, I deal with ‘political sectarianism’ as defined above.

Accordingly, the rise of political sectarianism in Iraq is a symptom of the failure of the nation-building process, which presumably aims to develop a national culture that would diminish the influence of sub-national identities<sup>2</sup>. This failure is related to the exclusionary nature that shaped the politics of the modern state in Iraq. On the one hand, the modern state was the key representative of the existence of an Iraqi political community; the development of its military, bureaucratic, financial, educational and communication organs played a significant role in shaping a fairly imaginable national identity. On the other, this exclusionary consolidation of power has favoured elites that are dictated by sub-national or trans-national ideologies, loyalties and alliances, thereby deepening social fragmentation and cultural divisions.

Prior to the US occupation, all governments that ruled Iraq, especially after the first Ba’athist coup d’état in 1963, were controlled by Arab-Sunni elites. This monopoly of power coincided with – and, to some extent, was caused by – three trends: i) the rise of revolutionary and militant ideologies, such as Arab nationalism; ii) the increasing militarism of the power structure and political sphere; and, iii) the transformation of Iraq into an oil-dependent rentier state, a key factor that encouraged ruling elites to govern independently from society. As a result, the exclusivist nature of the power elite produced socio-political hierarchies, deepening social divides that were silenced by unprecedented suppression.

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<sup>1</sup> F. HADDAD, *Sectarianism in Iraq: Antagonistic Visions of Unity*, London, C. Hurst & CO, 2011.

<sup>2</sup> W. KYMLICKA, *Modernity and National Identity*, in: S. BEN-AMI, Y. PELED, A. SPEKTOROWSKI, (ed.), *Ethnic Challenges to the Modern Nation State*, New York, Macmillan Press Ltd, 2000, pp. 11-41; A. SMITH, *National Identity*, Penguin Books, England, 1991.

The roles played by tribal and regional loyalties in building the power structure and its patronage networks created realities that brought the socio-political divide closer to cultural divides (Sunnis vs. Shi'as and Arabs vs. Kurds). However, it is important to note that it would be both simplistic and tricky to describe Saddam's regime as a Sunni regime. As a matter of fact, the regime did not rule the country as representative of a homogenous and self-defined entity called the 'Sunni community'. The regime's Sunni leanings were accidental consequences of its resorting to tribal and regional loyalties as a criterion in its policy of enrolment. Loyalty was the highest value in its practices. This explains the preferences given to those who were linked to its main actors through kinship and blood relations. The increasing exclusivity of the power structure, particularly with the decline of ideological alliances, had nurtured the effect of primordial connections. In this sense, the regime's 'Sunniism' was communal rather than ideological.

The Arabization of the state and of its official discourse, particularly under Ba'ath Party rule, induced the Kurds to assert their distinctive identity and pursue broader autonomy. Kurdish nationalists in Iraq became more suspicious of an 'Iraqi nationalism' that emphasized Arab identity, even after gaining more independence for Kurdistan after 1991. With regard to Sunni-Shi'a relations, the politicization of confessional identities was also accelerated by the rise of political Islamism and the decline of state power.

Economic sanctions in the 1990s dramatically diminished governmental resources and weakened the state's ability to satisfy the social and economic demands of a demographically inflating society. This simply reinforced the regime's exclusionary nature. Since the majority of Shi'as belonged to the disadvantaged part of the population, they were more inclined to accept a narrative that associated their marginalization with their sectarian identity. This narrative was constructed and evolved throughout the second half of the last century, nurtured by the return of religion as a powerful player in the shaping of collective mental maps. One can trace its roots back to the 1960s when the prominent Shi'a cleric and thinker, Mohammed Baqir al-Sadr, introduced a new political and social theory that addressed contemporary challenges by asserting an activism based on Shi'a doctrines. He rejected the passive role of traditional *al-Hawza*, the top religious establishment for Shi'a Muslims, arguing that it had a mandate that went beyond jurisprudence and theology to include the guidance of Muslims in their public affairs. He is thought to be one of

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the founders of the Islamist Daw'a Party, which became the first political organization adopting an ideology based on Shi'ism<sup>3</sup>.

Over the last four decades, three events contributed to shaping political Shi'ism in Iraq. Firstly, the Islamic revolution in Iran, which adopted *wilyat al-faqih al-mutlaqa* (absolute governance by jurists) and thereby espoused a Shi'a model of government. Afterwards, and particularly because of the Iran-Iraq war (1980-1988), the Iranian government played a crucial role in embracing and supporting Shi'a Islamist forces and advocating its ideology of political Islam both in Iraq and in the region. Secondly, the regime's brutal oppression of the 1991 Shi'a uprising in Southern Iraq, which accentuated feelings of Shi'a victimhood, culminating after 2003 with the discovery of hundreds of mass graves. Thirdly, the Sadrist movement (which emerged during the late 1990s under the guidance of Mohammed Sadiq al-Sadr, the father of the firebrand cleric Moqtada al-Sadr), that renovated and revived the activist orientation of *al-Hawza* and was critical of the traditional quietist line for what was regarded as its failure to play a guiding role in society. Mohammed Sadiq al-Sadr directed what he called the 'Outspoken *Hawza*' and managed to appeal to the less privileged sectors of Shi'a society such as the overpopulated *Thawra* area (later on re-named for him: Sadr City) in Baghdad<sup>4</sup>.

## 2. Sectarian Relations in Post-Saddam Iraq

The rapid collapse of the state and its military and security apparatuses after 2003 led to unprecedented lawlessness, chaos and reprisals. These were ideal circumstances for the empowerment of religious and local identities – especially after years of economic hardship, impoverishment and the state's replacement of its doctrinal socialism (to wit, its direction of socio-economic processes) with anti-modernization policies such as re-tribalization<sup>5</sup> and the Islamization of governance. Religious institutions and clerics played a significant role in filling the vacuum, particularly in the Shi'a areas. A sense of empowerment prevailed there and was revealed in the massive and celebratory participation of Shi'a

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<sup>3</sup> J. AL-QAZWINI, *The School of Najaf*, in F. ABDUL-JABAR, (ed.) *Ayatollahs, Sufis, and Ideologies: State, Religion, and social Movements in Iraq*, London, Saqi books, pp. 145-264; T. AZIZ, *The Political Theory of Muhammad Bagir Sadr*, in *Ibidem*, pp. 231-244; A.-H. AL-RUHAIMI, 2002. *The Da'wa Islamic Party: Origins, Actors, and Ideology*, in *Ibidem*, pp. 149-160.

<sup>4</sup> Despite his assassination by the regime in 1999, his movement, led this time by his son, Moqtada al-Sadr, resurrected after the war and regime change in 2003. Muntadeyat Al-Manar, 2004. *Al-Hawza Al-Natiqa (The Outspoken Hawza)*, <http://www.manaar.com/vb/showthread.php?t=2764>.

<sup>5</sup> A. BARAM, *Neo-Tribalism: Saddam Hussein Tribal Policies 1991-1996*, «Middle East Studies», Issue 29, 1997, pp. 1-31.

pilgrims in their religious rituals.

Simultaneously, Shi'a Islamist groups, such as the Iranian-backed Supreme Council of Islamic Revolution<sup>6</sup> and the Daw'a Party, were returning to the country and trying to broaden their constituencies and networks. 'Shi'a victimhood' was essential to shaping their ideology and strengthening their 'sectarian characteristics'. These groups, having spent decades in exile, did not appeal to wide sectors of Iraqi society. Many Shi'a youths from the disadvantaged suburbs of urban centres preferred to join the Sadrist movement because of its perceived social and cultural affinities with them.

Among the Sunni population, feelings of rejection and alienation were gradually deepening. On the one hand, widespread resentment arose from the fact that many Sunnis lost their jobs as a result of the dissolution of military and security institutions and of de-Ba'athification measures. On the other, these feelings were further fomented by the sectarian behaviour and rhetoric of some influential Shi'a groups<sup>7</sup>. This atmosphere allowed radical groups to build and expand their networks in the Sunni areas, adopting a mobilizing rhetoric that targeted the 'occupation' and its 'agents'. These areas became sanctuaries for the insurgency, further deepening Shi'a and Kurd suspicions of Sunni intentions. The counter-insurgency operations of the US army and Iraqi security forces also escalated the feelings that Sunnis were targeted by the new regime.

Commencing with attacks against US military, violence escalated after months of relative calm and took on a more sectarian character when Shi'a pilgrims and holy places were targeted. It reached its bloody climax in 2006 when an assault on a holy Shi'a shrine in Samarra provoked a heavy and deadly reaction from Shi'a militias and acts of revenge against Sunni mosques and civilians. This violence – de-escalated only after the US army managed to ally with Sunni tribes in Anbar to fight al-Qaeda –, has deepened the sectarian divide and nourished conflicting narratives of victimhood. One of its main outcomes was a reduction in the demographically mixed areas in Baghdad<sup>8</sup> and other provinces, as thousands of families were displaced, and communal segregation has become more rigid<sup>9</sup>.

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<sup>6</sup> The name was changed afterwards, in a sort of adaptation to the new realities, to the Islamic Supreme Council of Iraq (ISCI).

<sup>7</sup> Especially when they accused Saddam's regime of being sectarian, an accusation interpreted by some Sunnis as an accusation to them of being the perpetrators.

<sup>8</sup> While Baghdad has become more Shi'a (approximately 70% of its population today are Shi'a), Sunni discourse still tends to consider Baghdad a 'Sunni province'. In the initial stages of protests that started in Sunni areas recently, protesters raised the slogan of 'marching on Baghdad' as an expression of their strong feelings that restoring the 'Sunnism' of the city will represent the restoration of their dignity.

<sup>9</sup> Many districts were no longer mixed but were rather converted into entirely Shi'a or



Years of conflict took two contradicting trends. On the one hand, a wide conviction spread among average Iraqis that violence and radicalization would worsen the situation and not lead to drastic changes but only perpetuate their suffering. This conviction spurred Sunnis to become more politically active and to try to seek change through the electoral process. On the other, this conflict had radicalizing effects. Sectarian narratives were reinforced by memories of violence committed against the ‘imagined group’, hence solidifying boundaries with the out-group.

### 3. Sectarianism and the Political Process

The way the political process that should have contributed to the emergence of the “new Iraq” was managed did not ease mutual suspicions but rather intensified them. The provisional Governing Council, which was formed in 2004 by the Coalition Provisional Authority (CPA), on the basis of communal quotas, did not help to legitimize the process amongst the Sunni population, especially in the absence of organized Sunni leadership. Since the rebellious attitude was dominant in Sunni areas, a truly communal representation of Sunnis in the political process had not been secured, as demonstrated by the results of the January 2005 elections. This was the case also with the committee that drafted the Iraqi constitution, which was largely dominated by a Kurd-Shi’a alliance. During the constitutional referendum on October 2005, the constitution was rejected in every province populated by a Sunni majority, yet it gained a majority in Shi’a and Kurdish areas and in the total vote.

The lack of authentic Sunni representation in a system largely based on communal proportionality became a major problem. On the one hand, Shi’a parties, organized in a grand communal coalition, were sceptical about Sunni intentions to accept their minority status in the new regime<sup>10</sup>. De-Ba’athification and anti-terrorism laws were used as a means to target Sunni politicians who were perceived to be deliberately undermining the government from within (such actions did not spare leaders like Tariq al-Hashimi, then vice-president, or Rafi al-Issawi, the former minister of finance). On the other hand, sectarian categorization had not been

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Sunni areas. Those forced to move, either within Baghdad or from Baghdad to outlying governorates, comprise about 80% of Iraq’s internally displaced population.

International Medical Corps, *Iraqis on the move: Sectarian displacement in Baghdad*. 2007; International Crisis Group, *Civil War in Iraq, Sadrist Movement, and American military Surge*, «Middle East Report», No.72, 2008.

<sup>10</sup> With the absence of a credible census that considers sectarian and confessional identities as a valid categorization, there is no agreement about the percentage of each ‘community’ within the total population. In general, most observers agree that Iraq has a Shi’a majority which represents 55-65%, with a Significant Sunni minority of around 20% and Kurdish minority of 18-20%.

wholeheartedly adopted by Sunni groups – at least this was the case until recent demonstrations erupted in December 2012 in Sunni areas. Traditionally, Pan-Arab ideology, Iraqi nationalism and tribalism were the main sources of Sunni self-perception.

In the 2010 general election, most Sunni votes went to the al-Iraqiya slate that brought together several Sunni factions under the leadership of Ayad Alawi, a Shi'a liberal. It campaigned against sectarianism and marginalization, relying on a nostalgic and anti-Iranian discourse having affinities with the Sunni narrative. Taking advantage of Sunni mobilization and the split of Shi'a parties into two slates, it managed to win the election by securing 91 seats out of 325. Prime Minister Nouri al-Maliki, whose coalition (State of Law) was the runner-up with 89 seats, reacted strongly not only by questioning the electoral process' integrity, but also by implying that he would not give up power. As a matter of fact, al-Iraqiya failed to secure the parliamentary majority needed to form a government. It was hardly a homogenous group and it included anti-Kurd and anti-Shi'a elements which made it difficult to win over Kurd and Shi'a groups to its side. In the end, Maliki, helped by Iranian pressure on his Shi'a rivals such as Moqtada al-Sadr, managed to secure the majority and gain a second term in office.

The new government was formed according to the Erbil agreement: a deal to restrict Maliki's power and to both distribute executive positions and create new ones so as to make the government more inclusive. However, Maliki's authoritarian tendencies seemed to have grown stronger since the agreement. He consolidated his power through a number of sensitive institutions, including the armed forces and Ministry of Defence, which was supposed to be headed by a candidate from al-Iraqiya. After the withdrawal of US troops from Iraq at the end of 2011, Maliki's behaviour tended to be more aggressive. He justified it through a 'nationalist' stance and by emphasizing the failure of a system of government based on communal 'apportionment'<sup>11</sup>, which only creates an ineffective state. This rhetoric appealed to the Shi'a middle class as well as to large sectors of the inflating state-employed and those who aspired to more stability and stronger government<sup>12</sup>.

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<sup>11</sup> Alsumariya, *Al-Maliki: Lahel liazemat al-bilad bedoon Hukumat aghlabiya (Al-Maliki: No Solution for the Crisis Without a Majoritarian Government)*, 2013.

<sup>12</sup> This language was similar to Al-Iraqiya's before the election but, however, it could not appeal to large Sunni constituency. This explains another dimension of 'sectarianism' in Iraq which is a conflict between a Shi'a- leaning nationalism and a Sunni leaning nationalism. I discussed this further in my book: H.H. AL-QARAWEE, *Imagining the Nation: Nationalism, Sectarianism and Socio-political Conflict in Iraq*. London, Rossendale Books, 2012.



In 2012, relations between the central government in Baghdad and the Kurdistan Regional Government (KRG) deteriorated to the point of deployment of military forces on the borders of the disputed areas<sup>13</sup>. Among the reasons for this tension were the oil-field exploitation deals the KRG signed with international oil companies without consulting Baghdad<sup>14</sup>. Sunni leaders like Osama al-Nujeifi, the current speaker of Parliament, managed to build a support base not only by opposing the ‘marginalization’ of Sunnis in the central government, but also by opposing Kurdish ‘encroachment’ in Mosul and Kirkuk. Later on, Nujeifi and his colleagues concluded that their conflict with Maliki made it necessary to establish friendly relations with Masoud Barzani, president of the KRG<sup>15</sup>. Maliki found in this an opportunity to win over a Sunni constituency in the disputed areas, where feelings of disappointment with Sunni politicians were mounting, and hence revive a sort of new Arab solidarity under his leadership. However, this policy was hampered by increasing sectarian tension on both the internal and the regional levels in relation to the conflict in Syria<sup>16</sup>.

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<sup>13</sup> Ethnically mixed areas, among which the oil-rich Kirkuk, that KRG demands joining to its region which was resisted by their Arab and Turkmen population. According to article 140 of Iraqi constitution, Iraqi government should be responsible for normalization in these areas and conduct a census and referendum to “determine the will of their citizens”. The Kurds accused Baghdad of not accomplishing its responsibilities. For further details, See: B. O’LEARY, Article 140, Iraq’s Constitution, Kirkuk and the Disputed Territories, 2008, [http://www.kncna.org/docs/pdf\\_files/oleary\\_paper.pdf](http://www.kncna.org/docs/pdf_files/oleary_paper.pdf).

<sup>14</sup> Baghdad complains that constitutionally it should be responsible for any contract regarding natural resources in Iraq, and that these deals violated Iraqi law because they were based on contracts to share the ownership (only service contracts are allowed in Iraqi law) with a very high margin profit to IOCs which encouraged some of these companies to give up their contracts in the south because of the low margin of profit. See for more details: J. HILTERMANN, *Baghdad and Erbil Battle for Iraq*, «The National Interest», 17 August 2012.

<sup>15</sup> Turkish government, who sought to counter the Iranian influence on Shi’a groups, posing as a patron of Sunni population, supported this convergence. This escalated the tension between Maliki and Erdogan, the Turkish Prime Minister. Each side accuse the other of being sectarian. Reuters, 2012. *Erdogan warns Iraqi PM against stirring sectarian, ethnic tensions*. Available at: <http://www.reuters.com/article/2012/04/19/us-turkey-iraq-idUSBRE83I1M820120419>.

<sup>16</sup> Facing the imminent danger exerted by demonstrations and radicalization in the Sunni areas, Maliki recently sent conciliatory signals to KRG and even visited the region before Barzani, himself, visit Baghdad in July 2013, in an attempt to solve their disagreements: A. ABDEL-SADAH, *Expectations Are High for Maliki-Barzani Sunnit in Erbil*, Al-Monitor, 2013.

The targeting of former Minister of Finance, Rafi al-Issawi<sup>17</sup>, was the incident triggering the protests that started in the Sunni areas on December 2012, reflecting an important change in the dominant Sunni discourse and the way Sunnis identified themselves. Today, the Arab Sunni community is in the midst of a strong Sunnification process. This is the result of deep alienation from post-Saddam Iraq and is also inspired by the uprising in Syria. Sectarian symbolism can be seen in the on-going protests in Anbar, Mosul, and other Arab Sunni cities. This mobilization process is building a Sunni political agenda and a new communal stance despite the significant divisions still affecting the community. Many Sunni leaders seem to have accepted sectarian categorization and have even called for including sectarian identity in any future census, as did Nujaiifi<sup>18</sup>.

Sunni political, religious and tribal leaders use sectarian mobilization to revive their support base and prevent Maliki from making inroads with their constituencies. Similarly, Maliki uses this confrontation to appear as the strong Shi'a leader who is defending the Shi'a community and the "majority rule" targeted by regional Sunni powers and their local proxies. With the deepening sectarian divide, some voices within the Sunni elite have demanded that Sunni provinces be united in a federal Sunni region, similar to the KRG, or that Sunni majority provinces be transformed into autonomous regions. Historically, Sunni political culture was in favour of central rule when the state was controlled by 'Sunni' leaders. Even after 2003, the ideas of decentralization and federalism had little appeal, due also to widespread opposition to the U.S.-led invasion and to the undisputed influence Washington exerted on the institutions of the new Iraq. Today this attitude seems to be changing. Maliki and his Shi'a allies have strengthened their control over central-government bodies. They led a massive process of sectarian replacement within those bodies, through de-Ba'athification and cronyism, leaving Sunni Arabs with the feeling of being excluded and targeted. There is no way to know if state jobs are proportionally distributed between the two communities, but the Sunni feeling of alienation is unquestionable and is fomented by the inclination of some public institutions to demonstrate their Shi'a sectarian bias <sup>19</sup>.

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<sup>17</sup> The crisis started after military forces besieged the house of Al-Issawi and arrested some of his bodyguards, who were accused of committing terrorist attacks. For more details, See: A. ABDEL-SADAH, *Issawi Crisis Signals More Iraqi Sectarian Violence*, Al-Monitor, 2013.

<sup>18</sup> H.H. AL-QARAWEE, *The Rise of Sunni Identity in Iraq*, «The National Interest», 5 April 2013.

<sup>19</sup> P. COCKBURN, Patrick, *The Sunni rise again: Uprising in Syria emboldens Iraq's minority community*, «The Independent», 5 March 2013, <http://www.independent.co.uk/news/world/middle-east/the-sunni-rise-again-uprising-in-syria-emboldens-iraqs-minority-community-8521665.html>

## Conclusions

The transformations Iraqi society went through in recent decades, particularly after US occupation, have deepened sectarian rifts and created the conditions for the on-going institutionalization of sectarian identities. This has not only weakened the already thin layers of ‘national identity’, but is putting the very existence of a nation-state in doubt. The constitutional and political process, begun after the occupation, is also threatened by sectarian tension and exacerbated by the pressure exerted by increasingly sectarianized regional conflicts. However, the fact that Iraq has not been officially fragmented and that no major group is explicitly advocating its partition means that containment of these dynamics is still possible. A new deal following the next general election in 2014 may de-escalate this tension, energize a conciliatory approach and broaden the legitimacy of political institutions. Such a deal should not be reduced to the usual apportioning of executive positions or mere replacement of personalities. There must be constitutional and legislative changes that emphasize the state’s neutral identity in the clash of sectarian narratives; that delegitimize divisive cultural politics without suppressing non-politicized identity expressions; and that restrict the ability of politicians to use sectarian mobilization as an instrument to achieve political objectives (which requires enacting measures to regulate the formation, organization and foundation of political parties, and adopting electoral laws that encourage performance-oriented attitudes and citizenship politics, instead of identity politics).

Despite the powerful role played by sectarianism in Iraq and the region today, it would be unjustifiably reductionist to view all politics from this perspective only. In the end, identity politics is a tool used by political actors as they engage in more fundamental conflicts over power, status and resources. Recent developments in Iraq have resulted in new dynamics of political alignments that go beyond sectarianism. On several occasions, Shi’a, Sunni and Kurdish forces have agreed upon legislation or compromises that aim to counterbalance the increasing power of Prime Minister, Maliki. These dynamics are influenced by two continuous conflicts: one between centripetal and centrifugal forces; and the other between the Consociationalists and the Majoritarianists<sup>20</sup>. These are not unusual conflicts, especially in countries facing the challenges of state-formation and nation-building. The more these conflicts are separated from sectarian polarization, the better are the chances to deal with them peacefully through constitutional and institutional mechanisms.

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<sup>20</sup> So far, Maliki was the only Iraqi leader who explicitly called for a majority government. For more details on these two conflicts: H.H. AL-QARAWEE, *Imagining the Nation...*, cit.



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