



Political Transformation in Iraq After 2003: Dynamics of Power Restructuring and the Emergence of Sectarian Divisions Within the Framework of the Democratic Process

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Abstract:

This study addresses the political transformation that the Iraqi arena witnessed after 2003, focusing on its repercussions in reinforcing sectarian divisions within the structure of the political system. This transformation produced a new reality in which democracy shifted from a project of building a civil state based on the foundations of citizenship and equality to a formal framework through which the interests of groups and sub-identities are managed. This negatively affected the cohesion of state institutions and led to the fragmentation of the social fabric.

The study also relies on the descriptive-analytical method to understand the nature of this transformation, in addition to the historical method, which helps in tracing the chronological context of events and linking them to manifestations of political and social division. Through reviewing the relevant intellectual literature, the study seeks to construct an integrated vision of the relationship between the restructuring of power and the entrenchment of social division, without resorting to the analysis of official documents or direct political speeches.

The significance of this study lies in the fact that it sheds light on a pivotal stage in the history of contemporary Iraq, contributing to explaining the reasons behind the faltering of civil state-building and the decline of trust in the democratic process. This opens the way for rethinking the foundations of national coexistence and its future prospects.

Keywords: Political transformation _ Political sectarianism _ Power restructuring _ Democracy _ Quota system _ National identity.

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Introduction:

The year 2003 represents a decisive turning point in the course of modern Iraqi politics, as the collapse of the Baath regime resulted in the disintegration of the centralized authority structure that had ruled the country for decades, opening the way for the reconfiguration of the state according to radically different visions. This transformation was not merely a change of leadership or regime, but rather a comprehensive process of dismantling and rebuilding the political and social system, under intensive external intervention and accelerated internal interactions.

Amidst this change, democracy was introduced as a theoretical framework for the re-establishment of the state, through the adoption of multiparty elections, the drafting of a new constitution, and the creation of representative institutions. However, this process faced deep challenges, most notably the rise of sectarian and ethnic divisions, which shifted from being social components into active tools in the political struggle. This led to the entrenchment of a system based on quota-sharing, which weakened the concept of citizenship and deepened narrow affiliations at the expense of a unifying national identity.

This political transformation cannot be understood in isolation from historical contexts, regional and international interventions, as well as the complex interactions among political and social forces inside Iraq. While some parties sought to push toward building a pluralistic democratic system, others aimed to consolidate their sectarian gains, which made the political process vulnerable to polarization and deprived it of much of its legitimacy in the eyes of society.

This article focuses on analyzing the mechanisms of power restructuring in Iraq after 2003, by examining the relationship between the democratic project and the rise of sectarian divisions, and by exploring the impact of these transformations on the structure of the political system and the prospects for building a stable civil state. It also seeks to deconstruct the challenges Iraq faced during this stage and to evaluate their repercussions on the current political and social reality. After more than twenty years since the political transformation that Iraq experienced in the aftermath of 2003, the democratic process continues to suffer from structural imbalances and complex challenges, foremost among them the escalation of sectarian divisions that profoundly influenced the structure of power and its distribution mechanisms. Democracy, which was supposed to serve as an entry point for building a civil state founded on the principles of citizenship and equality, has turned into a formal framework through which sectarian and ethnic group interests are managed, thereby contributing to the weakening of state institutions and the deepening of social division.

Hence emerges the central problematic: To what extent did the political transformation after 2003 contribute to the entrenchment of sectarian divisions within Iraq, and how did these divisions affect the course of the democratic process and the restructuring of power?

Accordingly, this study seeks to elucidate the impact of the political transformation witnessed by Iraq after 2003 in deepening sectarian divisions, through analyzing the structure of the new political system and the mechanisms of power production within it. Instead of democracy being an entry point for building a civil state founded on the principles of citizenship and equality, it turned into a formal system managed through sectarian and ethnic interest networks, which led to the weakening of state institutions and the erosion of their capacity to achieve social cohesion. From this standpoint, the study aims to present a critical reading of the nature of this transformation, by tracing its political and social manifestations, and by exploring its repercussions on the unity and stability of the state, as well as on the trajectory of the democratic process as a tool for reproducing power rather than overcoming divisions.

This study derives its importance from its treatment of a pivotal political transformation in the modern history of Iraq, a transformation that followed 2003 and contributed to reshaping the political system according to sectarian and ethnic considerations. This led to a fundamental

change in the nature of power and its mechanisms of management. The importance of the study is not limited to describing the manifestations of division, but extends to analyzing the structure that produced this division, and to exploring how democracy shifted from being a tool for building a unifying national project into a means for managing balances between groups and sub-identities.

The analytical value of the study lies in its ability to deconstruct the reasons behind the faltering of civil state-building, the decline of the effectiveness of its institutions, and the erosion of public trust in the democratic process. Through this approach, the study seeks to provoke a critical discussion of the existing political model, and opens the way for reflecting on alternatives more capable of overcoming structural divisions, thereby ensuring the strengthening of national cohesion and state stability.

This study is based on the descriptive-analytical method, which is used to address the political transformation in Iraq after 2003 by tracing its general manifestations and interpreting its repercussions on the structure of the political system, particularly in relation to the reinforcement of sectarian divisions. This method allows for an understanding of the changes that affected the mechanisms of power formation and how they influenced the course of democracy, without entering into a direct evaluation of political actors or adopted policies.

The study also employs the historical method to monitor the temporal context that preceded the political transformation, and to link political and social events together in order to understand the nature of the transitional phase that Iraq underwent. This relies on reviewing intellectual and theoretical literature that addressed issues of political transformation and divided societies, with the aim of constructing a coherent explanatory framework for the relationship between power restructuring and the entrenchment of social division, without resorting to the analysis of official documents or political speeches.

Part One: The Collapse of the Centralized System and the Rise of Political Pluralism

At the dawn of the twenty-first century, Iraq witnessed a radical political transformation, represented by the collapse of the authoritarian system that had ruled the country for decades, followed by the restructuring of the state's framework on new foundations. This transformation was not merely a change of leadership, but rather the dismantling of a cohesive centralized system, which opened the way for an emerging democratic experiment characterized by party pluralism and the distribution of power among different components of society.

Although this political openness came within the framework of building a federal democratic system, the practical reality revealed profound challenges, foremost among them the absence of strong institutions capable of managing diversity, and the transformation of pluralism into sectarian and ethnic quota-sharing. This led to the deterioration of political performance and the exacerbation of internal crises. Political forces began to divide power according to their affiliations rather than their programs or competence, which weakened citizens' trust in the entire political process.

Furthermore, the federalism stipulated in the Iraqi Constitution, which was supposed to grant provinces wider powers, was not implemented in a manner that could achieve balance between

the center and the peripheries. Instead, attempts were made to reproduce centralization in new forms, raising fears of marginalizing some components and weakening the unity of the state.

Hence emerges the importance of studying this transformation in order to understand the mechanisms of the collapse of the centralized system and to analyze the rise of political pluralism in the complex Iraqi context, where internal factors intersect with regional and international influences, and where structural challenges are reflected on the future of democracy and political stability.

Section One: The Transformation of the Iraqi State After 2003: From the Nation-State Model to the Multi-Identity State

The Iraqi Constitution issued in 2005, through its Article Three, indicates that the societal structure of Iraq is based on ethnic, religious, and sectarian plurality, while Article Four emphasizes linguistic diversity, recognizing languages such as Arabic, Turkmen, Syriac, and Armenian. This constitutional orientation reflects a fundamental shift in the philosophy of the state—from the nation-state model that prevailed in the previous era to the pluralistic state model that embraces diversity and elevates difference. This transformation constitutes a fundamental step toward overcoming exclusionary policies and establishing the principle of societal partnership in building the state on the foundations of justice and mutual recognition.

Although the Iraqi Constitution after 2005 recognized ethnic, religious, and linguistic diversity, the political practice of elites and parties often tended toward fragmenting governmental work and linking it to factional loyalties. Recognition of diversity thus became a means of entrenching quota-sharing or justifying exclusion, as some groups resorted to marginalizing others under the cover of political entitlement.

In the same context, some researchers attribute the identity crisis suffered by the contemporary Iraqi state to the transformations that followed 2003. However, this interpretation overlooks that that stage was not the origin of the crisis but rather revealed its depth. National division began under the Baath regime, when the authorities at that time attempted to construct an artificial national identity based on narrow nationalist conceptions rather than on a genuine pluralistic reality. This identity was imposed through state instruments, such as educational curricula and official institutions, whereby one social component was portrayed as embodying the essence of the state, with the deliberate exclusion of other groups.

After 2003, that presumed identity dissipated because it was not rooted in social and political reality but was the product of ideological conceptions. This problem is not unique to the Iraqi case; it recurs in most Middle Eastern states that include pluralistic societies, where the identity crisis emerges at every political turning point or national crisis, revealing the fragility of national construction in the absence of a unifying project that acknowledges diversity and lays the foundations for a comprehensive national identity.

It is inaccurate to reduce the Iraqi state to being merely a collection of ethnic, sectarian, and religious identities, as some researchers do who reject this conception, considering that such a view reduces the state to its subcomponents and neglects the possibility of constructing a unifying national identity. Nevertheless, one cannot deny that Iraq contains clear identity plurality, but the problem lies in how it is managed. Some actors sought to deny this plurality

in order to impose their own conception of the state's identity, while others expressed fear of recognizing plurality out of concern that it would lead to state fragmentation and division.

Conversely, some adopted the discourse of identity plurality not out of genuine recognition of diversity but to entrench the interests of their own identity, without concern for the presence or absence of a unifying national identity. This approach ignores the fact that recognition of sub-identities is only meaningful if it emerges from a project of establishing a comprehensive national identity, rather than being used as a tool for reproducing division. Thus, the Iraqi model in dealing with identity plurality presented a distorted picture, as plurality was employed for narrow political purposes instead of being an entry point for building a modern state that embraces its diversity and utilizes it in the service of a unifying national project.

The emergence of the identity question in the Iraqi context cannot be explained solely through the political transformations that followed 2003; rather, it is more deeply linked to the politics of fear that preceded that date, which contributed to the entrenchment of exclusion and marginalization of certain groups. It is true that political change played a role in igniting this question, but it was not the fundamental cause; rather, it came as a facilitating factor that exposed social accumulations which drove marginalized groups to rebuild their self-awareness, drawing on their shared experiences and historical suffering.

In this context, identity was no longer an isolated individual matter but became closely tied to collective identity, where the individual is viewed as part of a specific cultural and social fabric through which their perception of themselves and their position in society is shaped. Thus, identity in Iraq after 2003 was not merely a reflection of plurality but an expression of marginalized groups' attempt to regain their presence in the public sphere by affirming their cultural and social specificity.¹

Despite the criticisms directed at the discourse based on identity plurality in Iraq, one of the most prominent challenges facing political societies in the twenty-first century is how to manage cultural diversity and the explosion of sub-identities. Today's world lives in a plural and complex reality, as estimates indicate that the majority of independent states—exceeding 184 states—include hundreds of living languages and thousands of ethnic groups, making complete cultural homogeneity rare if not impossible.²

In this context, the need arises for political models capable of accommodating this plurality without falling into the trap of division or exclusion. The challenge does not lie in the existence of diversity per se but in how it is managed within a unifying national framework that guarantees justice and representation, transforming difference into a source of strength rather than a threat. Addressing these cultural and identity differences requires the construction of flexible political institutions capable of embracing plurality and activating mechanisms of dialogue and integration, instead of imposing a singular identity or ignoring the pluralistic reality that has become a global feature.

¹ Heywood, Andrew, *Introduction to Political Ideologies*, trans. Mohamed Safar, National Center for Translation, Cairo, 1st ed., 2012, p. 284.

² Carens, Joseph H. *Culture, Citizenship, and Community: A Contextual Exploration of Justice as Evenhandedness*. Oxford University Press, New York, First published in 2000, p. 52.

It is observed that the prevailing model in contemporary political thought tends to adopt the idea of the multi-identity state as a flexible framework that accommodates cultural and social diversity within modern societies. However, the prevailing conceptions among many concerned with Iraqi affairs remain tied to the nation-state model, which presumes the existence of a single national identity, often built on the basis of the majority's identity. This stands in contrast to the constitutional and political orientations that emerged after 2003, which emphasized the necessity of representing all cultural identities in the national scene.

But the problem does not lie in the texts but in implementation. Iraq faced difficulty in translating this model into an effective institutional reality, due to the dominance of the unitary state mindset, through which each group sought to impose its own conception of the state's identity. This identity competition led to a structural crisis within state institutions, where plurality was interpreted as quota-sharing rather than national partnership. Although consensus politics is considered in some contexts a successful model for managing diversity, as demonstrated by multiple international experiences, its application in Iraq revealed a profound defect, due to the absence of political will to construct a unifying national model that balances plurality and unity without being reduced to narrow factional interests.

Section Two: Kurdish Identity and the Question of the Nation-State: An Analysis of the Secession Referendum of September 2017

Despite the limited attention to the issue of self-determination in traditional political literature, the intellectual transformations witnessed by the world since the early 1990s—particularly in the field of political philosophy—have led some thinkers to reconsider the conflicts of secessionist movements from a moral perspective. This approach does not suffice with analyzing the political dimensions alone but activates moral standards in evaluating such conflicts, on the basis that ethics can transcend the political framework and reshape it in ways that serve justice and stability in the international system.³

From this standpoint, linking ethics and politics becomes both a theoretical and practical necessity, after the idea of separating them had prevailed for a long period. Reintegrating the moral dimension into the analysis of political phenomena, such as secessionist movements, contributes to narrowing the gap that widened due to approaches that treated politics as a field independent of values. It also restores the principle that justice is inseparable from political practice but must be part of its interpretive structure.

Among the essential questions that emerged in contemporary intellectual debates is the question of self-determination—not as a direct proposition, but through multiple theoretical approaches that addressed the issue of secession. This subject has received increasing attention since the early 1990s, particularly within normative theory, where philosopher Allen Buchanan made remarkable contributions in analyzing the moral dimension of political secession. Since then, this field has become the subject of in-depth study by scholars in political philosophy,

³ The three main normative theories of secession view secession in terms of applying the liberal theory of justice or the liberal principle of self-government, without regard to the dynamics of national and political abstraction. Moore, Margaret. *The Ethics of Secession and a Normative Theory of Nationalism*. Canadian Journal of Law & Jurisprudence, Volume 13, Issue 2 (Secession), July 2000, pp. 225–250.

sociology, comparative politics, and others who sought to understand the complexities of secession from a perspective that goes beyond legal and political considerations to include the moral foundations governing the legitimacy of such demands.⁴

Since the early 1990s, the world has witnessed the disintegration of several federal entities characterized by cultural and ethnic diversity, such as the Soviet Union, Yugoslavia, and Czechoslovakia, leading up to the secession of South Sudan in recent years. This historical trajectory reflects the dynamism of secessionist movements that remain present in various parts of the world, manifesting in the demands of entities such as Quebec in Canada, Northern Ireland in Britain, Flanders in Belgium, and Catalonia in Spain, in addition to ethnically and religiously driven conflicts in Sri Lanka, Kashmir, and Punjab. Kurdish secessionist aspirations in Iraq and its regional surroundings are often placed within this context, reflecting the complexity of the phenomenon and its multiple political, cultural, and historical dimensions.⁵

The Kurdish case is a striking example of the formation of collective identity despite cultural and tribal variations within Kurdish society. Interestingly, this sense of shared belonging preceded the emergence of modern nationalist movements, indicating the existence of deep cultural ties that transcend traditional political structures.⁶ Language here emerges as a pivotal element in shaping national consciousness, as it carries within it a system of values, perceptions, and modes of expression that reinforce the sense of familiarity and belonging among members of the group.⁷

As for religion, although it constitutes one of the essential components of culture, it does not appear to have played a unifying role in the construction of the Kurdish nation. On the contrary, it contributed to deepening certain internal divisions. While most Kurds adhere to the Shafi'i Sunni school, large areas in southern Kurdistan—particularly in Iraq and Iran—witness a notable spread of the Twelver Shi'i sect, reflecting the interconnection of religion with the surrounding geographical and political contexts.⁸

Nationalist aspirations are not always directed toward establishing an independent state; they can also take shape within the framework of an existing state through the adoption of a federal system that ensures a degree of self-rule.⁹ This is what the Kurds in Iraq pursued after 2003, when they chose to engage in the Iraqi state through a federal model that reflects their national specificity. Nevertheless, federalism—especially that built on ethnic foundations—remains the subject of wide controversy due to its potential association with fears of secession.

Although this context does not require a detailed discussion of federalism typologies, the experience of Iraqi Kurdistan stands as a clear example of federalism based on ethnicity rather than administration. It thus falls within what is known in political philosophy as multinational

⁴ Moore, Margaret (Ed.), *National Self-Determination and Secession*, Oxford University Press, Oxford, 2003, pp. 4–5.

⁵ Ibid., p. 1.

⁶ Van Bruinessen, Martin, *The Kurds and Nation-Building*, trans. Faleh Abdul-Jabbar, Institute for Strategic Studies, Baghdad – Beirut, 1st ed., 2006, p. 13.

⁷ Heywood, Andrew, *Introduction to Political Ideologies*, p. 183.

⁸ Van Bruinessen, Martin, op. cit., p. 15.

⁹ Heywood, Andrew, ibid., p. 190.

federalism, which seeks to distribute power in a way that preserves cultural diversity within the state. This type of federalism enables minorities and other cultural groups to maintain their distinct identity within a specific region, ensuring the continuity of their culture without dissolving into the identity of the majority.

Secession is not necessarily tied to the existence of a federal system, as it may occur in different political contexts. However, federalism—particularly when founded on ethnic bases—provides a more conducive environment for secessionist demands to emerge, given the relative administrative and political independence it grants. This opens the door to an important philosophical question: Is there a normative approach through which the legitimacy of self-determination or secession referenda can be discussed?

Most theories concerned with self-determination converge around a set of normative positions that justify secession under certain circumstances. The first of these positions holds that secession becomes justified when the state fails to guarantee the rights of all its components in a fair manner.¹⁰ In this context, the Kurds in Iraq are among the groups that obtained a significant share of their rights, particularly through the establishment of a federal system that reflects their cultural distinctiveness. In addition, the Iraqi Constitution recognized the plurality of the state, thereby reinforcing the legitimacy of their presence within the national framework.

The second position links the right to self-determination to the systematic oppression of a group, which justifies its pursuit of separation from the parent state. The Kurds, alongside the Shi'a, suffered from repressive policies during the Ba'athist era, which, according to this view, grants them a moral justification for secession.¹¹ However, the timing of raising the secession project seems inconsistent with this logic, as it would have been more appropriate to advance it following the fall of the regime in 2003, when past grievances were still present, whereas today the Kurds are part of the political authority.

The third view raises the question of whether the Kurds have been subjected to oppression after 2003.¹² Yet this argument weakens in light of Article Three of the Iraqi Constitution of 2005, which recognizes the plurality of nationalities and religions, and grants the Kurds clear rights to administer their region, to be educated in their language, and to preserve their identity. This makes the claim of constitutional grievance untenable from a legal standpoint, despite the gap between text and practical implementation.

The fourth position examines the existence of a constitutional basis for secession.¹³ This is not provided for in the Iraqi Constitution, which explicitly stipulates the unity of the federal state and affirms its full sovereignty, thereby rendering any attempt at secession outside the constitutional framework.

¹⁰ For more see: Moore, Margaret, *The Ethics of Secession and Postinvasion Iraq*, *Ethics & International Affairs*, Volume 20, Issue 1, 2006, p. 57.

¹¹ For more see: Moore, Margaret, *The Ethics of Secession and Postinvasion Iraq*, p. 58.

¹² See: *Ibid.*, pp. 64–66.

¹³ *Ibid.*, pp. 64–65.

The fifth position revolves around the dream of building a Kurdish nation-state. Yet the demographic reality in Kurdistan, which includes non-Kurdish components, makes this project unattainable in its entirety and raises challenges related to plurality within the region itself.

The sixth position does not defend secession as a direct political option but stresses the necessity of recognizing the theoretical existence of a right to secession, without promoting it. This opens the space for a philosophical debate about its legitimacy without adopting an explicitly separatist stance.¹⁴

In light of these positions, Kurdish federalism can be considered a practical model that provides an alternative to secession, but at the same time enhances the Kurds' ability to envision the possibility of independence. This creates a political paradox: federalism, which is supposed to be a middle ground, may turn into a platform paving the way for secession. Hence, caution is required against assuming that federalism ends secessionist aspirations, for it may instead reshape them in a more realistic form.

Section Three: The Iraqi Political System After 2003: The Crisis of Models Between the Nation-State and Distorted Pluralism

After 2003, Iraq entered a new political phase characterized by the restructuring of the ruling system upon the ruins of the former centralized state. This transformation was not merely a transfer of power, but rather a sharp turning point in the structure of the state, where attempts to build a modern national model clashed with a complex political and social scene dominated by sectarian and ethnic divisions. Instead of laying the foundations for a state with strong institutions and an inclusive national identity, patterns of unbalanced pluralism emerged, strengthening the presence of sub-identities at the expense of the national project.

This reality produced a fragmentation of political decision-making and created a turbulent environment in which official and unofficial centers of influence competed, weakening the authority of the state and reducing its capacity to effectively impose sovereignty. Although political pluralism is considered one of the pillars of the democratic system, in the Iraqi context it turned into a mechanism for reproducing division, as political forces came to represent the interests of their narrow groups more than the general national will.

From here, it can be said that the Iraqi political model after 2003 suffers from a structural crisis, manifested in the absence of balance between the aspiration to build a modern nation-state and the reality of a distorted pluralism that entrenches division and weakens state institutions. This calls for a profound critical review of the path of state-building in light of this structural contradiction.

A – Historical Memory as a Tool for Reproducing the Nation: Between Cultural Pluralism and the Unification of National Belonging

Historical memory is a system of collective representations shared by a human group about past events, viewed as determinants of its current identity and its political, cultural, social, and economic position. From this perspective, a critical engagement with heritage does not mean

¹⁴ See: Wellman, Christopher, *A Theory of Secession: The Case for Political Self-Determination*, Cambridge University Press, UK, First published, 2005, p. 2.

its total exclusion but requires a conscious selectivity that balances between cancellation and preservation, where elements of the past are reconsidered through a critical lens aiming to liberate the self from its negative residues, without assuming that all inherited history is necessarily positive or valid for continuation.¹⁵

In this context, the necessity emerges of questioning the relationship between political authority and collective memory: how does the state employ this memory in nation-building? To what extent can it gain legitimacy through reshaping historical consciousness? Although many Arab societies rely on an ancient civilizational heritage, the political entities that govern them often arose in modern colonial contexts,¹⁶ making historical memory an effective tool in the hands of political elites for reproducing power and reinforcing legitimacy.

Here, a philosophical conception is recalled that sees the present not as a moment of forgetting but as a moment of truth's unveiling, where shadows and possibilities intersect with reality, making the present a window for understanding and analyzing the past. From this standpoint, one should beware of overestimating historical harmony within societies,¹⁷ since cultural and social distinctions only fade in specific historical contexts marked by expansion and social advancement, and the integration of groups depends on the degree of economic, political, and cultural interaction accompanying those periods.

Moreover, the belief that cultural plurality within the state threatens national identity may lead to a distorted perception of history and expose the community's future to disintegration. From here, the role of education emerges as central in shaping social consciousness. The absence of educational justice leads to the reproduction of inequalities among individuals and contributes to entrenching patterns of submission and surrender, where man loses his ability to resist under tyranny and grows accustomed to a distorted reality that does not reflect his human nature but expresses a defect in the social and political structure.¹⁸

B – Plurality and Difference: Towards a Political Conception of the Plural State

The idea of building a multi-identity state falls within the framework of normative theory in political thought, where the concept of the modern state is reconsidered as a space that should accommodate cultural and social diversity, not be reduced to a single dominant identity. From this perspective, it becomes legitimate to pose a fundamental question: what follows from the recognition of plurality and difference within the state?

- This recognition requires dismantling the traditional model of the nation-state, which often entrenches the dominance of a specific group and excludes other identities, leading to their

¹⁵ Davis, Eric, *Memories of State: Politics, History, and Collective Identity in Modern Iraq*, p. 15.

¹⁶ Larraín, Jorge, *Ideology and Cultural Identity (Modernity and the Presence of the Third World)*, trans. Feryal Hassan Khalifa, Madbouly Library, 2002, p. 24.

¹⁷ Soperstein, Blain Guillaume, *Political Philosophy in the Nineteenth and Twentieth Centuries*, trans. Ezzedine Al-Khattabi, Arab Organization for Translation, Beirut, 1st ed., 2011, p. 79.

¹⁸ For more see: Herder, Johann Gottfried, *Another Philosophy of History and Selected Political Writings*, trans., introduction, and notes by Ioannis D. Evrigenis and Daniel Pellerin, Hackett Publishing Company, 2004, p. 126.

marginalization or denial. A plural state cannot be built on the symbolic or cultural monopoly of a single identity.¹⁹

- It is necessary to expose policies that hide behind the rhetoric of national unity while practicing exclusion and marginalization in its name. A critical review of such policies reveals structures of domination nourished by unilateral narratives and reproduces inequality within society.²⁰
- The political project of the plural state requires consolidating a culture of recognition of difference and encouraging interaction between diverse identities within a common framework that guarantees justice and equality. Plurality is not viewed as a threat but as a lever for building a more inclusive and cohesive society.

C – Towards Building an Inclusive Iraqi Identity in the Context of Plurality

The contemporary Iraqi reality imposes the necessity of reconsidering the concept of national identity away from momentary emotions, especially in light of intellectual transformations that affirm that identity is not fixed but is continually reshaped according to political and social changes. In the post-2003 stage, Iraq witnessed a sudden transition from a monolithic conception of identity to a reality of multiple identities, creating confusion for the Iraqi individual who was raised on the idea of a unified national identity which, in truth, was imagined and imposed.

Based on the premise adopted by the Iraqi Constitution of 2005, which acknowledges multiple identities within the state, there arises a need for systematic mechanisms to activate this plurality positively, while resisting attempts to employ it negatively in ways that fragment the national fabric. Cultural and social diversity in Iraq, if approached according to the principles of justice and equality, can be a source of strength and integration rather than a factor of division.²¹

However, Iraqi political reality has clearly failed to transform this diversity into an inclusive national project. Political elites, instead of investing in consolidating a culture of plurality, chose a superficial approach based on ignoring details of religious, sectarian, and linguistic diversity, under an apparently unifying slogan: “We are all Iraqis,” without translating it into educational or cultural policies that enhance common belonging. This accumulated neglect across generations entrenched a sense of alienation within each group, not only toward others but also toward the national identity itself.²²

The belief that silence about plurality will automatically lead to national unity has proven a failure; it instead deepened divisions. Unity cannot be built on denial, but on explicit recognition of diversity and the provision of a political and educational space that enables every

¹⁹ For more see: Kymlicka, Will, *Odessa of Multiculturalism*, Vol. 1, trans. Imam Abdel-Fattah Imam, *Aalam Al-Ma'rifa*, Kuwait, Issue 377, June 2011, p. 82.

²⁰ Ibid., pp. 83–84. For more see: Gustavsson, Sverker & Leif Lewin (Eds.), *The Future of the Nation State*, Routledge, London, First published, 1996, p. 5; & Kymlicka, Will, “Modernity and National Identity,” in *Ethnic Challenges to the Modern Nation State*, ed. Shlomo Ben-Ami & Others, Macmillan Press Ltd., UK, First published, 2000, p. 18.

²¹ Shaban, Abdul Hussein, *The Debate of Identities in Iraq (State and Citizenship)*, p. 49.

²² For more see: Matar, Salim, *The Wounded Self*, Center for Studies of the Iraqi Nation – Mesopotamia, Geneva – Baghdad, 4th ed., 2008, p. 363.

group to express itself within a common national framework. From here, forming an inclusive Iraqi identity requires moving beyond symbolic discourse to a practical project that strengthens the values of citizenship, justice, and mutual recognition.²³

D – Towards Reshaping Iraqi Identity: A Critical Approach in Light of Identity Politics

The issue of national identity in the Iraqi context requires a profound review that goes beyond emotions and rests on a modern political understanding that sees identity as a dynamic process continually reshaped by historical and social circumstances experienced by groups.²⁴ Identity is not a fixed essence but a mutable phenomenon influenced by surrounding transformations and periodically redefined in accordance with the realities of its members.²⁵

In this framework, recognition of and dialogue with the Other are essential foundations in building an inclusive national identity. Plurality is not managed through silence or neglect but through continuous dialogue and negotiation over issues of belonging, ensuring the participation of all in shaping a shared conception of national identity.²⁶

Moreover, identity, from a philosophical and social perspective, does not fall under a single theory or rigid scientific explanation, but expresses the mode of human existence in the world and his consciousness of himself in relation to others. It is a composite construction of self- and social evaluations that grant man a sense of value and meaning and confer on his actions moral legitimacy.²⁷

It is important to note that abandoning identity is not a realistic option, even under sharp criticism. Identities, as shown by some psychological and cultural experiences, remain deeply rooted in individual consciousness and form part of man's psychological structure,²⁸ as in the case of Freud, who, despite criticizing the religion he was raised in, could not deny his essential belonging to it. This confirms that the solution does not lie in negating identities but in finding a formula for coexistence within a state that recognizes its plurality and reshapes its national identity on that basis.

In this context, national identity is a composite concept that provokes diverse reactions. Some see it as granted to the individual through citizenship regardless of acceptance or rejection. It is also part of the symbolic formation of the people, invoked through cultural practices, rituals, and symbols, and reproduced in collective consciousness.²⁹

But this formation is not free of problems, as identity politics may be used to define who is the “other” or the “enemy,” leading to a form of identity based on exclusion. Here arises the importance of civil society's role in criticizing such policies and striving to achieve a balance

²³ Ibid., p. 364.

²⁴ For more see: Parekh, Bhikhu, *A New Politics of Identity*, p. 80.

²⁵ Taylor, Charles, “The Politics of Recognition,” in *Multiculturalism: Examining the Politics of Recognition*, ed. Amy Gutmann, Princeton University Press, Princeton, New Jersey, 1994, p. 25.

²⁶ For more see: Holyon, Harlamis, *Sociology of Identity and Culture*, p. 93.

²⁷ See: *Political Thought in the Twentieth Century*, Vol. 2, ed. Terence Ball & Richard Bellamy, trans. Mai Moqlad, rev. Talaat Al-Shayeb, National Center for Translation, Cairo, 1st ed., 2010, p. 270.

²⁸ Tully, James, *Public Philosophy in a New Key, Volume I: Democracy and Civic Freedom*, Cambridge University Press, UK, first published, 2008, p. 169.

²⁹ Parekh, Bhikhu, *A New Politics of Identity*, p. 11.

between those who defend identity and those who oppose it, ensuring that institutions and laws do not side with one group at the expense of another.

Finally, the identity of the group is not a final given but a historical product requiring continuous review. Freezing identity at a certain historical moment leads to taking it out of context³⁰ and hinders its development. Hence, the space should be opened for all cultures to be present and participate,³¹ with emphasis that the modern state should not consecrate a specific cultural identity but must guarantee justice and equal recognition for all its components.³²

The foregoing can be summarized by pointing out that national identity is not a rigid structure but a transformative concept subject to reshaping according to political, social, and cultural changes. From this perspective, building an inclusive national identity requires openness to dialogue and negotiation, recognition of the Other within a framework of mutual respect, and the dissemination of a culture of tolerance. If agreement is reached that the state encompasses multiple cultural identities, respects their linguistic, religious, and social specificities, and constitutionally acknowledges them, this recognition could constitute an important step toward addressing identity-related challenges, provided it is supplemented with legal legislation that guarantees the protection and practical activation of this plurality.

Here emerges the importance of the role that academic elites and researchers in various fields—religious, legal, educational, media, and social—can play in formulating visions and approaches that ensure recognition of multiple identities and contribute to building a cohesive national model. Legal specialists are also expected to bear the responsibility of criminalizing discourses and practices that incite strife among different groups, whether issued by religious, political, or media figures, or even from within state institutions, emphasizing that the state should be the guardian of all identities that compose it.

Rethinking identity does not mean denying sub-identities or seeking to erase them but requires recognizing and organizing their presence within a national project that aims to build an overarching inclusive identity. The instruments of the state, foremost among them education and media, are among the most prominent tools in shaping this identity. If the state loses its ability to direct these two fields, it also loses its ability to construct a cohesive national identity, which weakens its capacity to achieve social and political harmony.

Part Two: From Pluralism to Division: A Reading of the Emergence of Sectarian Quotas

After 2003, Iraq witnessed radical transformations in its political and social structure, where sectarian quotas emerged as the governing pattern for power distribution, surpassing the idea of political pluralism, which is supposed to be based on programmatic competition and competence. This transformation was not the product of a fleeting moment, but rather the result

³⁰ Tully, James, *Strange Multiplicity: Constitutionalism in an Age of Diversity*, Cambridge University Press, UK, First published, 1995, p. 8.

³¹ Kymlicka, Will, “Modernity and National Identity,” in *Ethnic Challenges to the Modern Nation State*, ed. Shlomo Ben-Ami & Others, Macmillan Press Ltd., UK, First published, 2000, p. 13.

³² Barker, Chris, *The Sage Dictionary of Cultural Studies*, Sage Publications Ltd., London, 2004, pp. 131–132.

of historical accumulations, external interventions, and complex internal interactions that contributed to reshaping national identity on sectarian and denominational foundations.

The concept of “political representation” was reproduced in Iraq in a way that made sectarian affiliation a fundamental criterion for sharing positions, which led to entrenching social division instead of strengthening national unity. Instead of pluralism being an entry point to building a democratic civil state, it turned into a mechanism for entrenching narrow loyalties, and institutions were emptied of their professional substance in favor of fragile sectarian balances.

Reading the emergence of this system requires understanding the contexts that produced it, starting from the legacy of the rentier state, passing through the repercussions of sanctions and wars, and arriving at the American occupation, which engineered the political scene according to the logic of “sectarian balance,” not according to the logic of citizenship. From this perspective, sectarian quotas are not merely an administrative mechanism, but an expression of a structural crisis in the conception of the state, authority, and identity.

Section One: Sectarian Quotas under Consensual Democracy: An Analysis in the Iraqi Context

Since 2003, Iraq has entered a new phase of political transformations that reshaped its institutional and social structure. In an attempt to address sectarian and ethnic pluralism, the model of consensual democracy was adopted as a theoretical framework for involving different components in the management of the state. However, this model, which is supposed to achieve balance and fair representation, soon turned into a tool for entrenching sectarian quotas, where the distribution of positions and powers became subject more to denominational affiliation than to competence or national interest.

This transformation raised profound questions about the viability of consensual democracy in building a stable political system capable of overcoming societal divisions and achieving strong and effective institutions. From this perspective, this study seeks to deconstruct the relationship between consensual democracy and sectarian quotas in the Iraqi context, and to explore their repercussions on the political and social performance of the state.

A – The Concept of Sectarian Quotas:

The word “*muhasasa*” (quota) is used in general contexts to refer to the process of distributing a whole among its components according to specific proportions that reflect the size or entitlement of each party. However, this concept acquires a more complex political meaning when employed in the framework of governance, where it turns into a mechanism for power-sharing among political forces winning the elections. In this context, quotas are adopted as a method that allows different parties to participate in forming the government and assuming responsibilities, reflecting a kind of political consensus that is supposed to ensure stability.³³

But in practice, this model often leads to the distribution of sovereign and ministerial positions on the basis of partisan or sectarian affiliation, rather than competence or national interest.

³³ Mehran, Moshikh, *The Concept of Quotas in the Contemporary Iraqi Political Dictionary*, date of retrieval October 9, 2020, from <http://m.ahewar.org>

Thus, the state becomes an entity based on the representation of components, not on the principle of citizenship, opening the door to sectarianism and leading to the politicization and personalization of institutions, at the expense of building a modern civil state.³⁴

Sectarian quotas in the European experience are the product of a long historical evolution, where they contributed to consolidating the foundations of modern civil societies and came as a natural outcome of democratic practices and institutional growth in those countries. This mechanism became part of the constitutional structure in a number of European Union states, where it was formally adopted in the constitutions of 14 countries in order to achieve political stability and ensure a better future for coming generations. Political parties, regardless of their orientations and size, believe in the importance of this mechanism and work to instill it in the culture of their members, making quotas a popular approach that contributes to regulating the relationship between allied and competing national forces under the umbrella of the supreme national interest.³⁵

In the Iraqi case, however, quotas came in an imported form, not stemming from the local context or a natural development of the political community, but were imposed in the post-dictatorial stage. Their application was linked to the majority's desire to regain its political role and the minority's attempt to preserve its privileges in power, which led to a deviation in goals and purposes. Instead of being a tool to achieve national balance, quotas turned into a means of entrenching factional and sectarian interests at the expense of Iraq's general interest, highlighting the fundamental contrast between the European model and the Iraqi practice.

Political quotas in Iraq profoundly affected the structure of the political system, as they weakened the principle of national consensus and deprived parliament of its vital role in oversight, legislation, and accountability. Ministers became tied more to their partisan loyalties than to constitutional institutions, leading to a decline in efficiency in state management and to the squandering of public resources due to the appointment of unqualified figures in positions of responsibility.³⁶ This pattern of political distribution obstructed the work of state institutions and became one of the main obstacles to the project of building a modern civil state, while also fueling sectarian divisions within society. It is worth noting that the beginning of this trajectory goes back to the formation of the Governing Council after 2003, which entrenched the treatment of political elites on the basis of sectarian affiliation, deepening the societal view of national identity from a narrow denominational angle and laying the foundations for an institutional sectarian approach in public affairs management.³⁷

B – The Concept of Consensual Democracy:

It is a form of exercising power in socially diverse states, being a successful formula, especially in countries newly acquainted with democracy, as a way to put an end to chaos and civil wars,

³⁴ Zaid Adnan Mohsen Aliki & Ameer Malik Miloukh, *Foundations and Obstacles of the Effectiveness of the Iraqi Political System after 2005*, *Journal of Political Issues*, 2017, pp. 248–249.

³⁵ Mehran, Moshikh, op.cit., 2007.

³⁶ Nassar Nidal Abdul Ridha, *Political Sectarianism and Its Impact on the State-Building in Iraq after 2003*, Master's Thesis, Iraq: Al-Alamein Institute, 2016, p. 69.

³⁷ Azmi Bishara, *Sect, Sectarianism, Imagined Sects*, Beirut: Arab Center for Research and Policy Studies, 2018, p. 730.

and as an alternative to prevent worsening conditions and political and social instability. Consensual democracy is characterized by four features: the existence of a broad coalition of political leaders in the important sectors of a plural society, mutual veto, proportionality as a basis in representation and appointments, and self-autonomy in managing the private affairs of those communities.³⁸

Consensual democracy is considered a suitable option in states characterized by social and political pluralism, especially those facing challenges in building a cohesive national unity.³⁹ Among the most prominent factors that prepare the ground for the success of this model are: balance among political forces, the small size of the state, common external threats, in addition to strong societal loyalties and clear differences among its components. This model is positioned between the centralized British model and the international relations model, and it comes closer to the latter by granting its components freedom of movement and the right of mutual objection, opening the way to federalism as a middle-ground solution, or even partition as a final option in extreme cases.⁴⁰

Unlike representative democracy, which is based on party competition and the rule of the majority, consensual democracy focuses on building broad coalitions that guarantee the inclusion of all major parties in the decision-making process, from the highest levels of authority to the lowest. This approach grants political minorities the right to object and limits the domination of the majority, thereby enhancing balance and preventing a slide into authoritarianism or exclusion.⁴¹

In contexts experiencing recurring political unrest and weak national cohesion, consensual democracy emerges as an effective mechanism to avoid internal conflicts, by ensuring inclusive representation of all social spectrums, thus consolidating stability and preventing the outbreak of civil confrontations.⁴²

C – The Dialectic of Sectarian Quotas and Consensual Democracy:

After the entry of American forces into Iraq in 2003, the U.S. administration sought to address manifestations of chaos and political corruption, in addition to the recurring power struggles among the major sectarian components: Sunnis, Shiites, and Kurds. In the framework of building a new political system, the consensual democracy model was adopted. However, this model came in an imported form that did not match the political and social specificities of Iraqi society. On the ground, the consensual model was not applied in its theoretical form but rather turned into sectarian quotas wrapped in a democratic appearance, raising essential questions about the extent to which this model fits the Iraqi environment: Was it actually adapted to the composition of society, or was it imposed in a top-down manner without regard for local

³⁸ Al-Janabi, Mohamed Mohi, *Policies of Rehabilitating Post-Conflict Societies: A Case Study of Iraq after the Events of 2014*, Jordan: Dar Dijlah Publishers and Distributors, 2020, pp. 51–52.

³⁹ Jamous & Nabhan, Salem Marzouq, *Consociational Democracy and Its Reflections on the Management of Ethnic Diversity*, Denmark: The Arab Academy in Denmark, 2020.

⁴⁰ Lijphart, Arend, *Democracy in a Plural Society*, Beirut: Strategic Studies, 2006, p. 75.

⁴¹ Al-Safi, Mohamed Alaa, *Consociational Democracy in a Plural Society: Iraq as a Model*, date of retrieval October 2, 2020, from <http://amp.annabaa.org>

⁴² Ayman Ahmed, Mohamed, *Corruption and Accountability in Iraq*, Baghdad: Friedrich Ebert Foundation, 2009, p. 59.

pluralism, or was it partially borrowed from the Western model without a comprehensive understanding of its mechanisms?

Returning to the Iraqi Constitution of 2005, we do not find any explicit text recognizing consensual democracy as a system of governance or as a mechanism for forming governments. Nevertheless, this approach was later adopted in political practice, but according to the logic of partisan and sectarian quotas, which led to failure in building stable civil institutions and an inability to formulate a unifying national policy.⁴³ Consensual democracy in the Iraqi context turned into a tool for entrenching ethnic and sectarian division, as it was used as a political slogan to justify the distribution of positions and privileges, instead of being a means of achieving national balance.⁴⁴

Consequently, election results did not lead to genuine political partnership with national goals, but rather to a process of power-sharing among party elites, serving their own interests and fueling sectarian agendas at the expense of the public interest.

Section Two: Sectarian Quotas as a Pillar in Building the Iraqi Political System After 2003

After 2003, Iraq entered a new political phase characterized by the restructuring of state institutions according to a logic different from what had prevailed in previous decades. Sectarian quotas emerged as a central mechanism in building the political system, whereby power and positions were distributed on the basis of sectarian and ethnic affiliation, rather than merit or national belonging. This transformation was not merely an administrative measure, but a profound shift in the structure of the state, redefining the relationship between citizen and state on narrow identity-based grounds.

This model contributed to entrenching societal division, weakening the ability of institutions to perform their functions professionally and effectively, while reinforcing sub-loyalties at the expense of the public interest. The adoption of sectarian quotas was not the product of a fleeting moment, but rather the result of internal political compromises and external pressures. It became a tool for sharing influence among political forces, yet at the same time generated structural challenges threatening the stability and unity of the state.

A- The Composition of Parliamentary Councils

After the American invasion of Iraq in 2003, the Governing Council was formed according to a consensual formula among political forces and social components. However, this consensual model quickly revealed its fragility through recurring crises, the most prominent being the crisis of selecting a new parliament speaker following the resignation of Mahmoud al-Mashhadani at the end of 2008. Insistence on maintaining sectarian balance led to an almost complete paralysis of parliamentary work, as some parties insisted that the new speaker must be Sunni, based on prior understandings among political and social forces.

⁴³ Al-Janabi, Mohamed Mohi, *ibid.*, 2020.

⁴⁴ Ali Hussein, Sefih (February 28, 2016), *Consociational Democracy in Iraq: A Solution or a Problem?*, date of retrieval October 3, 2020, from <http://democraticac/de>

These understandings, which became evident after the 2005 elections, established the distribution of top state positions along sectarian and ethnic lines: the presidency of the republic assigned to the Kurdish component, the premiership to Arab Shia, and the speakership of parliament to Arab Sunnis, regardless of actual electoral results. This form of quota-sharing reflects the dilemmas of consociational democracy in Iraq, where electoral representation is marginalized in favor of pre-arranged settlements that reinforce division and weaken institutions.⁴⁵

The Iraqi constitution after 2005 sought to consolidate the parliamentary system, reflecting a clear tendency toward political consensus, on the premise that this model limits majority dominance and prevents concentration of executive power in the hands of the head of state. This orientation was consistent with the nature of Iraq's societal and political plurality, as powers were distributed in a way that reduced polarization and encouraged participation.

The constitution also adopted a federal formula, precisely defining the powers of the federal government and dividing responsibilities between the center and the regions, whereby authorities not explicitly stated fell within the jurisdiction of regions and provinces not incorporated into a region. This transformation represented a break with the centralized model that had prevailed for decades, reshaping the relationship between authority and society on more flexible and pluralistic grounds.

In the same context, the system of proportional representation was adopted in elections,⁴⁶ offering broader opportunities for the representation of various political forces and reducing monopolization of power by a single entity. Article One of the constitution stipulated that Iraq is a federal state with sovereignty, adopting a republican, parliamentary, democratic system, reflecting the general orientation toward building institutions based on balance and plurality rather than domination and unilateral decision-making.⁴⁷

The Iraqi experience reveals a striking peculiarity in the relationship between majority and minority. Contrary to the usual context where minorities suffer from majority marginalization, here the majority itself had historically been marginalized by the dominance of a political minority over the levers of power. This reality persisted until 2003, when the political change accompanying the U.S. occupation led to the official recognition of the Shia majority,⁴⁸ which in turn restructured the political system on consensual foundations.

These consensual arrangements were embodied in the new state structure through constitutional and customary measures designed to guarantee the representation of main components in governing institutions. A Presidency Council was formed, including representatives of Kurdish, Shia, and Sunni blocs. The same formula was repeated in the

⁴⁵ Al-Bakri, Yassin Saad Mohamed, *Problems of Consociational Democracy and Its Reflections on the Iraqi Experience*, *Journal of Al-Mustansiriya Center for Arab and International Studies*, 2009, pp. 63–64.

⁴⁶ Harith Hassan, *The Consociational Experience in Iraq: Theory, Application, and Results*, *Arab Politics Journal*, 2016, pp. 47–48.

⁴⁷ *The Iraqi Constitution* (2005).

⁴⁸ Eyad Al-Badiri & Wali Ayed, *The Ethnographic Composition of Iraq's Population and Analysis of Its Impact on State-Building and Stability*, *Al-Qadisiyah Journal*, 2010, pp. 147–148.

speakership of parliament and the deputy prime ministers, reflecting a strong commitment to power-sharing among key actors. A points system was also adopted for the distribution of ministerial portfolios, ensuring balanced representation within the federal government. This mechanism was applied in all electoral cycles following the adoption of the constitution, thereby entrenching a model of national partnership based on balance rather than numerical majority.⁴⁹

B- Parliamentary Representation and Power-Sharing

The 2005 Iraqi constitution stipulates that the Council of Representatives shall be formed according to a representative rule, allocating one parliamentary seat for every one hundred thousand citizens. Members are elected through direct secret ballot, with emphasis on the necessity of representing all components of Iraqi society. The law regulating the electoral process sets the candidacy conditions and implementation mechanisms, while the parliamentary term lasts for four years, beginning with the first session of the council and ending at the close of the fourth year.⁵⁰

Following the legislative elections of December 2005, Iraq entered a complex political stage marked by tensions among parliamentary blocs, with the Kurdish role emerging as a pivotal mediator in bringing viewpoints closer and facilitating understandings among disputing parties. This stage culminated in the formation of the first permanent constitutional government in May 2006, known as the Government of National Unity. Yet this government faced major challenges in the democratic transition, especially during the period between 2006 and 2010, where fundamental obstacles such as weak public freedoms and lack of national consensus negatively affected political stability and state-building.⁵¹

The 2006 parliamentary elections brought about significant political transformations, producing a diverse set of parliamentary blocs that shaped the Iraqi political scene. The speaker of parliament and his deputy were elected, alongside the Presidency Council, in accordance with constitutional mechanisms granting the largest bloc the right to nominate the prime minister and form the government. This event marked the end of the transitional phase, as Iraq acquired elected institutions to administer the state for a four-year term, reinforcing the features of the nascent democratic system despite its structural challenges.⁵²

In the 2010 elections, political currents with national and secular orientations emerged, seeking to transcend sectarian divides by forming inclusive electoral entities not dependent on sect as the main reference for their programs. Despite this trend, such forces could not achieve fundamental change in voting patterns or in the nature of competition within parliament, which remained governed by sectarian alignments. Indeed, the results of those elections and those that followed in 2014 revealed a clear rise in the sectarian character of political alliances,

⁴⁹ Harith, Hassan, *ibid.*, p. 48.

⁵⁰ *The Iraqi Constitution*, (2005).

⁵¹ Saber Ali, Sabah, *The American Occupation of Iraq and the Problematic of State-Building* (Master's Thesis), Middle East University, 2014–2015, pp. 106–110.

⁵² Ahmed Hussein Jaber & Nahid Hassan Wali, *Towards the Completion of State-Building: Stations in the Legitimacy of the Contemporary Iraqi Political System*, *Journal of Political Science*, 2019, pp. 47–48.

reflecting the continued influence of sub-identities in shaping Iraqi political decision-making.
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The 2018 elections witnessed a notable shift in the Iraqi political scene, marked by the fragmentation of electoral lists within the main components—Shia, Sunni, and Kurdish. This division extended beyond candidacy to the winning forces themselves, which were split between competing factions over posts and entitlements or subject to divergent external influences, most notably American and Iranian. These divergences even manifested within the same sectarian group, where internal disputes mirrored the regional struggle between Washington and Tehran. This resulted in the failure to form a government for the first time since 2003, due to lack of consensus between the two sides on its form and composition.⁵⁴

Despite this complexity, elections can be seen as entrenched as a fundamental mechanism for the peaceful transfer of power, lending the political system a clear parliamentary character. However, this form was not free from sectarianism, which remained strongly present in the structure and performance of authority, generating structural challenges in the state-building process.

Section Three: Sectarian Quota System and Its Impact on Democratic Performance in Iraq after the Fall of the Regime

Iraq witnessed a profound transformation in its political structure after 2003, following the collapse of the previous regime and the entry into a new phase of reconstructing state institutions on democratic foundations. However, this transformation was not smooth, as internal and external factors intertwined, most notably the adoption of the sectarian quota system as a mechanism for power-sharing among societal components. Although this model was initially proposed as a temporary solution to ensure political and social balance, it soon turned into a ruling pattern that entrenched sectarian affiliation at the expense of citizenship and democratic institutions.

The sectarian quota system generated deep challenges to building an effective democratic system, as it affected the formation of governments, decision-making mechanisms, and the distribution of positions, leading to a decline in institutional performance and narrowing the space for genuine political participation. It also contributed to reinforcing societal divisions, weakening citizens' trust in the democratic process, and turning it into a struggle for influence among sectarian forces instead of being a means for the peaceful transfer of power.

In this context, this research seeks to analyze the impact of the sectarian quota system on democratic performance in Iraq after the fall of the regime, by deconstructing the relationship between the sectarian structure of the political system and the effectiveness of democratic institutions, focusing on the political, legal, and social dimensions of this effect, and examining the extent to which the Iraqi model is capable of overcoming this dilemma in order to build a civil state based on citizenship and justice.

⁵³ Nassar Nidal Abdul Ridha, *Social Sectarianism and Its Impact on State-Building in Iraq after 2003* (Master's Thesis), Iraq: Al-Alamein Institute, 2016, pp. 47–48.

⁵⁴ Maki, Liqaa, *Social Sectarianism and Political Sectarianism in Iraq*, date of retrieval September 29, 2023, from <http://studies.aljazeera.net>

A- The Impact of Quota System on the Nature of Political Practices and Functions in Iraq:

Since 2003, Iraq has experienced a state of political and administrative confusion, which negatively reflected on government performance that appeared incapable of confronting the growing influence of other political forces. This weakness extended to the legislative authority, which lost much of its supervisory and legislative effectiveness, in light of the spread of corruption in its various forms within state institutions. External interventions, whether regional or international, also contributed to deepening the internal imbalance and increased the fragility of the governmental structure, which lacked clear development plans.

This situation worsened due to the adoption of partisan loyalty as the criterion for appointments and positions, at the expense of professional competence, resulting in widespread institutional slackness. In the absence of a genuine parliamentary opposition—since most political blocs were part of the government—one of democracy’s essential pillars was missing. This reality allowed bloc leaders to control critical decisions, turning them into a closed political elite monopolizing power, known as the political oligarchy, which constituted a major obstacle to the development of the democratic system in Iraq.⁵⁵

Within the debate about the nature of the political system in Iraq after 2003, sharp criticisms emerged against the model of “consociational democracy,” adopted by political forces as a mechanism for governance. This model was considered, by some political actors, one of the obstructing factors for state-building, as it creates a paralysis in decision-making due to the constant need for agreements between multiple parties with conflicting interests.

Former Prime Minister Nouri al-Maliki expressed this stance before the 2010 elections, when he indicated that consociational democracy represented an obstacle to political stability, preferring a presidential over a parliamentary system, and supporting granting the winning bloc the right to form the government without complex compromises. This position reflects a vision that sees political consensus as a form of bargaining that empties the legislative process of its popular content, as laws become tools of negotiation between blocs, not actual responses to societal demands or political system inputs.⁵⁶

From this perspective, it can be said that although consociationalism carries intentions of power-sharing, it has contributed to entrenching political division and weakened institutions’ capacity to produce effective decisions, requiring reconsideration of democratic-building mechanisms to ensure balance between representation and activation.⁵⁷

The Iraqi experience under consociational democracy shows that parliament members often behave as representatives of their sect, not of the entire people, committing to their political group’s line without going beyond it. This limits their independence and weakens their supervisory role, which should have been an effective tool for holding the executive

⁵⁵ Al-Janabi, Mohamed Mohi, *Policies of Rehabilitating Post-Conflict Societies: A Case Study of Iraq after the Events of 2014*, Jordan: Dar Dijlah Publishers and Distributors, 2020, pp. 53–54.

⁵⁶ Mahdid Al-Saeed, *Ethnic Conflicts and Their Impact on the Future of States: The Case of Turkey and Iraq* (Doctoral Dissertation), 2019–2020, Tlemcen: Belkaid University, p. 280.

⁵⁷ Ali Hussein, Sefih, op. cit., 2016.

accountable. This type of political representation deepens the overlap between social and political dimensions, weakens national identity in favor of sub-identities, undermines the principle of citizenship, and entrenches societal division.⁵⁸

The quota system has also amplified the role of minorities beyond their actual size, enabling a limited elite within society to control political decision-making through deals and understandings based on mutual interests rather than the public good. This made political compromises a complex and slow process, requiring long periods to reach solutions, negatively affecting public policymaking and delaying critical legislation and decisions.⁵⁹

In addition, the political environment produced by consociationalism fuels partisan violence, such as election result manipulation and sectarian or ethnic violence, which weakens the political system's legitimacy and obstructs state-building on national and professional foundations.⁶⁰

Sectarian and ethnic quota systems constitute one of the most prominent obstacles to building a cohesive national political system, as they not only establish fixed shares for components but also open the door for political forces tied to these identities to continuously seek adjusting representation ratios according to changes in internal power balances, whether military or economic. These forces often resort to regional or international support to reshape political arrangements in ways serving their own interests, thereby weakening national sovereignty and entrenching dependency in political decision-making.⁶¹

The parliamentary system has proven its limited effectiveness in the Iraqi context, as it failed to provide a stable environment for governance or achieve security. Since 2006, parliament has not succeeded in performing its legislative and supervisory functions effectively, due to political fragmentation and the absence of any party securing a clear majority, pushing toward the formation of fragile coalitions incapable of imposing stability or ensuring government continuity. This reality emptied the parliamentary system of its essence and transformed it into a consociational model based on quota-sharing, where top positions are distributed according to sectarian and political considerations, despite the absence of any constitutional text obliging such practice, reflecting a deviation from democratic principles and institutionalizing structural division in the state.⁶²

The impacts of sectarian and ethnic quotas were not limited to political institutions but extended to the legal and security structures of the state. Sectarian affiliation became an implicit criterion in judicial practices, despite the constitutional text affirming the independence of the judiciary. Practices emerged that reflected the existence of quasi-private courts within each sect, handling internal disputes, undermining the principle of judicial unity, and consolidating societal fragmentation.

⁵⁸ Al-Bakri, Yassin Saad Mohamed, op. cit., p. 77.

⁵⁹ Jamous & Nabhan, Salem Marzouq, op. cit., pp. 15–16.

⁶⁰ Mahdid Al-Saeed, ibid., pp. 287–288.

⁶¹ Hilal, Jamil, *Lebanon, Iraq, and the Palestinian Authority Areas: Polarization Factors*, date of retrieval September 27, 2023, from <http://carnegie-mec.org>

⁶² Zaki Hassan, Shatha, *Parliamentary Elections and the Restructuring of the Political System in Iraq*, *Journal of Al-Mustansiriya Center for Arab and International Studies*, 2009, p. 44.

At the security level, the quota system produced a distorted reality, as security agencies were distributed according to sectarian affiliations, despite constitutional provisions stipulating their neutrality and rejection of involvement in politics or forming militias outside the state framework. In practice, however, armed formations affiliated with parties emerged, exercising direct or indirect political influence, contributing to intimidating political opponents, and even engaging in assassinations targeting political, academic, and legal figures—a dangerous indicator of state retreat before sectarian power dynamics.⁶³

This overlap between sect and institution—whether political, legal, or security—undermines the concept of citizenship, prevents the establishment of a civil state based on law and equality, and entrenches loyalty to the group at the expense of national belonging.

B- Internal Structural Interactions and Their Reflections on the Regional Role:

On the domestic level, sectarian diversity in countries with complex social structures constitutes a sensitive factor, especially when coupled with ethnic competition for power, whether by the majority or the minority. The danger of this situation increases when external parties intervene to exploit sectarian divisions in service of their strategic interests,⁶⁴ as in the case of Iraq, where such intervention fragmented the social fabric, transforming it from a state of relative coexistence into a state of permanent conflict.

Sectarian quota-sharing contributed to entrenching division, as political crises turned into sectarian confrontations, and then into religious and ethnic splits, driven by weak collective awareness and multiple loyalties amid the decline of socialization institutions. The absence of trust among political components further aggravated the situation; the Shiite component lives under the obsession of the return of the former Sunni-led regime, while Sunnis fear Shiite domination perceived as an extension of Iranian influence, whereas the Kurds strive to achieve the dream of an independent state.⁶⁵ This deepened the politicization of sub-identities and transformed social belonging into a political tool.

This deterioration cannot be separated from the broader context following the American occupation, when Iraq faced an institutional vacuum and political shock, along with excessive dependence on oil rents and the state's declining role in providing security and stability. Security expenditures rose at the expense of social spending,⁶⁶ which eroded trust between citizen and state and detached the societal environment from the political system.

Economically, the post-occupation phase was marked by a clear structural imbalance, reflected in the decline of GDP and the inflated contribution of the oil sector at the expense of other productive sectors. The dominance of the public sector over economic activity and the weak contribution of agriculture and industry produced deep distortions in the economic structure.

⁶³ *The Iraqi Constitution* (2005).

⁶⁴ Zaid Adnan Mohsen Aliki & Ameer Malik Miloukh, *Foundations of the Effectiveness of the Iraqi Political System after 2005*, *Journal of Political Issues*, 2017, pp. 249–250.

⁶⁵ Al-Bayani, Firas Abdul Karim, *The Political Process and the Political System in Iraq (2005–2015)*, *Journal of Political Issues*, 2016, p. 257.

⁶⁶ Abdul-Jabbar Abdul-Sattar, *The Reality of the Iraqi Economy and Mechanisms of Transition towards a Market Economy*, The First National and Tenth Scientific Conference of the College of Administration and Economics, Iraq: Al-Mustansiriya University, 2010, pp. 6–8.

Oil revenues exceeded 90% of budget resources, amid a decline in gross fixed capital formation and reduced investment in infrastructure, which further weakened the fragility of the national economy.⁶⁷

Consociational democracy is built on the principle of distributing power among the different components of society, yet the Iraqi experience revealed a deviation in applying this model. The mechanism of consensus turned into a means of entrenching the interests of political elites at the expense of the popular base. This distribution produced a widening gap between the ruling elites and society, as these elites became incapable of representing citizens' aspirations or gaining their trust.

Within this reality, Shiite, Sunni, and Kurdish political forces engaged in benefit-sharing serving their own interests, without these gains reflecting on the social groups they were supposed to represent. Instead of using the economy as a tool for development, it was treated as spoils distributed through networks of partisan and sectarian patronage, leading to declining economic performance, unemployment, and administrative corruption.

The connection of these elites with regional states such as Iran and Saudi Arabia made them closer to external agents than to national representatives, as government decisions served the interests of those states more than the Iraqi citizen. This orientation contributed to the destruction of many local industries, neglected in favor of foreign—particularly Iranian and Turkish—products, deepening economic dependency and weakening the country's productive sovereignty.⁶⁸

The Iraqi experience in applying consociational democracy thus revealed a profound structural flaw: the mechanism of power-sharing turned into a means of consolidating elite interests, without translating into genuine reforms in the political or economic system. Access to power occurred through formal democratic mechanisms, while institutional, social, and cultural structures remained stagnant and fragmented, preventing the achievement of a genuine and comprehensive democratic transformation.⁶⁹

This gap between democratic form and developmental substance led to the absence of political development, which cannot be separated from economic development. International experiences confirm that stable democracy cannot grow in a fragile economic environment; it requires a cohesive productive structure that ensures fair distribution of wealth and equality of opportunities. In the Iraqi case, this linkage did not materialize; rather, the crisis deepened under the dominance of the quota system, as resources were managed through a narrow sectarian perspective serving the interests of political components at the expense of the national interest.⁷⁰

This orientation was reflected in the management of natural wealth, as some regions, such as the Kurdistan Region, treated oil and gas as private property, outside the authority of the central

⁶⁷ Iraqi Ministry of Planning, *Report on the Iraqi Economy*, Ministry of Planning, 2020.

⁶⁸ Najm Al-Ghazi, *The Impact of Sectarian Quotas on the Economic and Social Situation in Iraq*, February 22, 2021.

⁶⁹ Abdul-Jabbar Moussa, Abdul-Sattar, *ibid*.

⁷⁰ Ali Hussein Sadiq & Zain Al-Abidin Mohamed Abdul-Hussein, *The Iraqi Economy after 2003*, Beirut: Dar Al-Rafidain for Printing, Publishing and Distribution, p. 191.

state. Border crossings, ports, and airports also became tools of influence for parties, used to secure narrow political and economic gains, dragging the country into a cycle of recurring crises.⁷¹

Within this reality, the Iraqi economy ceased to be developmental and became a crisis-driven economy, fueled by improvisational policies and weak institutions. The administrative and planning apparatus suffers from disintegration and lacks a unified national vision, leading to the absence of effective development strategies. Weak rule of law, the spread of corruption, and the proliferation of terrorism all undermined the legitimacy of the political system, resulting in social deterioration, rising poverty and unemployment rates, and a widening gap between state and citizen.⁷²

Among the most prominent manifestations of corruption that deepened the crisis were: the paralysis of laws, the spread of nepotism, the occupation of public offices by the unqualified, the emergence of sudden wealth, and the absence of the principle of equal opportunities.⁷³ This reality made international institutions hesitant to provide financial support to Iraq, due to lack of confidence in the government's ability to manage resources in a way that serves national development priorities. Corruption also directly impacted economic performance, inflating expenditures and creating budget deficits, further weakening the national economy.

The absence of balanced development in Iraq produced a multiparty political system that failed to overcome ethnic and sectarian divisions; rather, it entrenched them as institutions in their own right. The democracy applied was not supported by strong institutional structures, effective rule of law, or even citizens prepared to practice this mode of governance.⁷⁴ Political transformations were received by ruling elites as an opportunity to redistribute interests, not as a stage for building a modern democratic state, leading to the spread of sectarian quota-sharing and its negative repercussions on society and state.⁷⁵

Economically, the crisis worsened due to excessive dependence on oil rent, in the absence of an alternative development vision, despite Iraq's natural and geographical potential. With the collapse of oil prices and the repercussions of the COVID-19 pandemic, unemployment and poverty rates rose unprecedentedly, exposing the fragility of the adopted economic policies and their inability to respond to crises.⁷⁶

⁷¹ Najm Al-Ghazi, *ibid.*, 2021.

⁷² Ali Khudr, Mazra, *The Iraqi Economy: Crises and Development*, Beirut: Arab Scientific Publishers, 2018, p. 526.

⁷³ Ayman Ahmed, Mohamed, *Corruption and Accountability in Iraq*, Baghdad: Friedrich Ebert Foundation, 2013, pp. 4–6.

⁷⁴ Nizar Abdul Amir, Turki Ghanem & Mohamed Al-Khurji, Hamad Jasim, *Financial and Administrative Corruption and Its Role in Curtailing the Iraqi Economy after the American Occupation of Iraq 2003*, 13th Scientific Conference of the College of Law, Karbala: University of Karbala, 2017, p. 21.

⁷⁵ Eberly, Don, *The Rise of Global Civil Society: Building Communities and States from the Bottom Up*, Jordan: Dar Al-Ahliya for Publishing and Distribution, 20011, p. 257.

⁷⁶ Ahmed Al-Nadawi Khudr, Abbas, *Poverty in Iraq and the Transformation from an Economic Phenomenon to a Social and Political Dilemma*, date of retrieval February 22, 2023, from <http://studies.aljazeera.net>

On the social level, the Iraqi constitution contributed to entrenching the notion of components instead of building a unified society, resulting in sectarian explosions that lasted for years and impacted the historically more intertwined and coexisting social fabric. Media and social networks played a role in fueling this division, as sectarian discourse became a tool for political leaders to mobilize support, even at the expense of social unity.

Nevertheless, the October 2019 protests marked a turning point, as citizens from various sects took to the streets in unified demonstrations against corruption and mismanagement, rejecting the divisions fueled by political elites. This popular movement revealed a new awareness that transcends sectarianism and demands genuine reforms touching the essence of the political and economic system.⁷⁷

Administrative and financial corruption was among the clearest aspects of the crisis: laws were paralyzed, nepotism spread, unqualified individuals assumed public offices, leading to declining trust in state institutions and difficulty in obtaining international support due to lack of transparency. Manipulation of resources and revenues, along with the absence of justice in wealth distribution, deepened the gap between state and citizen, transforming the economy into a crisis economy instead of a tool for sustainable development.

At the regional level, the effects of sectarian quota-sharing were not limited to dismantling Iraq's internal social fabric, but extended to open the way for external interventions, as some regional powers saw in Iraq's fragility an opportunity to enhance their influence:

- **The Iranian Role**

Iran's stance after 2003 was characterized by pragmatism, as Tehran adopted a policy of positive neutrality toward the American invasion, motivated by its desire to get rid of the Baathist regime, which had been a historical threat to it, while at the same time avoiding direct confrontation with Washington. This political balance enabled Iran to support the rising Shiite forces in ways that served its strategic interests in Iraq, which it considers a defensive depth and a vital sphere for its national security.⁷⁸

Iran sought to consolidate its influence through multiple tools, including intelligence support in southern and northern areas, and by strengthening religious ties with Shiite authorities, especially Ayatollah al-Sistani, who enjoys wide acceptance among Iraqi Shiites. This religious connection facilitated the flow of huge funds from Iraqis to the religious authority, which enhanced Iran's ability to influence the religious and political scene. Iranian influence reached a point that pushed Iraqi authorities to take measures to limit Persian manifestations in holy cities such as Karbala.⁷⁹

⁷⁷ Najm Al-Ghazi, *ibid.*, 2021.

⁷⁸ Moataz Ismail Al-Subaihi & Saleh Ali Khalaf, *Political Sectarianism in the Iraqi State in the First Decade after Change: A Study in Causes, Implications, and Solutions*, *Iraqi University Journal*, 2018, p. 444.

⁷⁹ Kribesh, Nabil, *Motives and Obstacles of Democratic Transformation in Iraq: Its Internal and External Dimensions* (Doctoral Dissertation), Batna: University of Hadj Lakhdar, 2007–2008, p. 210.

In the Arab context, fears of Iranian penetration into Iraq grew, especially among Arab Sunnis, who view this influence as an attempt to reshape Iraq to serve Tehran's security interests, reflecting the legacy of the previous war between the two countries. From this perspective, Iran seeks to ensure the presence of a political system in Iraq that poses no threat to its western borders but remains weak enough to be contained and directed.⁸⁰

- **The Turkish Role**

Turkey, for its part, approached the Iraqi situation from the standpoint of safeguarding its national interests, particularly regarding the unity of Iraqi territory. Since 2003, Ankara has adopted a clear stance rejecting the partition of Iraq into independent entities, focusing especially on the issue of Kirkuk, which it considers a red line due to its national and economic sensitivity.⁸¹

Turkey fears that Kurdish control over Kirkuk could reinforce their separatist ambitions, especially given their access to massive oil revenues. Therefore, Ankara sought to play the role of guarantor in oil contracts, ensuring revenue flow through it and granting it direct influence in managing the economic file between Erbil and Baghdad.⁸²

With rising security challenges, particularly after the emergence of the Islamic State organization, the need became urgent to reconsider security arrangements in disputed areas. Coordination between the federal government and the Kurdistan Regional Government is necessary to form a joint multiethnic security force capable of maintaining security in Kirkuk, ensuring fair representation of its components, and strengthening the links between the governorate and the two political capitals.⁸³

Conclusion:

The political transformation witnessed by Iraq after 2003 represented a decisive turning point in the course of the modern state, as it shifted from a centralized authoritarian regime to a pluralistic democratic experiment, carrying with it great hopes of building a civil state based on citizenship and equality. However, these hopes collided with a complex political and social reality, governed by internal entanglements and external influences, which led to the emergence of a political system based on power-sharing according to sectarian affiliations, instead of cooperation in building effective national institutions.

The data have shown that sectarianism was not merely a social reflection of the transformation, but became part of the very structure of the political system itself, employed in the formation of governments and the distribution of positions, which weakened institutional performance and deprived citizens of confidence in the value of the democratic process. This reality contributed to the decline of the collective national identity in favor of sub-identities exploited in political conflict, rather than celebrated as part of cultural and social diversity.

⁸⁰ Sardarina, K. & Chitsazian, M. R. (2019). *The Future of Iran–Iran Relations: Possible Scenarios. Iranian Political Studies*.

⁸¹ Moataz Ismail Al-Subaihi & Saleh Ali Khalaf, *ibid.*, p. 445.

⁸² Kribesh, Nabil, *ibid.*, pp. 207–208.

⁸³ International Crisis Group, *Iraq: Fixing Security in Kirkuk, Middle East Report*, 2020, p. 27.

What was implemented in Iraq was not genuine consensual democracy, but partisan sectarian quota-sharing that produced a plurality of authorities, where political forces divided influence without a unified national reference, leading to the fragmentation of state institutions, the growth of divisions, and the decline of opportunities for political and social stability. Furthermore, the federal system in place lacks clarity: it is neither centralized nor decentralized, creating a geographically divided reality along sectarian and regional lines that threatens state unity and weakens its capacity to manage national affairs.

Overcoming these dilemmas cannot be achieved through superficial reforms or cosmetic changes, but requires a fundamental review of the political system and a complete re-articulation of the national project, through the construction of a new political model that guarantees fair representation without entrenching division, and elevates the value of citizenship without excluding pluralism. Moreover, addressing economic crises, particularly those related to the management of oil resources, calls for the adoption of prudent financial policies, the reduction of public expenditures, and their redirection toward sustainable development, along with the creation of an active middle class capable of supporting social and political stability.

Alongside this, the reform of political parties, the activation of parliament's role as an independent legislative institution, and the strengthening of civil society organizations represent essential pillars for building a state of law. Likewise, reducing the size of electoral districts, providing legal, cultural, and political guarantees, and limiting external interventions are necessary steps for consolidating national sovereignty and achieving an internal balance that restores the authority of the state and lays the foundation for a new phase of political stability and comprehensive development.

The future of Iraq's political life depends on its ability to move beyond the logic of quota-sharing and to transition toward a civil state governed by law, managed by strong institutions, and built upon national rather than sectarian belonging. This can only be achieved by reaffirming the values of participation, justice, and shared identity, thereby ensuring the construction of a unified national state capable of embracing its diversity and realizing the aspirations of its people.

From within this complex reality emerges the necessity of adopting a set of practical measures that would place Iraq on the path of transformation toward a stable civil state. Foremost among these measures is the reconstruction of the constitutional and political framework in a way that guarantees a balanced relationship between citizen and state, founded on collective citizenship rather than narrow affiliations, while consolidating institutional independence and effectively separating powers. Electoral reform has also become an urgent matter, through the adoption of mechanisms that ensure genuine representation and reduce the influence of sectarian forces, in addition to encouraging the rise of national parties with comprehensive developmental visions.

In the same context, the serious addressing of economic and social gaps cannot be overlooked, through policies that guarantee a fair distribution of wealth and rebuild the middle class as a cornerstone of societal stability. At the political and social level, promoting a culture of participation, activating the role of civil society, and achieving independence of national decision-making away from external interventions are pivotal steps to restore trust between

citizen and state, and to launch a comprehensive national project that restores Iraq's regional presence and lays the foundations for a new stage of institutional building and sustainable development.

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