Intra-group Fractures in Iraq Paper Series (II)

The Iraqi Arab Shia Political Crisis

Muhanad Seloom

ALSHARQ FORUM

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Contents

Abstract: There is a narrative often told by Iraqi politicians and commentators that Arab Sunnis have excluded themselves from politics by boycotting the post-2003 democratic governance system in Iraq. Proponents of this narrative claim that Sunnis boycotted the new democratic system because they knew they would not be able to retain the privileges they had once enjoyed under the Saddam regime. However, many Iraqi Arab Sunni political figures dispute this narrative. Their counter-narrative is that Arab Sunnis, both Participants and Rejectionists, wanted to participate in the post-Saddam political process, but Shia political parties and the Coalition Provisional Authority (CPA) pursued discriminatory policies against Arab Sunnis.

Experts and commentators often blame Arab Sunnis for today's instability in Iraq, citing the Sunni insurgency after 2003 and the subsequent rise of extremist "Sunni" groups. As argued in Part I of this three-part series, intra-Sunni divisions are a major cause of instability in Iraq. Yet, Sunnis are neither the only divided group nor the only group from which armed insurgencies emerged. Iraqi Arab Shia groups are also divided both politically and ideologically. Furthermore, several Shia armed groups participated in the armed insurgency that began after 2003 – most notably, the al-Mahdi Army led by Muqtada al-Sadr.

This article argues that while intra-Sunni divisions are certainly detrimental to the stability of Iraq, we should not underestimate the effects of intra-Shia divisions either. This analysis will be contextualised through the narratives of Arab Shia and Sunni politicians who were part of early post-2003 political groups in Iraq.

Introduction

The majority of Arab Shia political groups in Iraq are closely related to pyramidal religious authorities under the auspices of the Grand Ayatollah,[2] who leads the Hawza[3] in Najaf. The Grand Ayatollah is usually called Marji'. There are several junior Marji's in the Shia religious structure who represent different schools of thought. Thus, the Marji'a religious system casts a heavy shadows on the new political system in Iraq.

Ethnoreligious Map of Iraq[4]

The post-Saddam political system in Iraq has been dominated by Islamist political parties. Since the first democratic elections after the toppling of the Saddam regime were held in 2005[5], the ruling party in Iraq has been the Shia Dawa Islamic Party. At the same time, the biggest Participant Arab Sunni political party in Iraq has been the Iraqi Islamic Party, a party with Muslim Brotherhood roots. The Islamist identities of the major political parties in Baghdad have made it inevitable that Iraqi politics would be shaped by sectarian identities. Consequently, the clash between the Shia and Sunni ideologies has been imported into Iraqi politics. The repercussions of sectarian politics in Iraq

have been disastrous both for state building and stability (Dodge 2012).[6]

In Part I[7] of this series, it was argued that intra-Sunni divisions represent a major impediment to peace in Iraq. The Sunni loss of power in Iraq, coupled with the disenfranchisement of many from that sect, drove many Sunni groups to armed insurgency, both against the occupying forces and against the newly formed government in Baghdad. Yet, Iraqi Arab Shia political parties have their own divisions as well. They also had armed insurgent groups fighting Coalition forces and the newly formed Iraqi government – for reasons not necessarily the same as the Sunnis'. The Marji'a religious system, however, has been the safety valve (Allawi 2007: p216),8 which has prevented a wider Shia armed insurgency in Iraq similar to that of the Sunnis'.
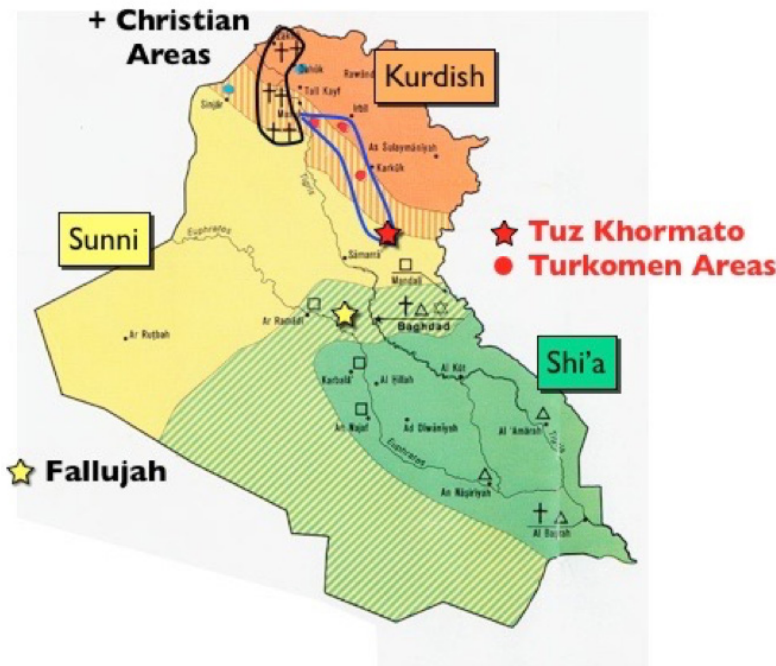
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The majority of Iraqi Shia political parties are connected in one way or another to a specific religious school of thought represented by a Marji'. The process of following the teaching of a certain Marji' is called Taqleed.[9] For example, the ruling Dawa Party follows Grand Ayatollah Sistani, but adheres to the teachings and fatwas of Mohammed Mohammed Baqir al-Sadr. In contrast, the Islamic Supreme Council of Iraq adheres to those of Abdulmuhsen al-Hakeem. The leader of the Sadrist Movement, Muqtada al-Sadr, however, adheres to the teachings of his late father. The same is true about militias fighting under the Hashd umbrella.[10] These various schools of thought govern the political orientation of each political group.

For instance, the Dawa Party intermittently had a religious justification for not resisting the U.S.-led occupation of Iraq after 2003. Other groups have been less consistent in this regard.[11] These different Shia Marji's have varying fatwas on the relationship these groups should have with Sunnis and Kurds, the form of governance in Iraq, Sharia influence on the constitution and legal code, the relationship these groups should have with minorities, etc.

It is argued here that the conflict among Shia parties on whether to build a democratic system dominated by the Iraqi Arab Shia or to build a Wilayet al-Faqih system similar to that of Iran has contributed to the paralysation of the state-building process in Iraq and strained relations among Iraqi political stakeholders.

While al-Sadr chose to suspend resistance against the U.S. occupation of Iraq after 2003, he later changed his mind, leading a ferocious armed resistance against Coalition forces. The Iraqi government, led by the Dawa Party, chose to side with the occupying Coalition forces against Sadr's militia "the Mahdi Army".[12] Another armed insurgent group, Asaib Ahl al-Haq (AAH) (League of the People of Righteousness),[13] was led by Qais al-Khaza'li, whose religious and political affiliations are closer to Iran's Wilayet al-Faqih than to the Marji'a system.[14] The AAH attacked Coalition forces in Baghdad between 2006-2012 in several of Iraq's southern cities (Wyer 2012).[15] The AAH is designated as a terrorist group by the United States government.[16] Despite the intertwined religious and political systems of Shia in Iraq, intra-Shia divisions have nonetheless proven to be a major source of instability in the country.

Intra-Shia ideological and political divisions have damaged the state-building process in Iraq.[17] While certain Shia political parties

have focused on state-building, other parties have chosen to recruit their own militias and operate as sub-state actors. These militias have turned Iraq's political environment into a toxic sectarian space in which Iraqi Arab Sunnis have felt threatened and marginalized. It is argued here that the conflict among Shia parties on whether to build a democratic system dominated by the Iraqi Arab Shia or to build a Wilayet al-Faqih system similar to that of Iran has contributed to the paralysation of the state-building process in Iraq and strained relations among Iraqi political stakeholders.

State-Building in Iraq

The rise of al-Qaida and subsequently the Islamic State in Iraq and the Levant (ISIL) is widely attributed by analysts and commentators to post-2003 bad governance in Iraq.18 Admittedly, the root causes of ill governance vary from case to case, but in the Iraqi case, unelected ethno-religious political parties seized power in Iraq after the toppling of the Baathist dictatorship. The U.S.-led Coalition's plan was to form an interim representative Governing Council in Iraq, paving the way for a democratically elected government (Bremer 2006).[19] Iraq, however, was taken over by ethno-sectarian political parties which have very little interest in creating a democratic system in the country.

The absence of strong democratic safeguards to protect the newly formed political system left Iraq vulnerable to a clash of ethno-sectarian agendas. While Shia political parties strived to consolidate their grip on power after having taken it from Iraqi Arab Sunnis, Sunni political parties struggled to prevent the rise of a Shia-dominated political system in Iraq. Iraqi Kurds, however, utilised their early-gained status of semi-autonomy[20] to prepare the ground for an independent Kurdish state carved out of today's northern Iraq. Consequently, the new constitution of Iraq was written in only vague terms,

leaving many issues for future governments to resolve. Constitutional issues like the disputed territories, Article 140 for the fate of Kirkuk province, the mechanisms for amending the constitution, federalism in Iraq, and the length of presidential terms are yet to be resolved (Jawad, S: 2013).[21]

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The rise of armed militias closely related to the main political parties in Iraq has undermined the creation of a national representative army. It is indicative of a general disinterest in building a free democratic system in Iraq, as well as a manifestation of failure in governance. The rise of armed militias in Iraq is not solely attributable to intra-group divisions, but can also be at least partly attributed to external influences. While some states in the region do not wish to see Iraq rebuild a strong army, others want the new Shia-led Iraq to become an auxiliary state run by a puppet government. The fractured and weak new Iraqi army was not able to prevent the sectarian violence which erupted across Iraq in 2016, in which tens of thousands of mainly Sunni civilians were murdered by armed militiamen in military uniform (Pirnie and O'Connell 2008).[22] Political and security instability helped extremist groups gain a foothold across Iraq, mainly in Sunni areas.

After the 2005-2008 sectarian violence in Iraq, the need for a national non-sectarian alternative political project became pressing. The Iraqi National Movement (Iraqiyya) was

a glimpse of a hope of a cross-sectarian representative political process; however, it was soon crushed by the cruel realities of ethno-sectarian politics in Iraq.[23] Iraqiyya, which was led by Dr. Ayad Alawi – a Shia secularist – was able to win the hearts and minds of many Arab Sunni and Shia voters across Iraq because of its non-sectarian nationalist platform, and the party won the 2010 elections.[24] Iraqis were hopeful that this cross-sect political bloc would end sectarian politics in Iraq, paving the way for the rise of democratic institutions. A series of political maneuvers, together with internal and external pressure, prevented Iraqiyya from forming a government. Ethno-sectarian politics prevailed against cross-sect politics. Instead, Maliki formed a government which has proven to be a disaster for Iraq (Dodge 2012: Loc 2286 Kindle).[25]

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Today, Iraqis are resuming the discussion on state-building, reforms, fighting corruption, amending the constitution, decentralization, and federalism. The crucial difference on this occasion is that reforms are planned for the post-ISIL era. Nevertheless, the pre-existing clash of visions for state-building persists today: the Shia political parties striving for majority rule while Arab Sunnis are driven to prevent the rise of a Shia dictatorship. Whether a new cross-sect political project akin to that of Iraqiyya will materialise is yet to be seen. It can be concluded that the optimal solution for the Iraqi political conundrum is to find a political framework under which cross-sectarian politics is possible.

Intra-Group Divisions: Reality and Myth

Iraqi politicians, depending on their ethno-sectarian backgrounds, have different narratives about why Iraq is a semi-failed state 13 years after the toppling of the Ba'ath regime. Over the last two years, I have had a series of conversations with Shia political figures about why Iraqi political groups have so far failed in creating a functional political model. Their answers were as diverse as the shades of blame they assign to rival groups.

Shia political groups are divided on both ideological and political levels. While the Dawa Party/SOL political model adopts majority-led power sharing, the Sadr and Hakeem political models adopt a nationalist approach under which state building should not be governed by the ethno-sectarian allocation of powers.

While a senior politician within the Maliki's State of the Law (SOL) political bloc admitted corruption and bad governance had hindered the progress of democracy in Iraq, he stressed that in his opinion, Participant Sunni politicians have joined the Iraqi government in order to sabotage the new Shia-led political process. He views certain Sunni political actions as part of a grand regional and international conspiracy to ensure that the Shia do not rule in Iraq (SOL: January 2016).[26] A representative of al-Hakeem's Islamic Supreme Council of Iraq (ISCI) to the European Union claims that Ba'athists have infiltrated senior positions in the State of Law bloc (ISCI Representative: November 2016).[27] He blames these ex-Baathists for intra-Shia divisions and bad governance. Sadrists, however, think that ethno-sectarian power sharing is behind the failure in governance in Iraq. A senior Sadr aide described the current state of politics in Iraq in these terms: "The plague of the ethno-sectarian allocation of powers has crippled Iraq. We need a national political solution to replace the current failed ethno-sectarian system" (Musawi: 2016).[28]

Analysing data collected from interviews senior Shia political figures throughout 2016 and 2017 show that intra-group divisions and different visions over how Iraq should be governed are to be found among Shia political groups. These intra-divisions contribute as much to political instability in Iraq as intra-Sunni divisions. Furthermore, Shia political groups have different narratives when it comes to intra-Shia divisions and Shia-Sunni divisions. While SOL and Dawa Party members accuse their Sunni counterparts of collaborating with internal and external players to undermine Shia rule in Iraq, Sadrists and al-Hakeem political groups accuse Baathists of infiltrating the Dawa/SOL ruling parties in Iraq (Assadi: 2017; Hashom: 2016).[29] Careful analysis and fact-checking of these narratives reveal a mixture of truths and myths. It is important to mention here that these narratives shape the forms of political rhetoric in Iraq that govern intra-Shia and inter-sect political relations.

Ministers carry out their political parties' agendas rather than the agenda of the Iraqi government. This dysfunctional system of governance in Iraq has weakened the Iraqi state, encouraged ministers to plunder the budget to benefit their own political parties, perpetuated the existence of armed militias, and hindered the development of a new democratic system in Iraq.

Shia political groups are divided on both ideological and political levels. While the Dawa Party/SOL political model adopts majority-led power sharing, the Sadr and Hakeem political models adopt a nationalist approach under which state building should not be governed by the ethno-

sectarian allocation of powers. The process of forming Iraqi governments after 2003 has been based on allocating ministries among political parties proportionate to the number of parliamentary seats won by each party. Consequently, ministers carry out their political parties' agendas rather than the agenda of the Iraqi government. This dysfunctional system of governance in Iraq has weakened the Iraqi state, encouraged ministers to plunder the budget to benefit their own political parties, perpetuated the existence of armed militias, and hindered the development of a new democratic system in Iraq.

Conclusions

This article has critically reviewed the narrative that Iraqi Arab Sunnis have excluded themselves from the new political process in Iraq. It also sheds light on the intricate relationship between intra-sect and inter-sect divisions among Iraqi political groups. While Shia political groups cite intra-Sunni divisions as one of the main drivers of instability in Iraq, these very same Shia political groups ignore the existing intra-Shia divisions as an equally destabilizing force in the country.

It can be concluded that bad governance in Iraq is an immediate consequence of a failure in state-building after 2003. Instead of creating a democratic system under which all Iraqis can participate in governance, the CPA and consequent Iraqi governments' allocation of power on an ethno-sectarian basis has destined the new democratic political process in Iraq to failure. Iraqi political groups are divided today on whether to blame the ethno-sectarian political system for the failure of governance or to blame each other. However, they all agree that the current political structure is dysfunctional and therefore needs structural reforms.

Blame-shifting among Iraqi political groups reveals a stagnant political process in need of urgent reforms. The recent reconciliation process – the "Historical Settlement" – is another attempt to reform the political process in Iraq. While there is much discussion about the possibility of real political reforms in Iraq, it is yet to be seen whether Iraqi political groups are willing to embrace democracy as a system of governance or continue their quest for an [elected] authoritarian theocratic dictatorship.

There is still a missing part to the overall picture of Iraq's fractured political system. This will be examined in Part III of this series, in which intra-Kurdish political divisions will be examined. Only by fully appreciating the "intra" against the "inter" group divisions can one critically understand the current political situation in Iraq.

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ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Muhanad Seloom is an independent analyst and academic researcher into ethno-sectarian conflicts. He is also the co-founder of the Iraqi Research Network (IRN), a non-profit research centre based in London. From 2007 to date, his research has focused on ethno-sectarian conflicts in the Middle East, including the Kurdish issue and the Shia-Sunni schism.

ABOUT ALSHARQ FORUM

The Sharq Forum is an independent international network whose mission is to undertake impartial research and develop long-term strategies to ensure the political development, social justice and economic prosperity of the people of Al-Sharq. The Forum does this through promoting the ideals of democratic participation, an informed citizenry, multi-stakeholder dialogue, social justice, and public-spirited research.

Address: Istanbul Vizyon Park A1 Plaza Floor:6
No.:68 34197 Bahçelievler/ Istanbul / Turkey
Telephone: +902126031815
Fax: +902126031665
Email: info@sharqforum.org

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