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Power of the People: Sectarian Rhetoric and Iran's Role in Fueling Division in Iraq

Ongoing protests in Iraq have once again fueled discussion of sectarian rhetoric that has been used to describe the evolving situation in Iraq for decades. In a post-Hussein, post-2003 United States invasion Iraq, sectarianism has been coined as a term to describe widespread historical issues throughout the country. After the US invasion of 2003, the fragile government of Iraq fell victim to deep divisions that allowed Iran to advance their influence in Iraq, in a time of weakness. The use of sectarianism to describe the divisions that are present throughout Iraq, not specific but significantly to the political situation, oversimplify the complexities of a rich and diverse Iraqi history.

Through critical historical analysis of Iranian involvement in Iraqi affairs, this paper attempts to dismember the rhetoric of sectarianism to describe Iraq's multifaceted relationship with Iran. This research argues that analyzing Iraqi affairs on the premise of sectarianism is an oversimplification to many of the issues that the country is facing today. Specifically, this paper will identify the role of sectarianism in the current protests in Iraq, and the role that Iran has played in creating the divisions prior to the protests.

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Introduction

Hundreds of thousands of Iraqis have taken to the streets in massive political protests throughout Iraq since the beginning of October 2019. Protests of this scale have not been seen since the fall of Saddam Hussein, in 2003. The protesters have made several demands from the government, most significantly calling for a complete government overhaul and reform while also denouncing Iranian influence within Iraq. The significance of sectarianism in Iraq cannot be underestimated when identifying the motivations behind the protests and how both the Iraqi and Iranian officials are addressing these protests. However, categorizing the current political situation in Iraq as a sectarian conflict is a vast oversimplification of the complex dynamics of the Iraqi political system and the criticized Iranian involvement in the country. This essay will examine how sectarianism, its motivations and its role in Iraqi affairs have transformed since the fall of the Hussein regime in 2003, which today ultimately dictates the Iranian involvement in Iraqi governmental affairs, and is seen as one of the motivations behind the current protests that are taking place in Iraq. By identifying the main historical events following the United States (US) invasion in 2003, where Iran's role in Iraqi affairs has been pivotal to the developing relationship between the two countries, this paper attempts to examine the role of sectarianism in the current protests in Iraq.

The first section of this paper begins with a historical background of modern sectarianism in Iraq. Due to the constraints in this scope of research, the history begins after the 2003 US-led invasion of Iraq. However, it is significant to note "this uneven sectarian makeup of the ruling elites nurtured exclusionary practices and concomitant feelings of political marginalization among subaltern sectarian groups, the Shi'ites before 2003 and the Sunnis in the post-2003 period, which hardened primordial sectarian identities."¹ Therefore it should be noted that sectarianism in Iraq is not a new phenomenon, stemming from the 2003 invasion and government restructure, rather sectarianism has impacted religious groups in Iraq for decades and disproportionately affects those who are not in control of the government at the time. The following section will outline a background to which the rhetoric surrounding Iran's sectarian vision in Iraqi affairs has been established in a post-2003 invasion setting, ultimately leading to the current situation today where protests around Iraq are threatening the relationship which Iran has fostered since 2003.

The Rise of a Sectarian Rhetoric in Iraqi Affairs

Since the fall of Saddam Hussein on the 20th of March 2003, the United States government failed to implement what they believed to be a stronger government that reflected the wishes of the people.² The system, referred to as *muhāsasa ta'ifia* (consociationalism system), was essentially a sectarian apportionment system where the government was split up to represent the three major religious

¹ Khalil Osman, *Sectarianism in Iraq: The Making of State and Nation Since 1920* (London: Routledge, 2014), <https://ebookcentral.proquest.com/lib/kentuk/detail.action?docID=1813152#>.

² Paul Waldman, "Sixteen Years Ago We Invaded Iraq. And What Did We Learn?," *The Washington Post*, March 20, 2019, <https://www.washingtonpost.com/opinions/2019/03/20/sixteen-years-ago-we-invaded-iraq-what-did-we-learn/>.

groups in the country.³ The new system mandated that Iraq would have a Shi'ite Arab Prime Minister, a Kurdish President and a Sunni Arab Speaker of Parliament. In this sense:

“The apparent ‘sectarianization’ of society that has taken place is, in other words, not an inevitable outcome of the past, but rather was actively produced and institutionalized by the occupying Coalition and its comprador regime. As Mac Weiss puts it ‘states, societies, institutions and communities become sectarian in unique ways, by diverse means through processes that must be historically contextualized.’”⁴

This fostered the idea that Iraqis did not have a unifying national identity, and by succumbing to international brokered regime change, the Iraqis were coerced to believe that their national identity was rather ethnic or sectarian in nature.⁵

While the United States failed to adequately address the weakness of Iraq, in a post-invasion setting, Iran saw an opportunity to fill the void that the United States had left, and thus began to slowly infiltrate the Iraqi military, security, intelligence and government communities following the de-Ba'athification process.⁶ When the United States attempted to establish this governmental system, they believed they were working to build a stronger and more representative government in Iraq, by supporting the major religious sects to ensure representation of each group. However, this system ultimately worked against what the US sought to create, as the US “believed they were working with social divisions which already existed, not actively creating and then institutionalizing them.”⁷ The following section will discuss how Iran strategically infiltrated the Iraqi Shi'a elites to ensure greater regional power and influence over the Iraqi political system, beginning in 2003.

The fall of Saddam Hussein in Iraq, in 2003 was the quintessential opportunity for Iran to take advantage of the weak Iraqi system and increase their influence within the country. However, the era following the post-transitional period also saw large scale sectarian conflicts throughout Iraq.

Between 2005 and 2007, conflicts and attacks identified as sectarian in nature were seen in isolated events throughout the country. In February 2006, one of the holiest Shi'ite shrines, the Golden Mosque in Samarra, was destroyed in an attack that was allegedly carried out by al-Qaeda.⁸ Notions of sectarian divisions, specifically within the rivalry of Shi'a versus Sunnis, was spread throughout Iraq by media, government officials and religious clerics. The months following the bombing resulted in violence and the death of thousands of civilians, some even resorted to identifying this period in Iraq

³ Toby Dodge, “Tracing the Rise of Sectarianism in Iraq after 2003 | Middle East Centre,” London School of Economics and Political Science, June 29, 2018, <https://blogs.lse.ac.uk/mec/2018/09/13/tracing-the-rise-of-sectarianism-in-iraq-after-2003/>.

⁴ Tim Jacoby and Nassima Neggaz, “Sectarianism in Iraq: The Role of the Coalition Provisional Authority,” *Critical Studies on Terrorism* 11, no. 3 (May 28, 2018): 478–500.

⁵ Mina Al-Oraibi, “The Fight for a New Iraq - The New York Times,” New York Times, November 5, 2019, <https://www.nytimes.com/2019/11/05/opinion/iraq-protests.html>.

⁶ “De-Ba'athification is a term used to describe a series of legal and administrative measures introduced in Iraq shortly after the April 2003 fall of the Ba'athist regime. The overriding goal of de-Ba'athification was to prevent the Ba'ath Party from returning to power in Iraq.” Miranda Sissons and Abdulrazzaq Al-Saiedi, “Lessons of De-Ba'athification in Iraq,” *International Center for Transitional Justice*, March 2013, 56.

⁷ Dodge, “Tracing the Rise of Sectarianism in Iraq after 2003 | Middle East Centre.”

⁸ Robert F. Worth, “Blast Destroys Shrine in Iraq, Setting Off Sectarian Fury,” *The New York Times*, February 22, 2006, sec. Middle East, <https://www.nytimes.com/2006/02/22/international/middleeast/blast-destroys-shrine-in-iraq-setting-off-sectarian.html>.

as a civil war between Shi'a and Sunni groups. Iran was able to take advantage of these divisions in order to infiltrate the rhetoric of high-ranking Shi'a authorities in Iraq. Again, the overestimation of sectarian divisions in the Iraqi violence oversimplifies the complex nature of this post-transition period.

The 2011 withdrawal of US troops from Iraq, pushed many Iraqis further into the hands of the Iranians and in 2014, Iranian influence within Iraq increased even further through new partnerships between the ministry of information and security and the Quds Forces of the Revolutionary Guard (IRGC), which acted as the two main vehicles for influence in Iraq.⁹ The IRGC funded, trained and armed al-Hashd al-Shaabi, or the Popular Mobilization Units (PMU) or al-Hashd al-Shaabi, along with other militia groups as they fought against the Islamic State (formerly ISIS).¹⁰ The PMU was established during the same time that the Iraqi army was collapsing and the country was in a state of chaos with the rise of IS, after the Grand Ayatollah Ali al-Sistani urged Iraqis to join the security forces in the fight against the terrorist group.¹¹ Oversimplifications of the diverse and complicated role that the PMU has in Iraq has left many within the international community to view the group as divisive, which reflects the deep-rooted sectarian struggles within Iraq. Even into today, some view the underlying mission of the PMU to be sectarian in nature, as the role that Iran and Iranian-backed militias have in Iraq extends far beyond the security system that Iran has established over the past 15 years.

Why is Iraq Significant to Iran?

Iran has multiple vested interests in Iraq, only a few of which are sectarian in nature. Iran has been making significant progress in recent years to strengthen economic ties and to improve trade with Iraq. Iran has been working to gain influence throughout the region for several decades now. The US invasion of Iraq, and its subsequent failure to establish a stable transitional government led to nearly two decades of instability and chaos throughout the country. The sectarian divisions that developed as an unfortunate consequence of the US invasion caused further rifts between the Sunni and the Shi'a that ultimately resulted in a seemingly more vulnerable Shi'a population to look towards Iran for protection.¹²

Since the US have been working to decrease their role in the region, many have turned to Iran for guidance. Furthermore, the role that Iran has in Iraqi governmental affairs is significantly stronger than the role of the US, which has led to criticism by Iraqi people for the direct involvement of Iranian Shi'ite officials in Iraqi affairs. There are multiple reasons and skepticisms behind why Iran holds such a significance to Iraq, and therefore does not want to invite a situation where Iraq-Iran tensions are heightened. However, with the recent events throughout the Middle East, including the widespread

⁹ Martin Chulov, "Leaked Cables Reveal Scale of Iran's Influence in Iraq," The Guardian, November 18, 2019, <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2019/nov/18/leaked-cables-reveal-scale-of-irans-influence-in-iraq>.

¹⁰ The PMF constituted an extensive network of over 40 militias, with varying allegiances. Tom Allinson, "Al-Hashd al-Shaabi and Hezbollah: Iran's Allies in Iraq and Lebanon," DW.COM, November 1, 2019, <https://www.dw.com/en/al-hashd-al-shaabi-and-hezbollah-irans-allies-in-iraq-and-lebanon/a-51078399>.

¹¹ Fanar Haddad, "Understanding Iraq's Hashd al-Sha'bi," The Century Foundation, March 5, 2018, <https://tcf.org/content/report/understanding-iraqs-hashd-al-shabi/?agreed=1>.

¹² Risen et al.

protests throughout Iraq and more recently Lebanon, the pressure of anti-Iranian sentiments may be pushing Iran to maintain influence within these two countries.¹³

In the current protests, the Iranian backed PMU have been carrying out violence against protesters for weeks now and are widely suspected of deploying snipers and employing other harsh tactics to subdue the protesters throughout Iraq. The PMU militia is not part of the regular armed forces, although the Iraqi government has tried on multiple occasions to integrate them into the national military.¹⁴ Many members of the PMU support the current regime, and are opposed to the call for Prime Minister Abdel Mahdi to resign, which could demonstrate their allegiance to their Iranian backers, who also share the desire to keep Abdel Mahdi in power.

Current Situation

The current protests taking place throughout cities in Iraq have garnered international attention, as over 330 civilians have died and thousands more have been injured.¹⁵ The sentiments of the protesters reflect similar demands from demonstrations in past years, such as the lack of government jobs, access to services, consistent electricity and internet, along with high youth unemployment. One of the most significant pleas the protesters are making is a call to end international intervention in Iraqi affairs. The protests began after a military official, Lieutenant General Abdulwahab al-Saadi, a leader in the Counterterrorism Service who was instrumental in defeating the Islamic State, was demoted to a desk position, likely due to his close ties with the US and Saudi Arabia.¹⁶ It has been shown that Saadi was likely demoted by Iraqi officials, under the direction or advise of Iranian military personnel.¹⁷

The ongoing protests are mostly taking place in Shi'a majority provinces around the country, but the rhetoric that is being used does not reflect sectarian motivations or goals, rather "these protests have challenged the sectarian formula of governance, which has reduced Iraqis to their ethnic and religious identities and empowered factions that embedded these identities in their politics."¹⁸ Notably, Iraqis are protesting because of their belief that "state sponsored sectarianism has failed to offer protection and progress to the citizens."¹⁹ The divisions that have been in place since 2003 may have attributed to many of the rifts that took place in Iraq following the regime change, however the ultimate consequence of the political system that was put into place put ethnic identity over that of national identity. Today, protesters are not demonstrating against the government because they identify as Shia, Sunni or Kurdish. In fact, many "young Iraqi protesters have been carrying the Iraqi flag and rejecting all other political and sectarian symbols."²⁰ The protesters have retaken pride in their national identity and are opposing the current government system for their willingness to be

¹³ Marc Daou, "Iran 'Anxious' as Popular Movements Threaten Its Influence in Iraq and Lebanon," France 24, November 1, 2019, <https://www.france24.com/en/20191101-iran-anxious-as-popular-movements-threaten-its-influence-in-iraq-and-lebanon>.

¹⁴ Allinson, "Al-Hashd al-Shaabi and Hezbollah: Iran's Allies in Iraq and Lebanon."

¹⁵ Arwa Ibrahim, "Death Toll Rises as Anti-Government Protests Grip Iraq," Al Jazeera, November 23, 2019, <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2019/11/protest-death-toll-rises-anti-gov-protests-grip-iraq-191124101735723.html>.

¹⁶ Jen Kirby, "Iraq's Protests, Explained - Vox," November 5, 2019, <https://www.vox.com/2019/11/5/20947668/iraqs-protests-baghdad-mahdi-tehran-explained>.

¹⁷ Kirby.

¹⁸ Harith Hasan, "Iraq Protests: A New Social Movement Is Challenging Sectarian Power," Middle East Eye, November 4, 2019, <https://www.middleeasteye.net/opinion/iraq-protests-waning-sectarianism>.

¹⁹ Al-Oraibi, "The Fight for a New Iraq - The New York Times."

²⁰ Al-Oraibi.

influenced by international powers, not just those who share the same ethnic identity as the government.

Throughout the protests, Iraqis have sought guidance from religious leaders and their sermons, during a time where they feel vulnerable and voiceless in the hands of the government. One of the most powerful religious figures in Iraq, Grand Ayatollah Ali-al-Sistani, has called upon the government to meet the demands of protesters and enact electoral reform.²¹ Sistani has remained one of the top clerics in Iraq since Hussein was in power and has gone beyond the expectations of his position to voice his opinion on politics, democracy and the need for Iraqis to vote throughout his time as the top Shi'ite official.²² Sistani has been seen as a positive voice in representing the concerns of the protesters, while not only addressing the Shiites of Iraq. The top cleric has been vocal about the international involvement in Iraq, including a US and Iranian presence, noting that Iraq "aspires to have good and balanced relations with all of its neighbors, based on mutual interests and without intervention in international affairs."²³ Sistani has successfully bolstered a strong relationship between Iran and Iraq, noting how "religious, cultural and economic bonds which tie Iran and Iraq will not be undermined."²⁴ The importance that religious figures such as Sistani have transcends politics and religion in both Iraq and Iran, yet it also demonstrates how political challenges in Iraq rely on those who are not involved directly in the government. In this sense, sectarianism in Iraq still factors into the decisions that are made by Iraqi elites, yet the demands of the protestors do not reflect the same sentiments.

On the 31st of October 2019, Prime Minister Adel Abdul Mahdi agreed to resign amid growing violence in the protests throughout the month of October. However, his promise to resign was conditional to the approval of an adequate replacement by parliament.²⁵ Following this announcement, both the government officials and the protesters have failed to come up with a suitable candidate, however it has recently been shown through a series of leaked Iranian intelligence documents, that Iran never intended to have Prime Minister Mahdi step down from power.²⁶ Subsequent to this announcement, Qassem Soleimani, the head of the IRGC Quds Force responsible for Syria, Iraq and Lebanon, visited Baghdad to ensure that Mahdi stayed in power.²⁷ The plan to keep Mahdi in power for the next year ensures that Iran will have time to recalculate how to retain its influence in the country.²⁸ The days

²¹ "Iraq's Top Cleric Urges Government to Meet Protesters' Demands," DW.COM, November 8, 2019, <https://www.dw.com/en/iraqs-top-cleric-urges-government-to-meet-protesters-demands/a-51172507>; Ahmed Aboulenein, "Iraqi Forces Kill Four Protesters, Cleric Warns of Crisis - Reuters," Reuters, November 22, 2019, <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-iraq-protests/iraqi-forces-kill-four-protesters-cleric-warns-of-crisis-idUSKBN1XW0NM>.

²² Qassim Abdul-Zahra, "Top Iraqi Cleric Rejects Trump's Plan for US Troops in Iraq," AP NEWS, February 6, 2019, <https://apnews.com/17583120829f458ea40f84910c4cef27>.

²³ Abdul-Zahra; "Iraq: Al-Sistani Responds to Khamenei's Statements," MEMO: Middle East Monitor, November 2, 2019, <https://www.middleeastmonitor.com/20191102-iraq-al-sistani-responds-to-khameneis-statements/>.

²⁴ Mustafa Salim and Tamer El-Ghobashy, "In Iraq, Iran's President Rouhani Meets Grand Ayatollah Sistani amid U.S. Sanctions Pressure on Tehran," The Washington Post, March 13, 2019, https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/by-granting-rare-audience-iraqs-grand-ayatollah-sends-message-to-washington-and-tehran/2019/03/13/9a624870-4506-11e9-94ab-d2dda3c0df52_story.html.

²⁵ "Iraq Protests: PM Adel Abdul Mahdi 'Will Resign If Replacement Is Found,'" BBC World News, October 31, 2019, <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-middle-east-50248954>.

²⁶ Chulov, "Leaked Cables Reveal Scale of Iran's Influence in Iraq."

²⁷ Samia Nakhoul and Nick Tattersall, "Exclusive: Iran Intervenes to Prevent Ousting of Iraqi Prime Minister," Reuters, October 31, 2019, <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-iraq-protests-iran-exclusive/exclusive-iran-intervenes-to-prevent-ousting-of-iraqi-prime-minister-sources-idUSKBN1XA2DI>.

²⁸ Raya Jalabi and Ahmed Rasheed, "Iraq's Elite Rallies around Iran-Backed Plan to Hang on to Power," Reuters, November 12, 2019, <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-iraq-protests-elite-analysis-idUSKBN1XM17D>.

succeeding Soleimani's visit to Iraq made clear that Iran has a large stake in the current government, and risks losing their regional influence if regime-change resulted from the protests. The intelligence breach has brought a new wave of anger to the protestors. Iraqis who were protesting Iran's role in Iraq expressed that "they do not want this government and they do not want the political parties to interfere."²⁹ Sentiments similar to this have been shared by protestors, expressing the distaste for Iranian involvement in Iraqi affairs, conveyed through a more nationalistic and less sectarian tone.

Conclusion

The protests themselves are not seeded in sectarian strife, but the Iraqi people have allowed religious divisions to dictate their government and daily activities for decades. Beyond the direct demands of the protests, Iraqis are calling for an end to foreign intervention, and express a strong desire to take control of their own decisions and their own government. Describing Iran's Iraq policy simply as sectarian, also with regards to the protests, completely ignores the complexity of both Iraqi and Iranian politics. While sectarianism plays a role in Iranian involvement in Iraqi affairs, there are other factors at play that must be recognized when discussing the relationship between Iraq and Iran.

Ultimately, overlapping and shifting loyalties exist across any society, but particularly in complexly divided societies that have had decades of influence by international actors such as the US and Iran. Sectarianism in Iraq should not curtail the government's ability to provide for its people and to enact policy changes that benefit individuals beyond their religious affiliation. The existing sectarian governmental system in Iraq has fueled Iran's ability to gain influence throughout country and enable its elites. Iran's fear of losing influence and further measures to ensure strong Shi'ite influence in Iraq and throughout the Middle East may continue as the protests in Iraq and Lebanon endure.

²⁹ *Iraqi Anti-Government Demonstrators React to Iran Riots*, 2019, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=e0-Nr41uCfl>.

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