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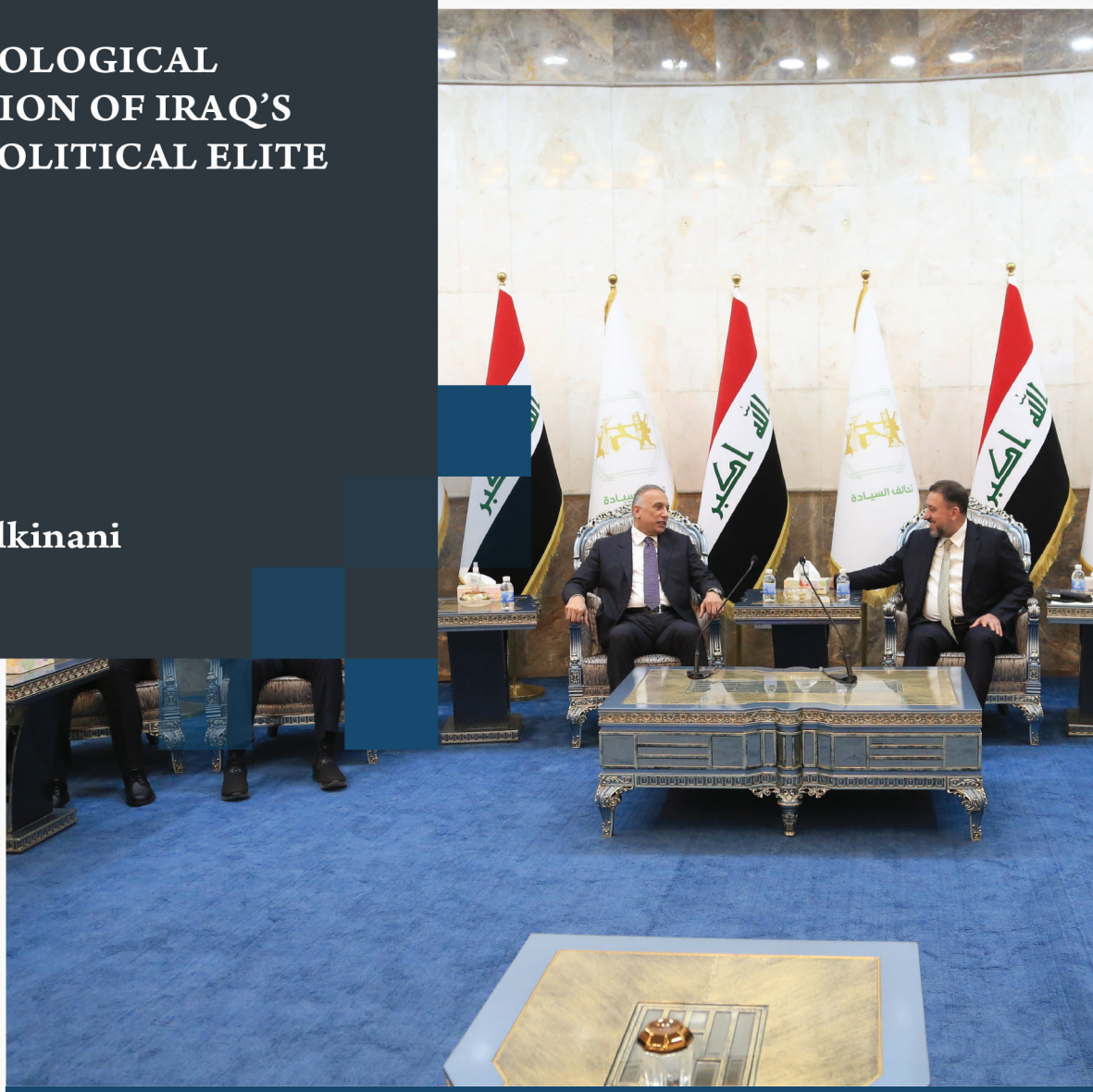
Zeidon Alkinani



Report

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Center for Iranian Studies in Ankara

The Ideological Evolution of Iraq's Sunni Political Elite

Irak'taki Sünni Siyasal Elitlerin İdeolojik Dönüşümü

چرخش ایدئولوژیک نخبگان سیاسی اهل سنت عراق

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Summary

- The political and institutional utilization of identities in Iraq following the US-led invasion and occupation (2003) produced a major scholarly emphasis on ethno-sectarianism and its implication for the country's political and economic stability.
- In order to fully understand modern Iraqi politics and society, we must also try to view it beyond the sect-centric approach towards it.
- In this regard, this study will provide an insight into the transitionary period of post-2003 Iraq's Sunni political elite from defensive Sunni Islamism to the pragmatist and opportunist approach.
- It is also an attempt to benefit researchers and interested readers in the study of Iraq about the complex political and ideological diversity within each confession, beyond the classical ethno-sectarianism focus.

Keywords: Iraq, Sunni Political Elits, US Invasion, Ethno-Sectarianism

Özet

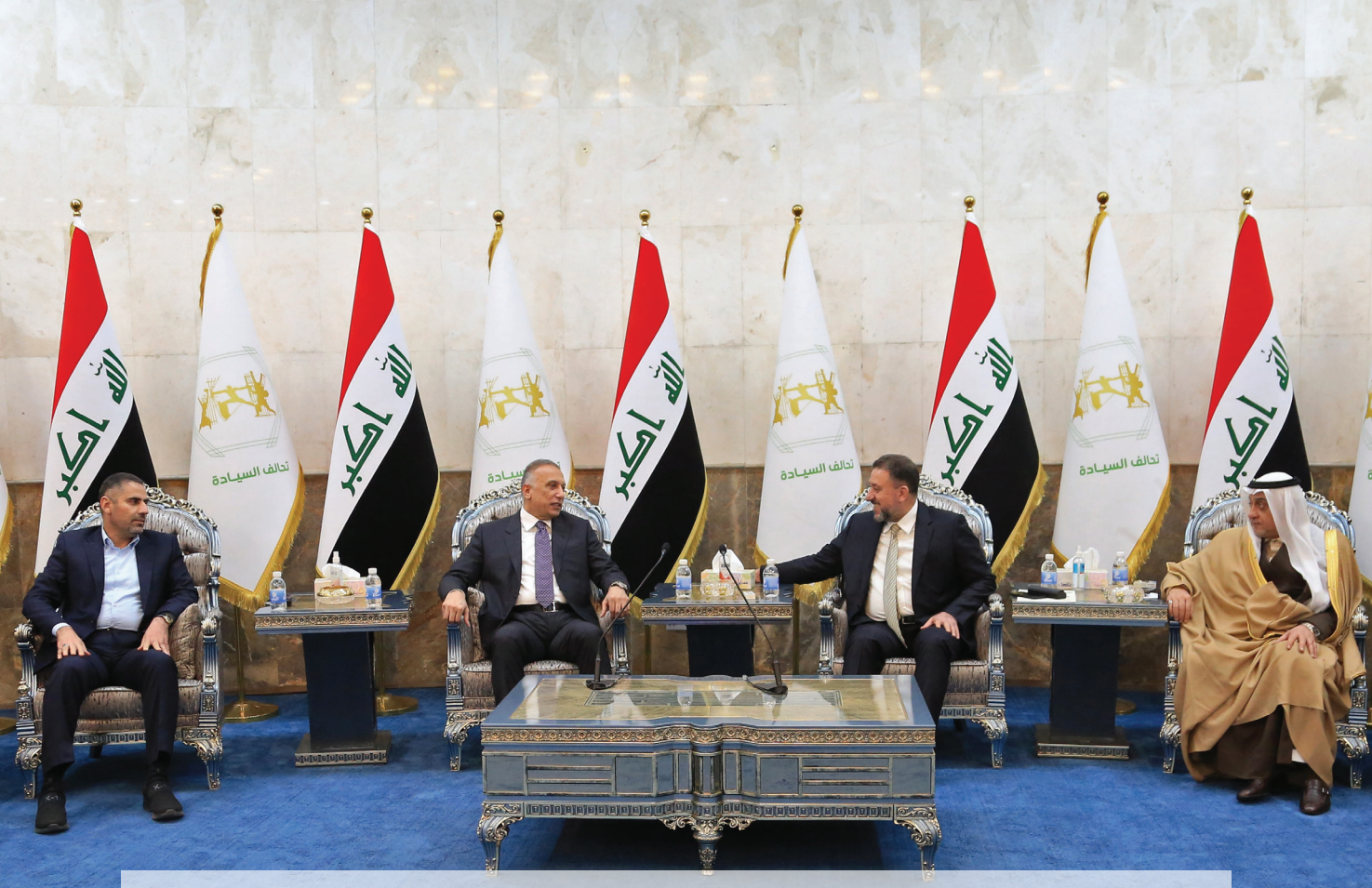
- ABD öncülüğündeki işgalin (2003) sonrasında Irak'ta kimliklerden siyasal ve kurumsal olarak faydalanılması, akademik vurgunun, etno-mezhepçilik ve etno-mezhepçiliğin ülkenin siyasi ve ekonomik istikrarı üzerindeki etkisi üzerine yoğunlaşmasına yol açmıştır.
- Modern Irak siyasetini ve toplumunu tam olarak anlayabilmek için ona mezhep merkezli yaklaşımın ötesinde bakmaya çalışmamız gerekmektedir.
- Bu bağlamda, bu çalışma 2003 sonrası Irak'ının siyasal elitlerinin savunmacı (defansif) Sünni İslamcılık'tan, pragmatist ve faydacı yaklaşımlara geçiş sürecine yönelik bir bakış sunacaktır.
- Bu çalışma ayrıca klasik etno-mezhepçi odağın ötesine geçerek, Irak çalışmaları ile ilgilenen araştırmacılar ve okurlar için Irak'ın karmaşık siyasal ve ideolojik çeşitliliği konusunda faydalı olmayı amaçlamaktadır.

Anahtar Kelimeler: Irak, Sünni Siyasal Elitler, ABD İşgali, Etno-Mezhepçilik

خلاصه

- بهره برداری سیاسی و نهادی از هویتهای قومی و مذهبی در عراق پس از اشغال این کشور توسط ایالات متحده در سال ۲۰۰۳ تاثیرات عمیقی بر فرقه گرایی قومی و پیامدهای آن برای ثبات سیاسی و اقتصادی کشور گذاشته است.
- برای درک سیاست و جامعه مدرن عراق، بایستی به آن فراتر از رویکرد فرقه محور نگریست. .
- در این مطالعه، انتقال نخبگان سیاسی اهل سنت عراق در دوره پس از اشغال این کشور از اسلامگرایی سنی دفاعی به رویکرد پراگماتیستی و فرصت طلبانه مورد بررسی قرار می گیرد.
- این تحقیق به پژوهشگران و علاقه مندان به عراق شناسی کمک می کند تا درک روشنتری از تنوع پیچیده سیاسی و ایدئولوژیک در داخل یک فرقه، فراتر از تمرکز بر فرقه گرایی قومی مطرح در گذشته داشته باشند.

کلیدواژه ها: عراق، نخبگان سیاسی اهل سنت، اشغال عراق، فرقه گرایی قومی



INTRODUCTION

Today's Iraq is faced with its most diverse and complex political environment. Identity politics dominate every aspect of life; society, economy, religion, and international relations. We are even witnessing different identities overlapping with one another, in contradiction with their own political ideologies or respective agendas. For instance, in the early stages of the US-led invasion and occupation of Iraq in 2003, there was a generalized sentiment that Sunni Arab Iraqis disfavored the change due to their dominance and privileges during the former Ba'athist rule, in contrast to their Shi'a countrymen. The latter found this as an opportunity to finally take the lead in a post-Ba'athist Era. Today, due to evolving political dynamics, we are witnessing a Shi'a-led anti-USA camp calling for sovereignty to its majority and hegemonic power against a Sunni-led camp promoting against the withdrawal of the US troops. This is one example that makes one wonder whether ideologies drive politics or vice versa? Or is it an interdependence that develops according to the present needs? The alliances established between secular and traditional ideologies were either defined as opportunistic conveniences or common foundational traits.

In the case of political Islamism and its attributes, and Pan-Arabism, and particularly the Iraqi Ba'ath, it was an outcome of both. Fundamentally secular and nationalist, the Iraqi Ba'ath also believed in its right to expand across the Arab world–a region that was also viewed as the *ummah* by their Islamist counterparts. Iraq's Ba'ath and Islamist parties both produced separate intra-rivalries, an additional element to the sophisticated relationship's complexity. Alongside a discussion of the diverse versions of each doctrine, this chapter will also aim to analyze how the political manipulation of various historical circumstances of both creeds shaped their common and conflicting traits. The Iraqi Ba'ath ruled Iraq between 1968-2003. It is essential to examine its relationship with an ideological force such as political Islamism, as the latter plays a vital role in the Iraqi current and the region beyond. It also allows us to understand the connection between the past and the present and its implications for the latter.

1. The Origins of Ba'athist-Islamist Ideological Parallelism

In Damascus, Syria, the Arab Socialist Ba'ath (Resurrection) Party was founded in 1947 on the basis of Arab nationalism, unity, and freedom from foreign rule. The birth of the Pan-Arab nationalism ideology emerged in opposition to Ottoman rule. The early 20th century witnessed Arab nationalist movements' alliance with the British and French mandates, who also benefited from an Ottoman defeat in the region. The post-WWI Era witnessed attempts at defining the Arab identity in its anthropological and geographic senses. Who is an Arab? And what constitutes the Arab world? were the two questions at the heart of the process of political determination. For a reasonable period, it was defined by a language until the Arab League (founded 1945) started incorporating countries from the Arabian Peninsula to the far west of North Africa as Morocco joined in 1958. This nationalist discourse inspired young Syrian scholars such as Michel Aflaq and Salah al-Din al-Bitar, the Ba'ath party's founding fathers. Egypt's Gamal Abdel Nasser's foundation of the United Arab Republic (UAR), an Egyptian-dominated unity with Syria as a member, presented significant rifts within the Pan-Arab fronts. Syria's Ba'ath rushed into a self-dissolvent to pave the way for Egypt's National Union to be the UAR's single governing party. The short-lived alliance presented the challenges faced by Arab unity with the presence of authoritarian leaders. The Iraqi Ba'ath party temporarily joined Abdulkarim Qasim's government yet resisted his involvement with the communists, which led to a successful coup and overthrow of his regime in 1963. Under the intellectual supervision of exiled Aflaq in Baghdad, the Iraqi Ba'ath managed to develop itself to meet the generational aspirations by 1968-1979, with Ahmed Hassan al-Bakr as president and Saddam Hussein as his deputy. Beyond Ba'athism, self-proclaimed Pan-Arab leaders such as Nasser, Syria's Hafez al-Assad, and Hussein always seemed to fail the sustainable goals of Arab unity through attempts of creating for themselves enclaves of totalitarian rule (Devlin, 1991, pp. 1396-1407).

Parallel to the variety of developments faced by Pan-Arabism in general and Ba'athism in particular, there is also a significant flaw in the western scholarly debate regarding the diverse players and interpretations of Islamism. The Islamist ideology endorses a prominent role of Islamic values in public life. That means it is a creation of modern politics interlocked with Islam, not the latter's orthodox implementation. Conversely, to what degree should those Islamic laws be pushed for is where the divisions emerge within the Islamist front. Furthermore, there are mainstream

Islamist factions, mainly consisting of the Muslim Brotherhood (MB) and similar groups. That is an even more pragmatic version of Islamism as it is a political settlement between pre-modern Islamic laws with the modern nation-state (Hamid and Dar, 2016). The similarities are significantly evident when looking at the scholarly overlap of the writings of Ba'athism's ideological founder, Michel Aflaq and one of the Egyptian Muslim Brotherhood's leading figures, Sayyid Qutb. American political writer Paul Berman (2012) describes the correlation as "The notion of returning to the ancient Islamic past in order to construct a postcolonial future, the emphasis on psychological and cultural problems deriving from the penetration of Western ideas, the occasional fascist overtones, and the special role granted to the Arab people (a feature not just of Ba'athism but of the Muslim Brotherhood's version of Islamism), together with the veneration of Islam and its prophet—this is a lot to share."

The alliances growing out of the ideological similarities between the Ba'athist and political Islamist schools of thought do not equal a complete absence of hostility between the two. The decades-long partnerships of Syria's Ba'ath party with Islamist-oriented players such as Hamas, Islamic Jihad, the Muslim Brotherhood of Jordan, Hezbollah, and the Islamic Republic of Iran, did not prevent its significant friction with the Syrian Muslim Brotherhood. On the other hand, Iraq's Ba'ath parties promoted its war against Iran as an Arab defense against Persian expansionism. To be more precise, it included the notion of a Sunni-majority Arab world conducting a war against the newly established Shi'a theocracy. Dominating the leading positions of Syria's and Iraq's Ba'ath parties by Hafez Al-Assad's inner circles of Alawite relatives and Saddam Hussein's direct Sunni Arab cousins from Tikrit was the beginning of anthropological preferences overshadowing the Pan-Arab and nationalist principles. Berman (2012) concludes with the Ba'athist-Islamist ideological similarities that are evident until our moment by describing them as "questions about alienation—about the conflict between the glorious past and the shameful present; about the divide between soul and intellect, and between private and public codes of behavior; about the need to control the temptations; about the need, finally, to repel Western civilization's invasion of the Arab mind" (Berman, 2012).

2. The Sectarianization of the Iran-Iraq War

In Iraq, the Sunni Arab dominance was not brought about by the Ba'ath. Instead, it was a social class construct adopted from the Iraqi Hashemite monarchy, the British Mandate rule, and the Ottoman rule. Hence, it was an established socio-political division, which individuals like Hussein and al-Bakr benefited from it. This class division was gradually leaning towards sect-centric approaches as policies were made with central religious and ethnical orientation into consideration, for instance, the use of the religious and nationalist doctrine in the Iran-Iraq war. On September 22, 1980, Hussein commanded the Iraqi armed forces to wage a full-scale invasion of the newly established Islamic Republic of Iran (Mackey, 1996, p. 318), which had overthrown the secular and pro-Western Pahlavi dynasty in 1979. The Islamic Republic's revolutionary and theocratic visions shook the Sunni-majority Arab states, particularly those with prominent Shi'a communities.

During the 8-year-long war, Hussein began establishing linkages between Arab nationalism and Sunni identity. Satgin Hamrah, an expert and researcher on the Iran-Iraq War, describes it as "He [Saddam Hussein] utilized sectarianism as a weapon of war by effectively linking Sunnism to religious nationalism.

By strategically politicizing ancient Sunni-versus-Shi'a sectarianism, he created a sense of national unity to support the nation's Sunni/Arab identity against the Shi'a/Persians. Additionally, Iraq was defining the war in terms of the battles of early Arabs fought in the seventh century against the Persians. This played on the fears of Sunni Arab nations and generated support. Moreover, it proved to be an effective tool because Arab states feared the Iranian regime's provocative rhetoric, expansionist policies, and region activities. The result was the formation of a strong coalition to defeat Iran, its strategy of revolution, and Shi'a revivalism" (2016). Hussein even targeted Iraqi families with allegedly any Persian ancestry, most notably the Feily Kurdish families who had their citizenships revoked and deported to Iran before and after the Iran-Iraq War. Some were even imprisoned, put into camps, or tortured to death (ABC News, 2008).

The sectarianization of the War was not exclusive to Iraq. The Iranian regime heavily relied on religious justifications to promote the war as well. Through Islamic [Shi'a] doctrine, symbolism, discourse, and new *fiqh* (opinion of jurists), juristic interpretations emerged to persuade public opinion about the Republic's Islamic way of conflict (Rezamand, 2010, p. 83). One of the earliest groundbreaking transitions from secularism to Islamism conducted by the Iraqi Ba'ath was when Hussein decided to secretly collaborate with the MB movements in Sudan and Egypt through their convenient ally, the Syrian MB. The decision was announced in a private and urgent meeting during the summer of 1986 amongst the Pan-Arab Leadership (*al-qiyadah al-qawmiyyah*), the party's most prominent ideological institution. The partnership between the secularist Iraqi Ba'ath and the Islamist Syrian MB resulted from sharing a common enemy–the Syrian Ba'ath and its leader, Hafez al-Assad, which dates back to 1982. The year 1986 was allegedly one of Iraq's worst years during the Iran-Iraq War, and Iran's former Supreme Leader, Ruhollah Khomeini's propaganda of portraying Hussein's regime as the atheistic and evil side of the conflict was allegedly effective to the extent that it pushed the latter to propose a more lenient policy towards Islamism, and more precisely, Sunni Islamism. Hussein also feared the Islamic Republic attracting the Muslim Brotherhood with its Islamist discourse (Baram, 2011, pp. 1-2).

Hussein's regime spread a rumor about Aflaq converting to Islam just prior to his death in 1989. This was viewed with significant irony as Aflaq was known for being too secular and also reflected Hussein's attempt to Islamize the Iraqi Ba'ath (Halliday, 2004). The utilization of religious and sectarian identities in the Iran-Iraq War wrecked the relevance of political ideologies, particularly–Ba'athism and Arab nationalism. Even Syria's former leader, Hafez al-Assad, stood alone in supporting the Iranian regime against Iraq. The legacy of sectarian politics continued to overshadow today's the Middle East through various yet different arenas: Lebanon, Yemen, Syria, Bahrain, and Iraq (Hamrah, 2020).

3. The Secular Finale of Iraq's Ba'ath

Islamist sentiment prominently rose in Iraq during the 1990s (Hashim, 2009, p. 29). In preparation for the Gulf War, Hussein added the words "*Allahu Akbar*" (God is the Greatest) to the Iraqi national flag. The US-led global sanctions imposed on Iraq following its defeat in Kuwait and the Desert Storm Operation in 1991 led to increasing unemployment, shortage of food and medicine, fear, and worse standards of living, which is believed to be a significant indicator that pushed people to rely on mosques for guidance and moments of peace. Hussein saw an opportunity to absorb the Iraqi people's anger and misery through the religious doctrine

(Ghattas, 2002). The Popular 1991 Uprisings or (al-intifada al-sha'abaniyah) was viewed as a rebellion of frustration from the Gulf War's defeat, with a significant Shi'a-centric focus, in addition to a Kurdish movement along with it. The regime lost control over 14 out of 18 provinces. The rebellion of Shi'a, Kurdish and Iraqi army sympathizers received no support from the United States despite the latter's calls to revolt against the former. Hussein's regime managed to crush both (Zenko, 2016). The rebellions of 1991 defined the hostile sectarian relations for the next decade (Haddad, 2011).

Hussein's romanticism with political Islamism was not official until June 1993, when he announced the start of the "Return to Faith Campaign" (*al-hamla al-imaniyah*) (Faith Campaign hereafter). Led by Hussein's second-in-command, Izzat Ibrahim al-Douri, the Faith Campaign created a more religious school curriculum in schools. It garnered more support from tribal and religious groups by providing them pilgrimage sponsorship, property, money, cars, and buildings for the mosques. Iraq's mosques multiplied as businessmen were encouraged to build them by being exempted from taxes. Hussein's hidden strategy through the Islamic movement was to promote Salafism to the prevention of any MB influence.

Ba'athist officers were sent to mosques to attend lectures and learn about Salafism in order to create a balance of Salafist ideology with Ba'athist monitoring. The results were beyond Hussein's expectations: the Islamist movement flipped the table on the Ba'athist rule, and intelligence officers became more attracted and influenced by religion than their Pan-Arab secularist ideology, which proved its breakdown following a bloody war with Iran, failed attempt at annexing Kuwait and the following defeat, and devastating economic and political sanctions. Hussein also seemed to miscalculate another risk: the anti-Ba'athist Salafists' opportunism mingled through this state-led Islamization following years of restricted activities. Unlike the Egyptian MB, Salafist movements never disassociated themselves from the use of violence. One of the costliest consequences out of this period was when several car bombings and assassinations occurred in the late 1990s. (Rayburn, 2014, pp. 101-103). US diplomat and former army officer Joel Rayburn claim "...Saddam [Hussein] and Izzat al-Douri had focused on forming Ba'athist-Salafi organizations to prepare for Islamist resistance in the eventuality that the regime should fall to either an internal uprising or an external attack from the United States or Iran. Members of these regime-sponsored militant groups could observe Baathist ideology and Salafi ideology at the same time, making cross-membership easy" (Rayburn, 2017, p. 103).

4. The US Invasion: Ba'athist-Islamist Integration and Disintegration

The year 2003 introduced the highest outbreak of national politics in the new Iraq, which was overshadowed by politics of sectional advocacy (Haddad, 2016, p. 13). Prior to the US invasion in 2003 and its utilization of ethnic and sectarian communal lines to form pluralist governance, the rising politicization of Shi'a Arab identity in Iraq and within the exiled opposition was escalated by the following features: "the suppression and demise of other forms of political mobilization, such as Arab nationalism and communism; the empowerment of political Shi'ism in post-1979 Iran; the Gulf War and particularly the uprisings that followed it in 1991; the social costs of the sanctions era and the resultant mass migration witnessed throughout the 1990s; and the increased interest and support that opposition movements were able to garner from foreign patrons", according to a leading scholar on Iraqi

identity and sectarian politics, Fanar Haddad (Haddad, 2016, p. 12). Iraq's Finance Minister and Deputy PM, Ali Allawi, and the Iraqi political scientist, Harith Hassan al-Qarawee, analyzes the Sunni dilemma as an outcome of confusion. For decades, the Ba'athist regime ruled Iraq under the banner of "Iraqi and Arab nationalism", and Hussein's strict interpretation of that meant no mercy for foreign occupation, Kurdish independence, and Shi'a Islamism–and those were the three elements that defined the new democratic Iraq (Allawi, 2008, p. 136).

On top of that, it is crucial to note here the distinction between ordinary Shi'a Iraqi citizens and the Shi'a Islamist political groups. Rejecting and opposing the US occupation and the politicization of identity lines was not solely for Sunni Iraqis. The anti-occupation camp in Iraq consisted of many anti-Islamist Shi'as, independent Kurds, and many other minorities rejecting the aggressive military intervention and violating Iraqi sovereignty. However, the Shi'a Islamist and Kurdish nationalist political movements' readiness paved the way for the US to establish a political system that fits their approaches (Haddad, 2016, p. 16). The Sunni reaction gradually developed into two main stances: to accept being a part of the new system with less power or to reject it–also, they both shared a fundamental common, and that is to start acting according to a Sunni-centric agenda. However, the "rejection" camp turned out to be even more complex and miscellaneous than the previous divisions, which will be explained in the next section (Bahney, Johnston, & Ryan, 2015).

Iraq witnessed a Sunni Arab-led insurgency in the early stages of the US-led invasion against the occupation. To some, it was a nationalist resistance against foreign occupation. To others, it was the preservationist revival of a group seeking to re-establish its lost position of power, the Sunni Arab community, in this case (O'Neill, 1990). Considering the Sunni Arab dominance of Iraqi politics for most of its modern history in the 20th century, Iraqi nationalism was ideologically equal to the Sunni-majority Arab nationalism. This translated into the idea of Sunni Arabs being the builders of modern Iraq (Luizard, 1995, pp. 19-21).

The political takeover by the Shi'a Arab community following the US-occupational elimination of the Ba'athist regime and which also meant the dismissal of the leading Sunni Arab government and military positions established a sense of victimhood amongst the Sunni Arab community–a sentiment which was carried by the Shi'a Arab community for decades. This marginalization is what mainly caused the recruitment of Sunni Arabs into the various insurgencies (Tavernise, 2006).

Professor Ahmed S. Hashim, a security and radicalization expert with extensive field research in Iraq, divides Iraq's Sunni insurgency into five main categories:

a. Ba'athists and their affiliates
b. Nationalist-Islamists and their affiliates
c. Iraqi Salafists
d. Tribes
e. Transnational Salafi Jihadists associated with al-Qaeda

The Ba'athists and their affiliates are a group that consists of members of the former Ba'athist regime, notably the Iraqi Army, the Special Republican Guards (SRG), the Republican Guard Corps (RGC), and the paramilitary squad known as Fedayeen Saddam. Al-Douri led a large portion of the post-2003 Ba'athist front. It is believed that his religious opinions are also what encouraged the Islamization of the Iraqi Ba'ath in the face of the US invasion. Therefore, given the nature of the Ba'athist loyalty in the Sunni-majority provinces such as Anbar, Ninewa, and Salahuddin in western and northern Iraq, the anti-occupation insurgency was labeled under a "Sunni Islamist theme", in

contrast to their Shi'a Islamist counterparts. An excellent example of an organization founded by former Ba'athist high-ranking officers with a strong Islamist influence over its approach is *Jaish Muhammad* (Muhammad's Army). It was established in the early stages of the US occupation with around 1,000 fighters and got defeated during two military confrontations in Falluja in 2004 (Hashim, 2009, pp. 25-27).

However, the Nationalist-Islamist group is similar to the previous one, with less emphasis on the Ba'athist ideological element. Thus, Iraqis that were resisting the occupation based on nationalist and Islamic contours. Nonetheless, there was still a prominent Ba'athist presence in this group, considering the common interests and shared values (Hashim, 2009, p. 27).

Moving to the Salafist Islamist fronts in Iraq, Salafism is defined by Hamid and Dar (2016) as "The idea that the most authentic and true Islam is found in the lived example of the first, righteous generations of Muslims, known as the *Salaf*, who were closest in both time and proximity to the Prophet Muhammad. Salafis—often described as "ultraconservatives"—believe not just in the "spirit" but in the "letter" of the law". Despite the more traditional approach, Salafists often do not participate in governances as Islamists do–if any, they avoid direct confrontations with state powers and focus on spreading their ideology through religious preaching and education, in some cases, through politics. This "Quietist Salafism" is understood as less political actions and a more political voice (Olidort, 2015, p.4). The Salafist emergence in the US occupation outbreak was an outcome of the former regime's utilization of Islamist discourse in its last years, the occupational promotion of democratic and Western ideas, and the religious and political Shi'a takeover. The most powerful Salafist groups were Ansar al-Sunna, the 1920 Revolution Brigades, Jaish al-Rashidin, and the Islamic Army in Iraq (IAI) (Hashim, 2009, pp. 29-31).

In reference to the Iraqi tribes, we are mainly referring to the Sunni Arab tribes, which Hussein's regime increasingly relied on during the 1990s sanctions when the state authorities lost control of most of the country.

The fifth group consists of the transnational Salafi jihadists affiliated with al-Qaeda. Before looking into this movement, one must get a glimpse of its ideological structures; Jihadism and Salafi-Jihadism. Jihad can be defined as the demand "To fulfill the command of God, sacrifice for his sake, spread the doctrine of monotheism, defend Islam and the homes of Muslims, and uphold the word of God, for this is jihad for the sake of God" (Hamad, 2020). Its concept can also mean to act for the betterment of one's self or the entire ummah according to God's laws (The Oxford Dictionary of Islam). Salafi-Jihadism is the military exploitation of the "Salafs". In other means, they militarily exploit Salafism to justify their actions against their enemies (Hamid & Dar, 2016). Moreover, the Salafist communities are divided on both the legitimacy and relevance of such measures in today's world and depending on the scenario of the broader concept.

Al-Qaeda in Mesopotamia (AQM), which is also referred to as (Al-Qaeda in Iraq), occurred in Iraq right after the occupation under the name of *Jama'at al-Tawhid wa'l-Jihad* (Monotheism and Jihad Group). Its late leader Abu Musab Al-Zarqawi pledged allegiance to Al-Qaeda's leader, Osama Bin Laden, in October 2004 to change the group's name into AQM. The extremist group established the Mujahadeen Shura Council to align or spread its orders amongst other insurgent groups in Iraq. However, AQM's objectives to establish a pan-Islamic Caliphate went beyond the nationalist, moderate Islamist, Ba'athist, and other reasons to resist the foreign occupation. Hence, this clash of interests led to a major war

between the AQM and most of the other insurgent movements. The Sunni Iraqi nationalist and Islamist frustration with AQM derived from the group's vicious method of dealing with anyone that did not pledge allegiance or follow their path–this would include Sunni Arabs who would want to join the political process or work in the public sector. Attempts to unite the Sunni Iraqi and non-Iraqi insurgencies failed due to differences in ideologies and purposes. The fronts and sub-fronts were allegedly divided into the following groups: Jihad and Change Front, the Political Council for Iraqi Resistance, Jihad and Liberation Front, and the Islamic State of Iraq (The Jamestown Foundation, 2008, pp. 5-10). Former Ba'athists were involved in all fronts, although mainly more aligned with the Nationalist-Islamist groups.

One would assume that the Sunni Arab-majority insurgency against the US occupation lacked other Shi'a Arab, Kurdish, and other communities in it, given the Ba'athist rule's nature. Hashim (2009) describes the various Kurdish and Turkmen roles in the insurgency as either through Islamist stances or through their longstanding Ba'athist philanthropy, particularly those who lived in Arab majority areas. Many Shi'a Arabs fought with the insurgency against the occupational forces prior to the increasingly Sunni Islamist and anti-Shi'a sentiment. This was an expected result as almost two-thirds of the Ba'ath Party's middle-ranking positions were Shi'a Arabs (Hashim, 2009, pp. 43-57).

AQM and other Salafist and Jihadist groups found an opportunity in the political vacuum that was left by the toppled Ba'athist regime. In contrast to the Shi'a Arab and Kurdish political parties, Sunni Arabs lacked a legitimate political entity to represent them in the transitionary period during the early stages of the US-led invasion. This was since transitional Salafi-Jihadist groups such as AQM were publicly targeting any Sunni Arab individuals or groups trying to participate in the new government.

As Zarqawi's crimes against Sunni Arabs erupted and the differing methods and objectives became more apparent than ever before, 25 Sunni Arab tribes formed the al-Anbar Salvation Council or what was known as the "Anbar Awakening"–a collective tribal front to fight AQM in August 2006. There was also a growing presence of Sunni Arabs in the new political process as they engaged in provincial and national assembly elections in December 2005 and January 2006, after years of publicly boycotting it for "empowering Shi'a Arab and Kurdish parties at the cost of Sunni Arab marginalization".

5. DAESH Emergence and the Unresolved Past

Post-2003 Iraqi sectarian politics was almost quieting between 2008-2010 with growing optimism (Visser, 2009) until Nouri al-Maliki lost elections but maintained power. Al-Maliki's second term witnessed a significant resurgence of identity politics and an increasing militant role in politics. On top of that, the timing was inadequate due to the neighboring Syrian civil war (2011-present) and its heavy sectarian discourse. The politicization and corruption of the Iraqi armed forces under al-Maliki's second term also encouraged an expansionist self-proclaimed Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (DAESH) to take over Iraq's Mosul in June 2014. (POMEPS, 2014, p. 13). The rise of DAESH and its continuous annexation of other areas in northern and western Iraq shed light on the roots of this escalation and its relation to the Ba'athist interaction with the non-Iraqi Salafi-Jihadists, Salafi, and extremist groups back in 2003-2008. Former Ba'athist intelligence and army officers happened to be at the core of the radical organization that crushed through Syria into Iraq (Benraad, 2018).

The extremist group might have shown up from Syria, but it was allegedly managed and driven by Iraqis, particularly former Ba'athists. In fact, DAESH had some of the former regime's most qualified officers, which is why the fragile and corrupt intelligence of al-Maliki's government struggled at the first stage of the conflict. The Ba'athist presence within DAESH was evident through similar military tactics, which entailed smuggling networks developed during the 1990s through illicit oil trading: a popular strategy by both DAESH and the former regime.

Conceptual similar traits were reflected in how both DAESH and Hussein's regime believed in the state of fear. In addition to how both considered themselves as the legitimate system to expand transnationally. In contrast to Zarqawi's hesitance towards the Ba'athists in the early stages of the invasion due to their political secular ideological origins: DAESH leader Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi entirely depended on former Ba'athist officers. Sunni-Arab Iraqi fighters joining the Sunni insurgency against the US invasion and a sectarian government back in 2003, who later switched sides and fought the non-Iraqi extremist groups through the Awakening in collaboration with the US and Iraqi security forces–found themselves repeatedly trapped in a marginalization act by al-Maliki's government following the US 2011 withdrawal. It was a golden opportunity for DAESH to recruit the ones who got unemployed again. Looking closely at the most recent strategic alliance between the former Ba'athist officers and DAESH, one would notice that both are heavily gaining from this alliance, regardless of the differing intentions. For DAESH, the Ba'athists were the local force that provided them support and guidance. For the Ba'athists (if they had long-term plans to return to their former power), DAESH provided them with a violent workforce and weaponry to fasten their long-term dream (Sly, 2015).

In comparison to the local Sunni hostility towards the Iraqi political order at the time and now, İRAM is exclusively informed by Mustafa Saadoun, an Iraqi journalist and CEO of the Iraqi Observatory for Human Rights, "DAESH is no longer desirable in Sunni areas, and Sunni communities have realized that anti-regime activities are not in their interest and that they are keener to witness more prosperity in terms of services and security that is similar to the Kurdistan region". Commenting on the extremist group's exploitation of local grievances, Saadoun explains how, despite the lack of fertile environment for the organization to resume its activity in those areas, yet it still enjoys support from very few people and many who have their families missing or killed during the liberation operations are also target groups for DAESH to radicalize–in other words, the government must address these grievances and the hardships faced by families that have their areas and lives destroyed with no incomes. Saadoun explains to İRAM how DAESH indirectly benefits actors beyond its network of supporters, "DAESH is not over in Iraq for perhaps more than ten years now, why? Because the presence of DAESH benefits armed groups and political parties in Iraq. The presence of the organization also gives space for countries to intervene in Iraq and extend their influence more in it. Therefore, I think that the organization will not end in Iraq, but it is not as strong as in 2014. Nevertheless, it will still have operations and attacks on civilians and Iraqi forces. In sum, there are internal and external parties that benefit from the presence of DAESH."

6. Riding the Shi'a Paramilitary Wave

In response to the DAESH takeover of Mosul, Grand Ayatollah Ali al-Sistani issued a fatwa in June 2014 to declare jihad against the extremist

group. Volunteers from across the country participated, in addition to already-existing armed groups that were affiliated with Iran or traditional political parties, which eventually led the latter to dominate the new platform known as the Popular Mobilization Forces (PMF) or al-Hashd al-Sha'abi in Arabic (Rudolf, 2018, p. 12). Sistani's representatives had to further emphasize how this fatwa is a call for all Iraqis regardless of their background in the face of sectarian accusations against it–an indicator of how DAESH refueled sectarian tensions and the fragility of national unity from its discourse.

One of PMF's attempts to diversify its branding and counter any criticism of its 'Shi'a-dominated approach' was to extensively include and welcome Sunni fighters to join Shi'a paramilitary groups and even create fully Sunni armed groups within the PMF–particularly ones from the areas that are to be liberated, in an attempt to further localize the umbrella group in the eyes of the indigenous communities receiving them (Rudolf, 2020). However, this inclusivity does not undo the prioritization policies, demographic engineering, or any acts that affected the social fabric of many of the Sunni-majority provinces such as Diyala and Nineveh.

PMF reminded Sunni communities of the Awakening (also known as the Sahwa)–yet with a more permanent and established presence. This led to encourage many Sunni groups and individuals to take an opportunity to be a part of a growing wave rather than becoming its potential enemy. Sunni tribes that are known for being weaker than others in their areas found an opportunity to empower their tribal positions locally and nationally. Political powers and economic advances were also at the forefront of motivating Sunni tribes to join the umbrella organization following years of rising unemployment rates led by non-stop conflicts and destabilizations. The dilemma of believing that the PMF was purely a nationalist and cross-sectarian organization was limited by the desperation of local communities deriving out no other alternatives and the background of many of the militias and political groups leading it. A similar experience was witnessed during the militarization of the Yazidi society in Sinjar by many different factions within the PMF and other Kurdish groups (Alkinani, 2021). It was evident that praising or joining the PMF by many Sunni tribal leaders and officials paved the way for governmental recognition of their communities' leadership or even cities, as seen by the head of Fallujah's tribal council Sheikh Abdul Rahman al-Nimrawi, Sheikh Mohammed al-Hayes the Sunni Endowment Office's president, Abd al-Latif al-Humaym, and Iraq's controversial Sunni grand mufti Sheikh Abdul-Mahdi al-Sumaidaie (Rudolf, 2020).

Inna Rudolf, a research fellow at the International Centre for the Study of Radicalization and a specialized academic on Iraqi politics with a particular focus on the PMF, exclusively describes to İRAM the evolution of Iraqi Sunni political engagement with the current political order, "I would not necessarily attribute the pragmatism of the current Sunni political elite to the inclusion of Sunni and minority brigades under the hashd [PMF] umbrella. I would rather argue that the participation of Sunni fighters in the tribal hashd [Sunni tribal PMF] and even in some of the majority of the Shi'ite brigades is in itself a reflection of a pragmatic assessment of the political realities on the ground. Having a foot in the PMF has made many things possible by unlocking access to powerful networks." In comparison with Sunni engagement with the PMF and the Awakening, Rudolf further elaborates that the leading Sunni decision-makers at the time did not have the political will to institutionalize or integrate the Sahwa in the security sector, which naturally led to a lot of resentment and disappointed expectations.

However, the rising tensions between the US and Iran in Iraq, which eventually dragged the PMF's leadership into it. Soleimani was assassinated along with Abu Mahdi al-Muhandis, deputy chief of the organization and leader of hardline pro-Iran group Kataib Hizbullah. This case presented a less convincing factor for Sunnis to join the PMF–particularly when many of the organization's pro-Iran groups were reportedly involved in the political violence committed against the anti-government protests since October 2019. The latter event witnessed a major anti-PMF campaign deriving out of grassroot Shi'a advocates.

Overall, despite heavy Sunni local hostilities towards the PMF, a new layer of "opportunistic prism" was emerging out of the Sunni community in Iraq's post-2003 political order driven by socioeconomic, security, and representation factors (Rudolf, 2020).

7. Re-entering the System: Gains Over Beliefs

In 2017, the PMF, alongside the Kurdish Peshmerga and the Global anti-DAESH coalition, supported the Iraqi armed forces in defeating DAESH. As the post-DAESH period pulled the country back to reconciliation and a post-war environment, which were common following the early stages of the US invasion and the sectarian conflict 2006-2008, it was repeatedly evident that an alliance between Ba'athism and broader Sunni Islamist and Salafist ideologies will not translate into an accurate representation of ordinary Sunni Arab Iraqi citizens. The political class in Iraq, particularly the Shi'a factions around the 2018 post-election governmental formation negotiations, realized that the emerging Sunni figures out of the DAESH war did not present an efficient alternative for many of the exiled prominent Sunni politicians during the pre-DAESH sectarian tensions. Signs of reconciliation efforts were evident in the surprising return of former finance minister Rafi al-Issawi to face his trial on terrorism charges. Further media sources reported on the possible return of many other leading Sunni political exiles, and it was clear that Baghdad was conducting secretive talks to ensure their smooth return to the political process in an attempt to present a post-conflict transitionary period. Returning exiled Sunni figures who were convicted innocent of their terrorism charges were Mishaan al-Jaburi, Mohammed al-Daini, and Khamis al-Khanjar. The latter came as a major surprise as he was allegedly accused of financing DAESH and is still believed to be guilty by many civil society activists and groups (Saadoun, 2022).

The returning Sunni political exiles carried with them a new cross-sectarian tone and a surprising lenient attitude towards Iran's involvement in Iraq as "partners" and their Iraqi associated as "brothers". However, their pragmatist approach was too late to the scene as Mohamed al-Halbousi preceded them with this strategy. Al-Halbousi was elected as the Speaker of Iraq's parliament in September 2018–the highest Sunni share in the unofficial ethno-sectarian power-sharing agreement. The speaker's election was pushed by the support of the pro-Iran al-Fatah bloc–an unusual attempt in the appointment of the Sunni-dominated position. Al-Halbousi comes from a background of a tribe with little influence during the Ba'athist Era and even among the rise of extremist groups in Anbar. Al-Halbousi's career began in renovations and reconstruction projects with the US since the early stages of the invasion. His economic success and rise helped him enter politics, and eventually represented his city in parliament.

Al-Halbousi entered post-2003 Iraqi politics with a different strategy: accepting the

others' conditions if guarantees of patronage and power are offered. Al-Halbousi's alliance with Iran-aligned Shi'a groups and his connections during his time as a mayor of Anbar paved the way for him to gradually control the Sunni political framework, and this was evident during the removal of Anbar's mayor, Aissa al-Sayir, in August 2019. The old anti-post-2003 political orders Sunni elite with links to some of the anti-invasion insurgencies were being challenged by a new trend from within their confession. Al-Halbousi's advocates present it as a new era of cross-sectarianism and secularism. However, his distance from civil society actors in reality and closeness to the political elite indicate opportunistic motives behind this pragmatism. The replacement of Sayir by Al-Halbousi represented a new era in Iraq's centralized recognition of who shall politically lead the Sunni community. Sayir comes from a milieu of the Islamists that were finally recognized and supported by Hussein's regime in the 1990s. On the upside, he was a part of the 2003 anti-US Sunni insurgency. His entrance into politics came as a political settlement between the Iraqi government and Iraqi Islamic Party as the former seek for grassroot Sunni resistance against DAESH.

Muhanad Seloom, assistant professor of security studies at the Doha Institute and a researcher at the Arab Center for Research and Policy Studies, tells İRAM how al-Halbousi's pragmatic approach largely comes from his past association with the businessman who helped him climb the ladder of politics, namely, Jamal al-Karbouli, an Amman-based Iraqi businessman from Anbar with a sizeable wealth in and outside Iraq, "Karbouli is known for his tact and pragmatic approach in securing contracts regardless of the official's sectarian or ethnic affiliation. Al-Halbousi learnt quite a bit from his former financial supporter, who continued to support him until he became Speaker of the Iraqi Parliament. This friendship, with benefits, didn't last long. Al-Halbousi today stands on his own financial feet, which he amassed during his posts as governor of Anbar and speaker of parliament. He has new 'friends' today such as Khamis al-Khanjar, who helped him secure another term as speaker". Seloom further adds that "pro-Iran Shi'a factions do not mind dealing with Sunni figures in power as long as they can co-exist with the PMF and Iran-aligned 'resistance' militias."

The youngest Iraqi speaker of parliament and the first to be re-elected in January 2022, was allegedly able to penetrate state institutions through his extensive network of relations with the active political blocs and his negotiating capabilities, as well as his good relations with all neighboring regional countries. Al-Halbousi's young age and distance from the traditional Sunni political leaders that usually promoted for the revival of the former regime are some of the indicators behind his successful rise. His high pragmatism also presented him regionally as the ideal and realistic candidate to lead and gather the different Sunni factions. Al-Halbousi was able to penetrate state institutions through the wide network of relations with the active political blocs and his negotiating capabilities, as well as his good relations with all the neighboring and quarreling regional countries over the Iraqi file at the same time. With regard to his ability to exclude rival Sunni leaders, the economic factors played a vital role, as well as benefiting from the experiences of his predecessors from the Sunni leaders such as Tariq al-Hashemi, Osama al-Nujaifi and Salim al-Jubouri, and not repeating the experiences that led to their political exclusion and the failure of some of them to even obtain a parliamentary seat (Al-Dabbagh, 2022).

Conclusion

This is equally similar to the irrelevance of the ordinary Shi'a Arab Iraqi citizens towards the Shi'a Islamist political parties and groups, trying to maintain hegemonic power over the economy, politics, and society through the support of an aggressive Iranian ally and neighbor with common interests. Iraq's Sunni Arab confession needs an alternative from Ba'ath and political Islamism in order to ensure a dignified citizenry in a national framework that aims to serve all the members of the nation regardless of backgrounds–a framework that must include all members and sections of the society based on their interests and rights as Iraqi citizens, and not as Sunni Islamists, Shi'a Islamists, Kurdish nationalists, Sunni Ba'athists or Sunni Islamists. The alternative promoted by current Sunni pragmatist political leaders such as Al-Halbousi and Khanjar may present optimism in theory as that is at the core of the demands by the anti-establishment protest movements. Yet, the practicality of its initial intentions is driven by strategic interests that are not sustainable to the protest and civil society movement's notions of efficient transitions, as they are veterans and strong advocates of the ethno-sectarian and corrupt regime-complex that failed to address Iraq's economic, environmental, infrastructure, and geopolitical needs. The democratic project in Iraq is witnessing ballot boxes, parliaments, and courts monitoring the process, yet it is still limited by unofficial power-sharing agreements and political pressures by domestic and external political parties and groups. The gradual and vague transition of Iraq's political scene from communalism to pragmatism is a development in the country's political culture, and its efficient implementation requires social and academic monitoring and understanding of the indicators and successful factors.

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Notes:

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About İRAM

Due to its historical depth and material power, Iran is among the countries that have to be reckoned with in the domain of international relations. The deep-rooted historical relations between Iran and Türkiye, border-sharing and comprehensive business relations make it necessary for Türkiye to understand Iran in a multitude of ways. Based on this necessity, the Center for Iranian Studies in Ankara (İran Araştırmaları Merkezi, İRAM) was established as an independent think tank in Ankara with the purpose of informing the Turkish public and interested parties about Iran. With this in mind, not only does İRAM produce field research, reports, and analyses based on primary resources, it also provides language courses, internships/scholarship programs, support for projects and graduate theses, workshops, and expert seminars in order to meet the need for experts and researchers on Iran in various disciplines in Türkiye. Offering a platform where academicians can share their research on Iran, İRAM also provides digital and printed publications on a wide variety of topics ranging from economy to domestic politics, international policy to security, and Shi'ism to society and culture.

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