فرّق تسُد؟

بروز الطائفيّة في مجتمع العراق:

بين ظاهرة إجتماعيّة و حقيقة سياسيّة[1]

Arthur Neron-Bancel

The Political Sociology of the State in the Contemporary Arab World

Professor Stéphane Lacroix

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[1] Divide and rule? The prominence of sectarianism in Iraqi society: Between social phenomenon and political reality.

I. Introduction

In the spring of 2003, the United States' powerful and sophisticated military forces led a coalition of allies in the swift and largely un-opposed invasion of a smaller (and relatively defenseless) country. Aside from the immense controversy surrounding the war's lack of legitimacy, clear violation of international law, and dangerous precedent for putatively 'preemptive' attacks - the American invasion of Iraq was at first celebrated by some as a welcome and watershed moment in the Middle Eastern country's history. In the immediate wake of the precipitated downfall of an authoritarian regime notorious for decades of increasingly fierce and repressive rule, as large segments of the Iraqi population initially seemed to express cautious optimism, supporters of the invasion were quick to predict that the country's imposed political transition would lead to the spontaneous emergence of a new state - one that would naturally come to stand as a regional beacon of 'freedom' and constitutional democracy. [2]Driven by this heavily ideologically-biased outlook, the newly-instituted ruling American Coalition Provisional Authority (CPA) promptly decided to entirely dismantle Iraq's existing state institutions as a necessary step before re-building a new – liberal, democratic – state.

In the decade since this fateful decision, however, the process of national reconstruction and state building has proven, tragically, far more elusive and complex than these advocates of regime change initially expected. Over the course of this period, the country's social fabric has been profoundly shaken by shattering violence, rampant insecurity, and chronic socio-political instability.

The following essay revolves around a discussion on the socio-political dynamics of sub-national collective identities in post-2003 Iraq. We will focus specifically on Shi'a-Sunni sectarian identities in an effort to understand how the resurgence of this cleavage in Iraqi society has shaped the early stages of

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[2] This outlook was perhaps best expressed by then U.S President George W. Bush, who was quick to deliver a televised speech commending this "noble cause" as marking a new era where "we have the greater power to free a nation by breaking a dangerous and aggressive regime (...) without directing violence against civilians." While perhaps too quick to declare 'Mission Accomplished', the president did announce his government's commitment to "stand with the new leaders of Iraq as they establish a government of, by, and for the Iraqi people" and did concede that "we have difficult work to do in Iraq." (Bush speech on board the USS Abraham Lincoln - May 1st, 2003)

nation-state building. Our argument will be two-fold. On the one hand, we will take a more theoretical

approach to suggest that, in spite of strong traditional sub-national ethno-sectarian identities in Iraqi

society, the current fragmentation does not necessarily preclude the (re)establishment of an over-arching

integrated national identity supporting a stable central political authority anchored in a form of inclusive,

rational-legal (rather than traditional-patrimonial) legitimacy. In practice, however, we will show that

events since 2003 mark a worrying trend towards the institutional formalization of sectarianism in the

new emerging Iraqi central state, arguing that in the absence of rapid reforms these trends could

jeopardize the country's long-term socio-political development. Our concluding remarks will point to the

risk that the Iraqi state's massive oil rents may incentivize the resort to sectarianism by political elites as a

repressive tool to divide and control the Iraqi population.

I. Theoretical Framework

A. Sectarian affiliation in Iraq

> "Every political judgment helps to modify the facts on which it is passed. Political
> thought is itself a form of political action. Political science is the science not only of what
> is, but of what ought to be."

This statement, initially articulated by E.H Carr in the opening chapter of his seminal 1939 work,

The Twenty Years' Crisis: 1919-1939, as a product of his reflection on the challenges inherent in social

sciences, is particularly germane to our ensuing examination of the role of sectarianism and communal

identities in contemporary Iraqi socio-political culture. Indeed, analyzing and conceptualizing such fluid

social constructs requires very careful attention to avoid a process of reification and formalization that

might eventually engender long-term ramifications for a country's political culture and institutions.[3] It

also requires a delicate balance between anecdotal relativism and inductive generalizations, a constant

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[3] In the words of one political analyst, the risk is to "force people to identify themselves in narrow terms when they
often have many different aspects to their identity. You are making people define themselves in a way that is not
conducive to the healing process at a time when there is a desperate need to focus on issues which bring people
together." (ICG Report No 103- Iraq and the Kurds: Confronting Withdrawal Fears, March 2011: 10)

awareness in both epistemology and ontology of the fact that "the world is made up of dynamic space that is the product of a constant negotiation and contestation over time: it is ever-changing, and subject to the dynamics of causal mechanisms, so that it is always in the process of becoming, rather than completed and produced." (Yeung, 1998: 296) Finally, the inherently politicized nature of the topic and the resulting prevalence of factual manipulation and historical revisionism incite further skepticism.[4]

In light of all these considerations, then, we find ourselves faced with the task of formulating a clear theoretical model with the flexibility necessary to address issues of social and political identification in Iraq. Inasmuch as we are adopting a predominantly political sociology approach to state formation in Iraq, our examination will focus on sectarian identities as channels for social mobilization and engagement with political authorities, and how these might compete with a potential secular-nationalist political identification.

This approach is potentially problematic to the extent that sectarian affiliation is not a strictly political form of identification. Clearly, the cleavages between Iraq's Shi'a and Sunni communities are also based on very important religious and cultural dimensions. It is important to bear in mind the powerful and deeply-rooted traditional-cultural dimensions of sectarian affiliation resulting from the continuing role of Islamic culture and rituals in Iraq today.[5] Michael Hudson touches on this particularity while writing more generally about the role of 'primary identities' in Arab politics, citing "Milton Esman [who] asserts that 'ethnic, racial, and religious solidarities are likely to touch deeper emotional levels' than other cleavages, implying that it cannot be easy for modernizing regimes [to replace them]." (1977: 9)

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[4] For instance, since 2003 the defunct Baath regime's supposed heavy Sunni bias has become intensely utilized as a political tool, but much evidence points to a more nuanced historical picture, as outlined in Batatu (1986) - "It remains to underline that Saddam Husain does not discriminate against Shi'is and thinks in Arab rather than sectarian terms. This is not without its appeal to many in Baghdad or the southern part of the country who are Arabs first and Shi'is after." (197)

[5] This fact is especially true for Shi'a Iraqis. For an insightful cultural-psychological perspective on Shi'ism, see Hamid Dabashi's recent book *Shi'ism: A Religion of Protest* (2011).

In his book *Sectarianism in Iraq: Antagonistic visions of unity*, Fanar Haddad offers a particularly useful way to conceptualize sectarian identities, offering insight into the texture and nuances of sectarian identities and partially bridging the gap between their socio-cultural and political roles. While acknowledging that several other factors need to be taken into consideration, such as economic interests and external-geopolitical influences, Haddad argues that the most relevant driver of sectarian identity is the competition between 'myth-symbol complexes' that buttress sectarian identity and "have the power to sustain group identity by providing a sense of uniqueness and purpose for members." (2011: 17) Borrowing from extensive literature on the dynamics of ethnic conflict and identity politics,[6] he shows how this "combination of myths, memories, values and symbols" constitutes the "core of ethnic identity" and can become central to a community's sense of "ontological security".(2011:17) Viewing sectarian identities along these lines is particularly interesting because it highlights how easily their influence can extend to politics – the lines between history, culture(religion) and politics are blurred as symbols and narratives are manipulated and woven into conflicting versions of nationalism and history [Haddad cites Anthony Smith's term "ethnohistory as a source of, and conduit for, myth-symbol complexes and chosen traumas and glories." (2011:23)] We then find that the cultural-symbolic nature of sectarian identities, combined with their continued prominence in many segments of Iraq's society, contributes to making them potentially powerful political tools.

But fundamental to our argument is the idea that this active extension into the political realm is not necessarily a given. Haddad stresses that the historical fluctuations in the salience of sectarian identities makes it important not to perceive these as necessarily 'fixed or ascribed' social categories, stipulating that "perhaps the primary shortcoming in analyses of Iraqi society is the failure to account for the elasticity of sectarian sentiment." (2011: 10) This claim is supported by recent political developments and trends in post-2003 Iraq – in discussing sectarian trends, the International Crisis Group specifies that

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[6] Haddad adopts the concept of myth-symbol complexes from Stuart Kaufman (*Modern Hatres: The Symbolic Politics of Ethnic War*, 2001)

"these forces, while religious in inspiration and identification, are profoundly political in origin and character." (2006: 1)

Therefore, we will assume that in general members of Iraqi society are at all times balancing between multiple identities, and that for political purposes the particular dynamics or incentives of any given context may incite them to prime one over another. Here we can illustrate this interrelationship using the concept of 'dialogism' as employed by Linda Layne in her study of the social identification in Jordan:

> Different collective identities can be intricately related. The relationship between them might be called 'dialogic,' to use a Bakhtinian term (...) [which] refers to the constant interaction between meanings, all of which have the potential of conditioning others. Which will affect the other, how it will do so and in what degree is what is actually settled at the moment of utterance.

Our conception of sectarian identities then designates these as politically relevant only to the extent that actors find it necessary to rely on them for reasons of political expediency or in reaction to certain circumstances or a given context. While under some conditions (e.g. patronage system, political vacuum/ instability, or conflict/ physical insecurity) sectarian identities can offer more reliable access to support networks, resources and protection - and will therefore might more likely serve as primary identities - this potential role should not necessarily be interpreted as meaning that Iraqis cannot favor other, broader and more inclusive, forms of social identification in other contexts.

B. Nation-building, collective identities and state legitimacy

Writing in 1977, Michael Hudson introduced his study on the socio-political dynamics of state legitimacy in the Arab world by cautioning against the risks of cultural bias:

> We must look beyond explanations rooted in the alleged uniqueness of the area itself. While it is easy to demonstrate the uniqueness of Arab culture, it is fallacious to assume that this uniqueness decisively shapes the political behavior of Arabs. Instead, we must seek our explanation in terms of universally applicable categories of analysis. (1977: 3)

This caution incites us to view the dialectic between Iraq's sectarian identities and state power within broader "patterns of identity and authority" (Hudson, 1977: 5), to re-frame the discussion and place Iraq's current travails in a broader theoretical context. Indeed there would appear to exist significant parallels between efforts to (re)construct an efficient and inclusive central Iraqi state today, and those made to establish legitimate nation-states in other territories across the world in the past.

The disruptive influence of 'sectarian identities' in some Arab countries has often been portrayed in ways that make the phenomenon appear unique or exotic, implying that these cultural predispositions may cause intractable problems and that Arab societies may face insuperable obstacles to certain models of 'Western' political development. However, studies of early nation building in European countries have shown that these countries faced very similar challenges. Today it is often taken for granted that in these 'developed' countries, existing sub-national communal identities are effectively subsumed within a broader, integrated national identity that legitimizes state power and serves as a shared channel for popular engagement with political authority.[7] This trait may in some ways be seen as a basis for 'civil society' where socio-political relations rely on shared norms, values, and conceptions of legitimate authority. A look back into earlier historical periods reveals that such levels of unified popular allegiance to one single form of nationalism congruent with the institutionalized power of a central state were generally achieved through lengthy and often violent processes of nation-building.[8] On the challenges encountered by early European states Anthony Marx explains:

> As institutionalized political authority grows, it claims a monopoly on the legitimate use of force, bringing the imperative for wider allegiance but also making such cohesion in some ways less likely. Direct rule draws together under a single authority a greater diversity of peoples with varying backgrounds, languages, interests, and experiences, often before central authority has the tools or power to encourage cohesion. (...) The envisioned solution is (...) the modern ideal of popular loyalty and obedience coinciding with the boundaries of political power, either institutionalized as states or asserted against those states. It is the collective soul envisioned as

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[7] Of course issues of national identity are still very relevant in many developed countries, either as a result of new waves of immigration or of limited success in early national assimilation processes (e.g. separatist movement in Spain's Catalunya region, among so many others.)

[8] One key element might be increased centralized control over certain functions such as education, giving the state a better capacity to influence collective sentiments – for example by shaping historical narratives, reducing the role of 'ethno-histories' that may nurture a sense of victimhood and social stigma among some groups.

inhabiting and enlivening the political body, linking individuals en masse to the center. (2005: 4-6)

While the exact extent to which one can draw parallels with the contemporary Middle East would warrant further discussion, within the scope of this paper acknowledging the similarity in experience and objectives (creating a united polity that believes in the legitimacy of centralized rule), we find that the de-politicization of sectarian narratives will ultimately be a closely related to the creation of a legitimate state authority in Iraq.

Michael Hudson places issues of social identification at the heart of his analysis into the root causes of the legitimacy problem in Arab politics, explaining that "the legitimate order requires a distinct sense of corporate selfhood: the people within a territory must feel a sense of political community which does not conflict with other subnational or supranational communal identifications." (1977: 4) While political and social circumstances may have changed quite a bit in the Middle East since Hudson first formulated his analysis, his framework proves very useful when looking at state legitimacy issues in contemporary Iraq. Of the different explanatory models Hudson proposes regarding social change and sub-national communal identities, it would seem that the resurgence of sectarian identities in Iraqi politics after several decades of Baath rule would lend a certain weight to the "mosaic model [which] asserts the persistence of traditional particularist identifications even under conditions of modernization."[9] (1977: 9) This model, as Hudson explains, corresponds to a critique or challenge to the Weberian model that predicts societal changes associated with modernization and secularization – a critique which might be gain credence in the context of our definition of sectarian identities as predicated on deeply-rooted and easily-manipulated myth-symbol complexes. However, Hudson goes on to express the fear that the implications of the 'mosaic model' may be a "permanent legitimacy crisis" due to a constant competition

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[9] Though of course of critical importance here is the idea that these processes of modernization and social mobilization, and their accompanying political-ideological circumstances, have been fundamentally different in the Middle East compared to Europe. Whether it is these different material circumstances, or inherent differences in Arab culture or natural disposition, that explain different socio-political outcomes today seems very difficult to answer definitively.

between sub-national communal identities and the "irreversible momentum [of] assimilative, modernizing ideologies." (1977: 10)

Again, this last problem is closely related to the situation we are currently addressing as we look at Iraq. However, given our definition of sectarian identities in the previous section, we would argue that the persistence of communal-primal identities does not necessarily have to clash with the creation of a new, broader national identity tied to a legitimate central state - as long as the former become de-politicized as the state transitions from a "patrimonial to republic basis for governance" (Hudson, 1977), acquiring societal approval through performance-based traditional-legal legitimacy that reduces the utility and prevalence of sectarianism and patronage in state-society relations (access to resources.) In relation to this idea, Haddad writes: "Having distinct secondary identities is not a problem in itself, indeed it is natural; however when broader categories of self-definition, for example national identity, fail to maintain their ascendancy in people's self-categorisation, secondary identities will rise to the fore and whilst these are not necessarily incompatible, they are distinct – hence the potential for conflict." (Haddad, 2011: 19)

As we look at the role of sectarian identities in the new Iraqi state in the following section, ideally one would therefore expect that sectarianism would lose relevance and fade out of politics through a concerted national effort to establish a strong state legitimized by a solid institutional and constitutional foundation, a capacity to provide security, and the achievement of tangible human and economic development goals.

III. Sectarianism and the State in Iraq:

A. A brief historical context

From an historical perspective, as in much of the Middle East, the shifting dynamics of coexistence and competition between ethnic and sectarian groups have been a defining characteristic of

the Mesopotamian region's history. The social and political manifestations of sectarianism stretch from the turbulent first decades of Islamic rule with the first emergence Sunni-Shi'a tensions, through to the collapse of the Ottoman Empire and the fusion of Mosul, Baghdad and Basra provinces to form an Iraqi nation under British colonialist control in the early 20th century, and up to contemporary political culture in Iraq today.

But the role and salience of sectarian identities has been far from constant or static. Most recently, throughout more than 30 years of autocratic rule, the Baathist regime did not maintain a steady and monolithic political culture, and the use of sectarian identities was often dictated by the careful, interested calculations of elites. As in most of its history, Iraqi society treated sectarian affiliation as a taboo subject and "social convention and political correctness have often inhibited the annunciation of sectarian identities beyond the confines of the group." (Haddad, 2011:5) However many actors increasingly sought to profit from a heightened polarization in Iraqi society - including an increasingly weak, pressured and repressive state faced with the Iran-Iraq war (1980-1988) followed by a decade of international sanctions, or various exiled opposition groups trying to develop a persuasive narrative in order to mobilize support following the dramatic events of the failed uprising in 1991.[10] Fanar Haddad explains that, between the Islamic Revolution in Iran in 1979 and 2003, a convergence of political, economic, and geostrategic factors contributed to a gradual rise in the politicization of sectarian identities in Iraq (2011: 13-14). Referring to the societal processes of circular and cumulative causation that nurtured this polarization in group identifications, Haddad writes: "in this cyclical dynamic the rising salience of one sect's identity will lead to a mobilization of sectarian identity across the divide and so forth." (2011: 13)

B. (Re)constructing the state

Since 2003, starting with the months of complete institutional vacuum and creeping violence and insecurity that followed the regime's overthrow, the divide between the country's Shi'a and Sunni

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[10] For a discussion of this period, the development and mobilization strategies of Da'wah and Supreme Council for Islamic Revolution in Iraq (SCIRI) exilee opposition groups, see Batatu (1986).

populations has gradually imposed itself as one of, if not the, most prominent organizing principles in Iraqi society. Sectarian identity has, within a certain range of fluctuation across time, come to define social interactions and political mobilization and discourse; it has consistently acted as the driving factor behind mass population displacement and internecine conflict. Haddad writes: "What the years since 2003 represent is a renegotiation of sectarian identity in unfamiliar political territory that for the first time allowed, even encouraged, the articulation, assertion and politicisation of sectarian identity." (2011: 144)

Throughout the decade since 2003, Iraq's political landscape – while loosely structured around a tripartite dialectic between Shiite, Kurdish and Sunni Arab actors - has been very fragmented and volatile. During the early years, a multitude of internal factors and foreign interests converged and together contributed to both triggering and perpetuating the communal conflict that came to define this dark chapter of Iraq's contemporary history. The complexity of the environment and underlying social and political processes makes it very difficult to ascribe clear political labels, intentions or objectives to actors whose rhetoric and alliances are often ambiguous and constantly evolving.

Nevertheless our analysis finds that several elements and sequences of events can be identified that could have a concrete lasting impact or signal long-term trends. We will focus on the consistent dominance of Shi'a interests over state institutions since 2005 as a form of "institution-building by ethno-sectarian logic." (ICG 2006: 12)

Evidence increasingly indicates that throughout the early stages of state-building (especially since the first elections in January 2005, first under Jaafari (2005-2006) and then al-Maliki since 2006) Shiite actors have been able to gain privileged access to positions of power – not necessarily as a unified or homogenous front, but often on a common platform (United Iraqi Alliance in 2005) through which various (competing) Shi'a parties joined forces to gain power.[11] This early, often un-checked influence

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[11] While the initial Interim Governing Council appointed by the U.S (July 2003-June 2004) was headed by Iyyad al-Allawi and therefore closer to secular nationalist dynamics, it achieved little as it remained "a powerless body established by the CPA to give a local face to the U.S occupation" and was widely perceived as corrupt and ineffective. (ICG 127, 2012: 5)

over a developing state has often allowed Shi'a interests to weigh heavily on key state-building processes such as the drafting of the new constitution and staffing and structuring of nascent institutions. It has also had a significant impact on the chronic lack of legitimacy and perceived sectarian bias of the new state.

The notable rise to power of Shiite actors, "the ascendancy of Shi'a dominated parties to the top of the political pyramid" (Haddad, 2011: 144), can be attributed to a number of factors. First and foremost is perhaps the Sunni groups' decision to boycott the January 2005 elections.[12] Moreover, Shiite groups in exile [mostly two groups, *al-Da'wa al-Islamiya* (Da'wa) and the Supreme Council for Islamic Republic in Iraq (SCIRI)] were more politically active prior to 2003 and therefore benefited from higher levels of trust and support from both the U.S and Iran upon their return to Iraq after 2003. "What they lacked in popularity they made up in resources, military organization and patronage." (ICG 52, 2006: 17) This support was very important because it was used by a recently returned Shi'a opposition in exile "traumatized by what it regarded as sectarian discrimination" (Haddad, 2011: 148) to re-constitute patronage networks along sectarian lines in order to re-gain political influence in Iraq. Another factor was the rapid social and political mobilization of Shiite networks in an environment where "religious identity was the prime organizing principle of politics. They seized upon the mosque (...) as their main vehicle for assembly, propagation and recruitment." (ICG 52, 2006: 22) The Shiite sect has often been associated with a particularly strong capacity for effective social mobilization and resistance to institutionalized authority due to more developed and effective social structures and networks, building on a history of autonomy from the state and powerful symbols drawn for a rich 'ethnohistory' of 'chosen traumas.'[13]

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[12] Voter turnout was very low in Sunni-dominated provinces such as Anbar (2%), Ninewa (17%) and Salah al-Din (29%), compared to much higher voting rates above 60-70% across the South (Basra, Najaf, Babil, Wast). See (Toensing, 2005: 8)

[13] A discussion and tentative explanation for this phenomenon can be found pages 26-27 in Cole and Keddie (1986), as well as on page 148 in Haddad (2011). Similarly, this inclination is addressed by Hamid Dabashi (2011), he writes: "A normative alterity that has always been the contrapuntal character trait of Shi'ism is formenting dissent among the Iranian youth, in the midst of Iraqi artists, and in the defiant soul of the Lebanese militia fighting against the military invasion and occupation of their homeland." (24)

Most important for our argument will be the potentially long-lasting impact of this Shi'a ascendancy on the Iraqi state. Given the complete dismantling of existing state institutions in 2003[14], the structural impact of the sectarian politics that pervaded the following period is often quite clear. The allocation of government positions and general staffing of all ministries was overwhelmingly conducted on the basis of sectarian logics (and often even specific party affiliation) instead of competence or performance (ICG, 2006: 19).

Given the critical role of security forces as representatives of state power during a period of social instability and widespread violence, the underlying sectarian logic clearly driving the state's security services has particularly important and problematic (Toensing, 2005: 8). After the (Shiite) United Iraqi Alliance dominated the January 2005 elections, then-leading member SCIRI and its military-wing, the Badr Corps, worked to "re-shape dramatically the police and paramilitary forces established (...) under the 2004 Allawi government." (ICG, 2006: 17) Very quickly, and ever since, government forces became tainted by sectarianism and have faced recurring accusations of running secret detention facilities and conducting assassinations, abductions, arbitrary detainments, torture (ICG, 2006: 19). This blatant sectarian edge has not only significantly eroded the legitimacy of the new central state, it has also prevented efforts at social mediation by moderate leaders such as Al-Sistani, whose influence and calls for social dialogue were undermined by the government's "interior ministry units and (...) arbitrary practices against Sunni-Arabs under the rubric of counter-insurgency." (ICG, 2006: 25)

The central government's tendencies to pursue a sectarian agenda or even specific party-political interests continue today. After a first term as Prime Minister that led some to express fears of a growing authoritarian trend, since obtaining a second term in 2010 Nuri al-Maliki has continued to renege on early

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[14] It was often an almost physical process: "Almost all of the police facilities including the eleven story Ministry of Interior building had been looted, ransacked, stripped of all doors, windows, furniture, electrical fixtures, and set on fire. In many places entire new facilities would need to be built. Almost all the former police vehicles had been stolen, often by the police themselves or destroyed. Entire new recruit, supervisory, leadership, and specialized training curricula would need to be designed, developed, and delivered to thousands of policemen across the entire country." (Joel Wing, Interview with Jerry Burke, Former advisor to the Baghdad Police and Interior Ministry, Feb. 2012)

power-sharing promises and to consolidate the power of the central government - and especially the executive branch. In 2012 the International Crisis Group notes that since 2010 "Maliki's government has carried out repeated waves of arrests against alleged former Baathists in governorates with a heavy Sunni population where Iraqiya [Sunni-secular opposition] had scored strongest." (2012: 2)

IV. Concluding remarks – Weak prospects for legitimacy

Despite the persistence of sectarianism in Iraqi politics since 2003, and the worrying trends embodied by a Shiite-led central government, it is important to note that state performance and legitimacy has remained a powerful factor in political rhetoric and popular demands – therefore in direct competition with sectarianism for dominance over political culture in Iraq. This potential was very clear during the 2009-2010 electoral processes, when parties "relinquished resort to sectarian appeal as a political platform or mobilizing tool" (ICG, 2012: 8) owing to widespread popular anger against ruling Islamist parties seen as responsible for "the civil war that ravaged the country in 2005-2008" (ICG, 2012: 8) as well as the poor-performance of the central government under al-Maliki. Iraqiya (a leading Sunni-secular party) re-emerged as a national player and "Maliki and State of Law campaigned on a similar non-sectarian, secular nationalist platform." (ICG, 2012: 1)

This political phenomenon is consistent with our conception of sectarian identities and their role in Iraqi politics. As noted earlier, ultimately stable state legitimacy in Iraq may depend on the nurturing of a secular, inclusive national identity - facilitated through the creation of social and political conditions (security, rule of law, essential services) that make sectarian identities less relevant or necessary as tools for mobilization and channels for engagement with the state.

However, one the most critical issues in Iraq today may be that this process could be very difficult in the context of a rentier state.[15] The parallels we have drawn with similar processes in early European nation-building suggest that "such boundedness is not a historical given; instead, such cohesion must and has been actively constructed by both elites and commoners." (Marx, 2005: 6) Therefore, finding common incentives within both elites and the population to support the centralization of powers under state control was a critical ingredient in Europe: "The potential complementarity of interest in centralization from above and below added to the growing impetus for achieving domestic cohesion and stability. (...) It is this dynamic between state elites and the populace that emerged as central to modern political development." (Marx, 2005: 5)

But as shown by substantial literature on the potentially devastating impacts of massive natural resource wealth, the incentive structures that determine the behavior of political elites are generally significantly distorted in rentier states. The political elite face fewer incentives to nurture the type of comprehensive socio-economic development and any associated "social mobilization that expands the politically relevant population (and) may create new and contradictory demands on government." (Hudson, 1977: 12) This argument, and the resulting importance for the early establishment of strong state institutions and checks and balances, was put forward by Paul Collier back in 2005: "It is easier to build checks and balances into the system before it becomes corrupted by patronage politics rather than once corrupt interests have become powerful." (2005: 4)

Unfortunately, the possibility that it may be too late seems to be supported by the increasing concentration of power, as well as the state's dismal performance in terms of socio-economic development, and consistently increasing levels of social control and repression of civil society. In this

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[15] In 2011, revenues from oil exports accounted for 99% of Iraq's export revenues, and provided 90% of total government revenue. This overwhelming dependence on oil revenue will only increase -while the Iraqi private sector has shown almost no signs of growth in recent years, oil production has been expanding rapidly and is expected to at least double by 2015-2016. (See UNDP Iraq Information and Analysis Unit, Briefing: Iraq and Oil, Sept. 2011) The Iraqi government's revenue is therefore completely independent from any potential taxation from the population.

context, sectarian politics could serve as a very potent political tool to maintain deep cleavages in Iraqi society, to perpetuate social tensions and thereby prevent the rise of a united civil society capable of challenging and pressuring state authority - signs of mobilization, noticed during a wave social uprisings in 2011, were swiftly crushed by state security.

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