

On the Non-state (Ladaula) in Iraq

by [Sardar Aziz \(/experts/sardar-aziz\)](#)

Sep 25, 2020

Also available in

[العربية \(/ar/policy-analysis/n-alla-dwlt-fy-alraq\)](#)

ABOUT THE AUTHORS

[Sardar Aziz \(/experts/sardar-aziz\)](#)

Sardar Aziz is a senior adviser in the Kurdish parliament as well as a researcher and writer. His areas of interest include civil-military relations, Middle East regional politics, and governing. He has a Ph.D. in Government from the University College Cork.



Brief Analysis

One of the most common terms used among Iraqi elites to criticize the current state is the concept of the non-state, or *al-ladaula*. Anyone closely observing Iraq's political affairs cannot avoid reading and hearing this word multiple times a day, given its prominent usage on TV debates, Whatsapp chats, local newspaper op-eds, tweets, and other social media accounts. The term, which signifies the Iraqi "non-state," or a group of actors contending with the formal state for authority, has problematic roots and applications, though an exploration of its nuances may indicate a path forward for Iraq.

This concept of ladaula signifies a widespread characterization of a kind of non-state governance that has salient applications to Iraqi politics, though the term has a variety of uses and meanings. It has been used to classify, condemn, and even justify the use of violence by political actors in Iraq, while Iraqis also use it to describe the general current political struggle in their country. In the Iraqi case, ladaula refers neither to a deep state nor a parallel state, but rather a mixed constellation of actors inside and outside the state organization whose operations include formal policy, extra-governmental violence, and polarizing popular rhetoric.

The man behind the concept is the prominent Iraqi political sociologist Faleh A. Jabar. His last, posthumously published book is entitled *Al-Ladaula*, which could be translated as "the non-state," or "the anti-state," but it describes an entity inseparable from the state itself. Jabar had previously written a book entitled *The Book of State: New Leviathan*, drawing on Hobbes' perennial imagery. The shift from the leviathan, or the strong/hard state—to use political scientist Nazih N. Ayubi's conceptualization of Arab states—to the non-state, or ladaula, is not only a shift from a strong state to a weak one, but is also the rise of strong polarization and vacillation between different forms of misguided policies in Iraq, a significant and enduring presence in modern Iraqi politics.

Effective state governance has always been a critical question in modern Iraqi politics. The Iraqi state, approaching its centenary in the coming years, has had an eventful history with a slew of drastic political junctures, including a postcolonial monarchy, coups, a republic, a single-party dictatorship, and a civil war.

Throughout this eventful century, experts and historians have presented a number of explanations for the country's tumultuous political history. Experts have blamed, for example, the inherently colonial origin of the state, fractured local communities, a lack of national identity, coups, external interventions, nationalism promoted by a dictatorship, and sectarianism. But while Iraq's political turmoil can be attributed to a mix of these factors, Iraq must also face

problems of national, territorial, and class unity. The nature of the Iraqi state has therefore never been a simple or static idea, and the concept of *ladaula* strikes at a very elementary aspect of Iraqi history.

As such, *ladaula*'s role as a concept and term used to criticize the Iraqi state is multifaceted and rich. It not only illustrates the crises of the state, but also exposes the challenges involved in understanding and critiquing it. The mention of *ladaula* contains a spectrum of different forces and groups: political parties' militias, criminal groups, armed tribal groups, and others. In this sense, *ladaula* is not beyond the state, nor does it aim at ending the state; it is both inside and outside the state.

Some have described *ladaula* forces as 'hybrid actors.' An extended definition is provided in a Century Foundation report: **hybrid actors (https://production-tcf.imgix.net/app/uploads/2019/11/15165406/TheCenturyFoundation_HybridActors.pdf)** are "armed groups that have acquired enduring political and military significance by creating constituencies while holding territory and engaging in armed conflict. The most important of these groups often capture state institutions and participate, to varying extents, in formal governance. However, these groups also develop structures parallel to the state, affording them extralegal autonomy. These hybrid groups engage in war, diplomacy, politics, propaganda, and constituency building. They are not states as such, and yet they manage long-term relationships with states, and in many cases shape their host states through symbiotic or combative relationships."

Yet the "hybrid actors" concept only applies to some groups described as part of the *ladaula*. *Ladaula* is more complex, both as a concept and as a system of categorization, especially as its meaning in most circumstances depends on the agent's intention. The *ladaula* does not only refer to armed groups themselves, as paramilitaries are used as an apparatus to change the state itself to non-state *ladaula* and establish a particular relationship with state institutions built on shared power and common interests. These groups take from the institution of the state without giving and weaken without killing, making the boundaries of *ladaula*, or non-state, ambiguous and unclear.

When *ladaula* is used as a critical term, it is a form of condemnation. The prefix *la* (no) is negative, and the word bears inherently negative connotations, especially in the Hobbesian sense of stateless chaos. The negative connotations of such chaos are particularly salient in the Iraqi context in which security, or rather the lack of it, plays a very visible role in the lives of the ordinary people. Because security, an essential condition for development, is derived from the state, the Iraqi state is synonymous with security and development in popular discourse while the *ladaula* signifies insecurity and poverty.

Recent Iraqi Prime Ministers Adel Abdul-Mahdi and Al-Kadhimi have used the concept to warn Iraqis of the dangers ahead. Rhetorically, they have called Iraqi people to choose between the state or the *ladaula*. The discourse divides the country's influential figures into two antagonistic groups: state and *ladaula* (non-state). For some in Iraq, choosing the state is the way out of the current crises. Yet others claim the choice is not so clear, arguing that there is not a defined separation between the state and the *ladaula*. Still others go further to claim that the state is a non-state.

If the *ladaula* concept is fuzzy on a political level, then on the intellectual level it is even more problematic, employing a degree of black-and-white thinking that doesn't fully capture the nature of Iraqi history. The concept of *ladaula* is a continuation of a very common Iraqi style of thinking, built on dualistic or binary thought, which was popularized by the prominent 20th century Iraqi sociologist Ali Al-Wardi. Al-Wardi drew on the sociological thinking of Ibn Khaldun, understanding the history of Iraq not as a linear progression from pre-modern forms of social organization to modern ones, but as a continuous struggle between *hadara* and *badawa*, between the cultures of urban settled life and the primordial allegiances to tribe and sect.

This dualism and binary thinking has become popular and frequently practiced as ritual within Iraqi intelligentsia

circles. The dualism of state (daula) and nonstate (ladaula) is another way of replicating this way of thinking.

And as with any dichotomy, it suffers from problems inherent to binary thinking and the overemphasis of one path as a correction to the other. Contemporary Iraqi history is far too complicated to be captured in a binary style of thinking. If the non-state is a problem, that does not indicate that the state, especially a hard and strong state, is the solution. The state can be problematic also, as shown by the dictatorial regime of Saddam Hussein. The history of the world clearly shows that neither a strong state nor a strong society necessarily results in the emergence of a liberal country.

The Weberian definition of the state likewise exposes the difficulty in treating the state as a solution to Iraq's problems. Weber defines the state as a "claim to the monopoly of the legitimate use of physical force within a given territory." In an Iraqi context, that most likely means a dictatorship.

As such, a contractual democratic state in Iraq is possible, but will be difficult to attain. Competing senses of nationalism have led to the marginalization of ethnic communities and the division of national identity in Iraq. For a real national identity to emerge, the rising form of Iraqi local nationalism, known as *wataniya* (as opposed to pan-Arab nationalism, or *qawmiya*) requires a process of de-radicalisation. Any form of identity based on sect, religion, or ethnicity immediately clashes with the reality of Iraq as a unified state.

Nonetheless, there is hope for a future Iraq with a stable, decentralized state. The fall of the Iraqi state whetted other regional powers' appetites for expansion, especially in Iran and Turkey, and today the region is restructuring to deal with those expansionist forces. Many forces in the ladaula have security and ideological links to these foreign powers. Now, Iraq faces a difficult path back from governance by the ladaula to governance by the daula (the state).

The focus on the concept of ladaula and its relationship to the state is a clear sign that people are stepping away from ideologies and prioritizing services, security, and prosperity in their expectations of what a functional state should provide. This shift—if it can avoid leaning too hard into the alternative of a strong state- could provide a new way to re-imagine Iraq's political dynamics in the future. ❖

RECOMMENDED



BRIEF ANALYSIS

[Iran Takes Next Steps on Rocket Technology](#)

Feb 11, 2022

◆
Farzin Nadimi

(/policy-analysis/iran-takes-next-steps-rocket-technology)



BRIEF ANALYSIS

Saudi Arabia Adjusts Its History, Diminishing the Role of Wahhabism

Feb 11, 2022



Simon Henderson

(/policy-analysis/saudi-arabia-adjusts-its-history-diminishing-role-wahhabism)



ARTICLES & TESTIMONY

Podcast: Breaking Hezbollah's Golden Rule

Feb 9, 2022



Matthew Levitt

(/policy-analysis/podcast-breaking-hezbollahs-golden-rule)