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The Myth of Rising Above Sectarianism in Iraq

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Brief Analysis

As nationwide parliamentary elections, scheduled for May 12, 2018, are drawing closer in Iraq, leaders of the country's contending electoral alliances are promising to alter the nature of Iraq's future political dynamics by pursuing non-sectarian policies and agendas that would serve the interests of all Iraqi citizens. The realities and existing circumstances in Iraq, however, strongly indicate that sectarianism and identity politics will remain potent forces that will profoundly influence the shaping of Iraq's future domestic politics.

The recent changes in Iraq have not been in the sectarian nature of the country's domestic politics, but in its ethno-sectarian balance of power that has considerably shifted in favor of Iraq's Shias. As the dominant majority since 2005, Shias have gained nearly absolute control over the state's vital institutions, resources, and official discourse. Through fighting the Islamic State (IS), the Shia-led Popular Mobilization Forces (PMF) represent security management and administration along with the Iraqi Security Forces (ISF) in Iraq's Sunni provinces of Diyala, Salahuddin, al-Anbar, and Mosul. In the past three years, the PMF co-opted many Sunni tribal militants and government administrators, whose allegiances now rest with the Shias, and their political agenda for Iraq's Sunni inhibited regions. Shias direct the movement of the Sunni population, requiring Sunni refugees to receive permission from the PMF/SDF and their local allies to return home in Iraq's Sunni provinces.

Responding to the Iraqi Kurdistan's ill-advised independence referendum in October 2017, the Shia-led Iraqi government removed disputed territories from Kurdish authority, including the oil-rich city of Kirkuk, and placed them under Baghdad's control. The Iraqi government forced Kurds to surrender their management of the two international airports in the Kurdish region and the formal border crossings connecting Kurdistan to the outside world to the federal authorities.

By defeating IS militarily and crashing the Kurds' attempt for independence, the Shia political forces have asserted their dominance over Iraq. Some Iraq Shia leaders acclaimed these recent achievements as gains for all Iraqis in an attempt to re-energize Iraqi nationalism among the Arab population to smooth the legitimacy of an otherwise Shia-controlled government across Iraq.

The Iraqi Shia-led state's recent successes would not have been possible without the explicit assistance of Iran, Turkey, and the international coalition for fighting IS led by the United States. Powerful regional Arab states, such as Saudi Arabia, who previously demonized the Shia authorities in Baghdad as puppets of Iran and thus refused to deal with them, have recently demonstrated both in words and deeds that they are ready to turn a new page with the Iraqi government by restoring diplomatic and economic relations.

The Iraqi Shia factions now hold more reasons to pursue post-election unity. International support and recognition, in addition to lack of serious domestic challenges, will shape the Iraqi Shia factions' policies and ambitions. This will focus on battering up their privileged position in Iraq in the future. After the upcoming elections, it is likely that Shias will prevail as the main power brokers of Iraq, while the Sunni Arabs and Kurds will remain with no choice but to play the role of junior brother to the Shias in governing Iraq.

Iraqi Shias are not monolithic and various Shia groups and factions have fiercely, and at times violently, vied for power and influence with each other. However, none of these factions intends to overthrow the current ethno-sectarian order in Iraq in favor of ending sectarianism in the country. One key factor that has united most of the rival Shia factions in Iraq since 2005 has been their goal of reserving the post of Iraq's Prime Minister, the country's most significant political position, for a Shia. Almost all of the powerful Shia alliances formed to contest in general elections believe in building a strong and centralized state to solve Iraq's major problems. This will ensure that strategic decision-making in Iraq will remain in the hands of the Shia political factions.

A rising tendency to curb Iran's influence in Iraq among some Iraqi Shia factions does not amount to a serious commitment to end political sectarianism among powerful Shia groups. Categorizing Shia groups into pro and against Iran camps is an oversimplification of a much more complex relationship between the Islamic Republic and Iraq's Shia political factions. Strong religious, historical, and political ties bind all Shia factions to Iran and these ties have been, and will continue to be, utilized by Tehran for strategic purposes, including the enhancement of Iran's regional standing. Likewise, Iraqi Shia factions, far from being Iran's puppets, have employed Tehran's support for advancing and protecting their domestic political interests.

Having ties to Iran has not stopped Iraqi Shia factions from developing relations with the U.S. government. Similarly, Iraqi Shia figures and groups close to the U.S. agenda have not become Tehran's enemy in Iraq. Prior to the rise of IS in mid-2014, Iraq's former Prime Minister Nuri al-Maliki, who leads the State of Law alliance and is known for his close connections to the ruling regime in Tehran, used to enjoy Washington's backing and assistance. Likewise, the current Prime Minister Haider al-Abadi, who leads the Victory alliance and is defined as an ally of the U.S. and the West, does not defy Iranian influence in Iraq and, indeed, enjoys the respect of influential circles within Iran's ruling elite. Abadi has visited Tehran and has met and coordinated with Iranian top delegations in Baghdad.

Iraq's Shia political class can base their external relations on pragmatic calculations and are likely to benefit from having the respect and recognition of regional and international influential players for legitimizing their domestic dominance over the rest of Iraq's communities. Regardless of their factional affiliations, all members of the powerful Iraqi Shia political factions are religious and driven by a form of pan-Shia destiny, presently rebranded as Iraqi nationalism.

Not all Iraqi Shias have benefited from their leaders' political dominance in Iraq. Many have remained poor and suffer under the Shia-controlled dysfunctional state that has largely failed to meet the expectations of most Iraqi citizens. There is a high level of discontent among Iraq's Shia citizens with the ruling Shia oligarchy, but it is too early to suggest that this popular dissatisfaction will translate into a force that will replace the current Shia political class during the next Iraqi general elections. The sectarian war and tensions for the past fifteen years have contributed to consolidating communal sentiment among Iraq's Shia citizens, making it hard for them to trust non-Shia candidates and parties. Furthermore, it will be difficult for an Iraqi Shia to abstain from the appeals of PMF

leaders - grouped in the Conquest electoral alliance led by Hadi al-Amri - and their messages that highlight the sacrifices and bravery of the Shia-led force in saving Iraq's Shia community from the scourges of IS.

In addition, the control of the Shia ruling class over the state's economic resources has enabled it to entrench itself through strong networks of patronage, leaving little room for effective civil society organizations and secular parties to flourish within the Shia community. Being in control of multiple media outlets, Shia traditional parties also play a significant role in shaping the Shia public discourse in ways that serve their political interests.

Iraq's Shia factions, as well as their Sunni and Kurdish counterparts, lack the serious will and commitment to place Iraq on a path in which democratic values and competence, rather than sectarian identity and considerations, determines Iraq's political future. Beyond an obvious inclination for securing their levers of power in Iraq, the Shia political leaders lack long-term and robust strategies for managing a multi-ethnic and multi-sectarian country located in the world's most volatile region.

For instance, Shia factions have not presented a clear vision demonstrating how they would reconcile state centralization with demands made by many Sunni Arabs for power devolution and regional autonomy. In addition, the Shia political class has failed to offer a convincing and realistic proposal that would solve the chronic issues between the Federal government in Baghdad and Iraqi Kurdistan, including sharing of Iraq's oil revenues and the question of disputed territories. Moreover, Shia ruling factions in Baghdad have not proposed an overall strategy for reconstructing the Sunni areas devastated by the war against IS and preventing the future rise of religious extremism among Iraq's the Sunni Arabs. Here lie some core issues the Shia political class has yet to address to build a strong and unified Iraq.

The U.S. government should not limit its Iraq strategy to curbing Iran's influence in Iraq. Turning a blind eye on the dominant Shia factions' ambitions to impose their will on the rest of Iraq's society under the pretext of forging a united Iraq is a recipe for past disasters to reoccur. The U.S. government should be prepared to play a pro-active role in the post-election process of government formation in Iraq, encouraging Shia leaders to think beyond power and towards strategies that benefit all Iraqi citizens. Washington should emphasize to future Iraqi Shia stakeholders that only true commitment to sharing Iraq with the country's citizens, regardless of their ethnic and sectarian background, could lead to a cohesive, unified, and an independent nation. ❖



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