

Iraq's Nexus of Sectarianism and Corruption

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Brief Analysis

Iraq is entering into another electoral season, yet elections and political parties alone do not mean successful democracy. Rather, government policies and strategies need to be drafted in line with good governance standards in order to ensure synergy between all domestic actors (the state, institutions, civil society organizations, and society), in addition to regional and international organizations. Such measures are necessary to bolster the fight against terrorism, especially in light of the need to restructure after the war with ISIS. It is also imperative to strengthen national identity, deal with the abuse of power, combat corruption, and stop the use of religion as a political facade to monopolize the perks of power.

These negative practices are the by-product of sectarianism, which has created a climate of terrorism, crisis, war, power struggles, and organized corruption. All of these factors have become sources of power that often rival, if not exceed, the power of the state. Unfortunately, Iraq lacks a qualified political class or fair and impartial government oversight organizations. It also lacks supporting legislation to create a climate of transparency, not to mention mechanisms to achieve justice, accountability, and sustainable development.

In this regard, RAND Corporation published a study last year entitled [“The Future of Sectarian Relations in the Middle East \(https://www.rand.org/content/dam/rand/pubs/perspectives/PE200/PE242/RAND_PE242.pdf\)”](https://www.rand.org/content/dam/rand/pubs/perspectives/PE200/PE242/RAND_PE242.pdf). The study produced conclusions indicating that this conflict can be brought to an end by orienting the country towards national identity, halting the regional role that fuels sectarian conflicts, and applying governance principles that do not discriminate between the different religious sects, ethnicities, and components of the country.

Sectarian conflict represents a pivotal factor in kindling the conflicts that plague the Middle East. These conflicts are often supported by regional neighbors aiming to achieve their own interests by exploiting the tendency for sectarian identity to trump national identity. They also exploit the characteristics of religious discourse promoted by religious leaders, which fosters an antagonistic relationship between sects. Similarly, the state's inability to provide basic services, along with sectarian discrimination when providing services, has contributed to exacerbating those sectarian conflicts.

But less commonly understood is how sectarianism is deeply linked to corruption, a toxic mix that has produced the terrorism draining Iraq's potential. It has also weakened the role of the Iraqi state to that of just another NGO, on par with the sectarian Popular Mobilization Forces. Political sectarianism creates a favorable environment and legal

immunity for corruption to operate.

This specifically includes the continuous sectarian favoritism in filling high administrative positions with people who possess neither the educational and practical qualifications nor the relevant specialized experience in pivotal areas. What is known as “political sectarian privatization” means filling leadership positions in state institutions without any reference to the candidate’s work performance, impartiality, or efficacy. Merging political, administrative, and financial corruption into one corrupt system has become widespread. This system works without concern for results or serious legal consequences for theft of public funds and exploitation of one’s position. It allows personal and party financial expenses that are huge and disproportionate to the overall budget. This is a unique level of corruption that leads the global rankings.

This corruption, piling up popular grievances and incompetencies with no means of redress, then provided fertile ground for the growth of terrorism in Iraq. They worked in tandem to dismantle the country’s institutional infrastructure, national strategy, social cohesion, and allegiance to the state. Terrorism even provided a kind of “strategic deception” to cover up the system of corruption operating in Iraq, as officials exploited the crisis to smuggle treasury and tax money outside the borders without any international accountability or auditing. Thus the original sin of political sectarianism is the key factor fostering a climate of corruption and terrorism, given the impunity enjoyed by the corrupting and corrupted, whose influence is so great that it has overstepped the Iraqi state’s own authority.

In conclusion, Iraq faces an urgent need to accelerate the application of good governance principles, which will contribute to eliminating the phenomenon of sectarian discrimination that fuels corruption. The state must work to form an integrated system with Iraqi society, to achieve equality and thus political stability and security. In the long term, this could unleash Iraq’s great potential for structural interdependence between the economy, energy, the environment, and society, leading to economic growth (physical capital), human development (human capital), and sustainable development (socio-national capital).

Much deeper than the upcoming electoral exercise, this transformation requires political will, international monitoring, effective application of governance mechanisms, dismantling the sectarianism-corruption nexus, and bolstering confidence in government institutions. It also requires restructuring and developing Iraqi military forces to fight terrorism, stop the armed conflict, and maintain state control over weapons. And it demands a new and effective legislative framework that criminalizes sectarianism, fights corruption, develops domestic and foreign monitoring systems, and enshrines a policy of institutional disclosure to strengthen transparency, accountability, and justice. ❖

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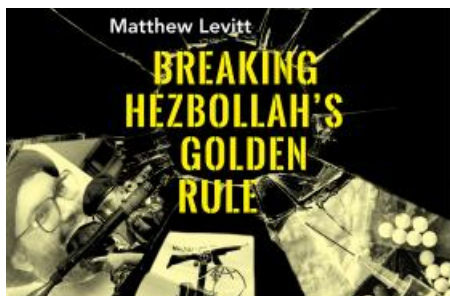
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