

SHIA-CENTRIC STATE BUILDING AND SUNNI REJECTION IN POST-2003 IRAQ

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The clash of visions over the Iraqi state's identity, legitimacy, and ownership, long predating the U.S.-led invasion of the country in 2003, has been the root cause of political violence in postwar Arab Iraq. Post-2003 politics have been dominated by the competition between sect-centric Shia and Sunni forces as exemplified by the ongoing cycle of Shia-centric state building and Sunni rejection of this state-building project. As long as violence rages, the mistrust characterizing politics and sectarian relations will persist to the benefit of hardline actors on all sides.

The Roots of Iraq's Sect-Centric Politics

- Both Shia-centric state building and Sunni rejection of the post-2003 order are the result of cumulative processes that have unfolded over the course of the twentieth century. These developments ranged from the homogenizing nation building propagated by successive Iraqi regimes to the rise of a sect-centric Shia opposition in exile.
- The sectarianization of Iraq was not inevitable, but regime change in 2003 accelerated the empowerment of new and preexisting sect-centric actors. The necessary will, vision, and political skill to avert the sectarianization of Iraq were absent among Iraqi and U.S. decisionmakers at the time. The failure of the occupation forces and the new political classes to construct a functioning state that could deliver basic services exacerbated the problem.
- Sunni opponents of the post-2003 order became as sect-centric as the system they once derided for its Shia-centricity.

Implications for Iraq's Future

- Sectarianization will continue to define Iraqi politics. The spread of the self-proclaimed Islamic State across much of Iraq in 2014 represents the most extreme form of Sunni rejection. The state-sanctioned Hashd al-Shaabi, the term given to the mass mobilization of volunteers to repel the Islamic State, embodies the most serious defense of Shia-centric state building as of late 2015.
- Shia political ascendancy will remain irreversible well into the foreseeable future. For Sunnis and everyone else, the distasteful implication of this is that they must either withdraw from the state by boycotting it or taking up arms, or they must accept a junior role in Iraqi politics.
- Extremist, sect-centric forces must be defeated if Iraq is to succeed. An end to Iraq's sectarian warfare is a prerequisite to shift the political focus away from questions of state legitimacy and toward those of state efficiency, corruption, and service delivery. These are key to the stability and sustainability of the Iraqi state and to the securing of broader buy-in to the post-2003 order.

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