IDENTITY POLITICS AND THE NATION STATE IN A NON-WESTERN WORLD: A THEORETICAL ESSAY WITH REFERENCE TO THE CASE OF IRAQ

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The concept of ‘identity politics’ is tied to advances in social sciences and to the development of the nation state in Europe. This concept, in the commonly accepted view, grew out of black, homosexual and ethnic movements in the 1950s and 60s in what was known as ‘minority issues’.

This is why trying to apply this concept to understanding identity-based social movements in the non-Western world poses theoretical problems. It could be that these two patterns of identity movements have very different origins and that the concept is part of a ‘West-centric’ trend, like most global social sciences concepts, possibly including the very idea of a ‘nation’. The idea of the ‘nation’ has been widely discussed in Arabic social sciences circles these past few decades, and yet some basic questions were glossed over. For example: is the ‘nation’ an internal inevitability that non-Western societies are bound to attain like Western societies did? Or could it be that nation-building is a programme imposed by European colonialism? Can the non-Western world produce a demographic-political entity like the ‘nation’?

In saying this I am not taking the fundamentalist approach dominant in the Middle East, which is based on an entrenched tendency to reject Western modernism and found its most tragic manifestation in the radical Islamist movements that emerged in the past decade and turned Iraq into a bloody battle field. Rather, this is an attempt to look into the use of these concepts in two contexts that differ in culture and development, and in the role of social actors.

The fundamentalist approach is based on a dangerous use of the notion of ‘cultural exceptionalism’ as the logical opposite of ‘universalism’, whereas this essay would attempt to reconstruct ‘universalism’ to be based not solely on the West’s experience and general values, or the values presented as general, but rather on a diversity of cultural practices, including the non-Western world, and from there to develop the general models of social sciences to reflect that diversity.

With this in mind we can say that if the emergence of ‘identity politics’ in Europe was seen as a crisis of the nation state, in ‘our region’ – the Middle East – it can only be seen as a consequence of the failure of nation-building to start with. Whereas in Europe identity politics are a phase, a moment, a turning point in the evolution of the nation state, linked to a series of developments like migration and other trends, in our region identity politics form the main scheme of the structure of the post-colonial state. In other words, identity politics in the West are the exception; in this region, they are the rule. Nation-building in this part of the world was never separated from identity politics, turning the state into a space for the long and old clash between identities. Unlike in the West, where national identity is beyond the scope of identity politics, in our region national identity is at the heart of identity politics.

Moreover, as I explained in an earlier contribution, the coincidence of nation state-building with the colonial era served to intensify competition between
identities. This competition, which modern political literature would describe as ‘sectarianism’, is a product of the modern Arab state that took shape in the early 20th century. I am not saying that the modern Arab state is a new phase of this long sectarian conflict, but rather that the modern state redefined sectarianism and reproduced it in a different form. Specifically, the modern state reshuffled the positions of the identities that were already in competition.

**Nation-building in the Middle-East was never separated from identity politics, turning the state into a space for the old clash between identities.**

The move from the vast and decentralized Ottoman imperial realm to a small centralized state was a decisive factor in redefining the conflict, not just as conflict for power in the nascent state, now defined and understood as the sole source of authority and the influence and wealth that come with it, but also as a conflict over the ‘ownership’ of the concept of the ‘nation’ – a modern colonial invention – as a unified entity. When the nation failed to become a unifying implement, this left the space open for pre-state identities to reorganise and dig in for the fight over control of this unifying implement.

There is no doubt that the creation of the modern state in the region was an extraordinary event – the most momentous in its modern history in fact. This is so not because these states took political practices in the region from their pre-modern setting to political modernity rooted in the West, but because these states displaced the leadership of social, political, economic and cultural movements. The order of these movements, their strength or weakness was now determined through the state – the system political sciences describe as ‘statism’.

In Iraq the British set out to build a fully-fledged nation state and launched a nation-building project knowing that the demographic components of Iraq each carried its own pre-national state identities, ethnic, religious or sectarian. In other words, building the nation was part of the state’s mission. This coupling of nation-building to the state is one of the features of what some early theorists of nationalism described as “Eastern Nationalism”, which they saw as different from Western nationalism that emerged in Europe in the 17th and 18th centuries in that, in the non-Western world, the nation was post-factum justification for nation states invented by Western colonialism, whereas Western nationalisms were defined by the masses, and served as cultural rationalization of already-existing polities.

The aim of the nation-building process carried out by the nation state in Iraq and similar countries was to create a historic mapping between the state and the nation.

**THE IRAQI NATION?**

The pioneer of the nation-building project in Iraq, King Faisal I (1883-1933), complained shortly before his death about the fragmentation of Iraq’s ethnic groups:

> I have long noticed the existence of different ideas and opinions about how to run the state, (…) and have been thinking about it. I recently came to understand that this stems (…) from the elements of destruction like ignorance and the difference of origins, religions, sects and environments and cultures. (…) The Iraqi land lacks the most important element of social life, that is intellectual, national and religious unity; which is why this country is fragmented and divided (Al-Husseini, 1953, pp. 286-287).

1. See Saeed, H. Al-Ta’ifiyya al-Siyasiyya fi al-’Iraq inkaran wa i’tirafan (Political Sectarianism in Iraq: Denial and Recognition), a paper presented at the “Sectarianism and Manufacturing of Minorities in Greater Arab Mashreq” conference held by the Arab Center for Research and Policy Studies at the Dead Sea, Jordan, in September 2014.

And on a different occasion:

I think there is no Iraqi people in Iraq yet. What we have is human groups free of any national ideals and saturated with tradition and false religious superstitions that have nothing in common. They lend ears to any rabble-rouser and are always ready to rebel against any government. This being the case, what we need to do is form these groups into one organized, trained and educated people. Those who understand how difficult it is to form a people in these conditions also understand the effort to be expended to achieve this (...). I have taken it upon myself to form this people, and this is my opinion about it (Al-Husseini, 1953, pp. 269-270).

This nation-building project comprised the usual tools, like building a common cultural structure, complete with history and traditions, all the way to material structures like national military service and physically connecting the country through transportation projects and the like.

And yet the regime observed the ethnic diversity of the country – within limits. Whether by law or by practice, ethnic identities were taken into account in the country's political and administrative organization. The recognition in the law of ethnic diversity was mostly about cultural and religious aspects, such as leaving family law cases to religious courts, regulation of use of local languages or similar measures the Iraqi state adopted in its early days.

That said, the nation-building project did not keep a steady pace. More specifically, the early 1930s proved to be a turning point, with the end of the British mandate, independence, Iraq's joining the League of Nations (1932) and the death of King Faisal I (1933). It was in this period that the 'Sharifian Officers' officially came to power: these were a group of former Ottoman army officers who had joined the Arab Revolt under Sharif Hussein in 1916 and later on formed the backbone of the new Iraq's ruling elite. This class, with its pan-Arab background, worked to build a unitary identity for Iraq – an Arab-Muslim-Sunni identity that did not reflect the ethnic, religious and sectarian diversity of the country. On the other hand, they placed Iraqi identity within the broader context of the Arab World, a point that would assume greater ideological significance in the Baath era.

The way I see it, the attempt to build a unitary identity in this manner was part of the rivalry and clash of identities in the country, yet at the same time this unitary identity worked to enrol a wide section of the public in the base of the regime, establishing (or at least trying to establish) a long and flexible process of domination.

Thus, the political class launched a 'national integration' programme on two dimensions:

- Coercive and violent. In this period the state launched a number of military operations seen, even by Iraq's intellectual elite, as part of the 'making of Iraqi national identity' that was influenced by Kemalism in Turkey, such as the Simele massacre (1933) and the repression of the mid-Euphrates rebellion (1935). At Simele the Iraqi army killed hundreds of Assyrians mainly, although there were other political factors at play, because the pro-German government of Rasheed Aali al-Gailani saw the Assyrians as part of the British legacy, and now Iraq was an independent state. In the mid-Euphrates region the army savagely repressed tribesmen who had formulated demands under the headline of 'Shiite demands'. In both cases the government's violent response was presented as part of the birth throes of Iraqi national identity. Again, I have to underline the dates of these events, which mark not just the rise of violence in Iraq's political dealings, but also a turning point in the country's history, as the beginning of the project to build a unitary national identity.

• Cultural and soft, comprising the building of a common memory for the nation, recounted through school curricula and the state’s cultural bodies, and a system of symbols for the nation state, complete with national holidays and slogans, in addition to the political narratives, discourse and ideological connotations that inform the state and the political expression of its identity.

In this respect, the discourse of the Sharifian Officers redefined the Great Iraqi Revolt (renamed the 1920 Revolt after the coup d’état of 1958) as part of the ‘Great Arab Revolt’ of 1916–18 against Ottoman rule. A broad section of the intellectual elite was involved in this process. Indeed, they were the main tool for building this unitary identity for the country and they placed it within the context of the existing rivalry between identities. For example, affirming Iraq’s Arab identity included questioning the ‘Arabness’ of Iraq’s Shiite population, suggesting they have Iranian origins or at least that they are loyal to Iran. Several books on that theme appeared starting from the mid-1930s, including Abderrazzaq al-Hassan’s Arabism in the Balance (1933) and Maarouf Rasafi’s Iraqi Letter (1940). Both books questioned the ‘Arabness’ of Iraq’s Shiites, which by extension meant raising doubts about their loyalty and patriotism.

Throughout all that the various Iraqi factions were quarrelling, sometimes sharply, over narratives of the past. One famous incident in Iraqi history was when Shiites demonstrated against a book published by Anis al-Nusuoli, a Syrian teacher working in Iraq, which glorified the Umayyad state.

Some researchers see this as a facet of the victory of the Turkish model and its representatives in Iraq over the Iranian model and its representatives. Although the Sharifian Officers carried a pan-Arab project that, at the time, was defined in contrast to Turkish nationalism, not to mention the fact that the nation-building project was started by the British, the nationalist model that dominated the thinking of Sharifian Officers, who, it should be recalled, were trained in the Ottoman army, was the Kemalist model and its understanding of the nation, the state and power. Thus, the Iraqi nation, and possibly pan-Arabism, were built on the model of Turkish nationalism and inherited even its understanding of ethnic and sectarian balances in the region.3

To sum up, the nation-building project in Iraq (and possibly in the broader region, too) failed to meld or integrate the identities that existed in the country into one national identity. Instead, it is the nation-building project that was contained within the rivalry and clash of these identities. The Iraqi nation was built on the basis of a unitary Arab-Muslim identity; and the deep logic of the state, which carried the project to build a coherent nation, was that this coherence can only be achieved by eliminating religious and ethnic diversity.

The plan to weave the various ethnic identities into one demographic-political tissue failed.

A long-term strategy was put in place to achieve this coherence, including expulsion (as happened with the Jews and is happening now to Christians), forcible modification of ethnic identity and all the way to mass extermination. Such practices were not mistakes, but rather the manifestations of a long historic process to align the nation and the state, to create the coherent unitary-identity nation that could live in peace with the post-colonial state. Redrawing the borders of the state could be the last manifestation of this historic alignment process.

**POLITICAL SECTARIANISM AS DENIAL OF DIVERSITY**

Thus, the more established nation-building becomes in this manner, the more political sectarianism expands, by which I mean recognition of pre-state identities and building political institution based on them. Although the Iraqi state tried from the begin-

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ning to give the various identities making up the country some representation in political institutions and the administration – under Sunni domination, of course – this tendency became more marked when the nation-building process was launched in earnest, especially from the early 1930s on.

But first we should note that any national or nation-state system in a multi-identity country has to recognise that diversity to some extent. That recognition comes in various forms: institutional, legal or traditional. Under the Iraqi monarchy, alongside the dominant tendency to give the state a unitary identity, diversity was recognized in different ways, including religion-based family and civil status laws and cultural recognition of local languages, enshrined in the local languages law of 1931, even though classic nationalist models made a point of defining the national language as a pillar of nationalist construction. In addition, there was some degree of allocation of political and administrative posts on the basis of existing identities.

The representation of Shiites in ruling institutions was one of the thorny problems under the Iraqi monarchy, dominated by the Sunnis for various reasons that we are not going to discuss in detail here. Suffice it to say that this dominance came about not just because the Sharifian Officers, who controlled the levers of power, all had background in the Ottoman administration, but also because the highly sectarian Ottoman state afforded the Sunni community the opportunity to cultivate competence in the political, military and bureaucratic domains while keeping the Shiites marginalized. Shiite leaders were aware of this. Samir Naqqash related what one of them told B. H. Bourdillon, the British high commissioner in Iraq:

We know we are uneducated and so cannot at present take our proper share in public services. What we want is British control, to save us from Sunni domination, until our sons are educated;

then we, who are the real majority, will take our proper place in the government of our country.  

What is remarkable is that Shiite representation, say in ministerial posts, grew as the unitary nation-building process deepened. In the first phase of the modern Iraqi state (under the British mandate, 1921-32) and before the Sharifian Officers came to power in the early 30s, Shiites held 18% of these posts; that rose to around 28% in the following phase (1936-46) and reached about 35% in the period of 1947-58, described as the second foundation of the monarchy in Iraq. In this latter phase, four out of the 12 prime ministers were Shiites (Iraq had 23 prime ministers in the whole monarchic era).

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It appears clear that political sectarianism in this sense was an attempt to fill in the gaps, or manage the crises, of the nation-building process. More dangerous, though, was that in reality it reaffirmed the existing power balance – and when the equilibrium is disrupted, sectarian relations turn violent. This is what happened in 1958, unleashing sharp and violent ethnic and sectarian confrontations, including the Kurdish rebellion of September 1961 and an unprecedented explosion of the Sunni-Shiite conflict. The 1960s were a sectarian decade par excellence.

This period produced the second document about the ‘Rights of the Shiites’ in the history of the mod-

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ern Iraqi state. Sheikh Muhammed Ridha al-Shibibi in 1965, just a few days before he died, presented a document on this exact subject to then Prime Minister Abderrahman al-Bazzaz. A comprehensive document, it mentioned internal crises, Iraq’s foreign relations and the necessity of its commitment to pan-Arabism, called for restoration of constitutional political life through free elections, guarantees for freedom of expression and the press, a decentralized system to treat the Kurdish question, respecting the rights of labour unions and better labour legislations. Yet it focused on the necessity of comprehensive equality and fighting the sectarian discrimination that, according to Al-Shibibi, left “the majority of the people” (by which he means the Shiites) under-represented in government posts. Jobs were filled based on sectarian clientelism, not competence, he contends, and the areas where the majority is concentrated and their cultural, economic and social facilities were neglected. Even worse, their dignity was targeted and doubts raised about their origins, their ‘Arabness’ and their loyalty to the country. Shibibi also criticized some economic measures the Shiites and their leaders felt were targeted against them, like the 1964 nationalization law which the Shiite community protested, seeing it as targeting Shi’ite capital, and before that was the agricultural reform law, which drew a negative reaction from the religious authorities of Najaf.

Shabibi’s was the second document of its kind, after that of Sheikh Muhammed al-Hussein Kashif al-Ghita’a, a leading Shi’ite ‘alim (scholar), during the mid-Euphrates rebellion in 1935, in the early days of the Sharifian Officers’ rule. Known as the ‘Najaf Charter’, this document, written by Kashif al-Ghita’a and a number of tribal leaders from the mid-Euphrates area, is more explicit about “the rights of the Shiites” than Shibibi’s document. Although it does mention some general demands, like freedom of the press, bureaucratic reforms and more care for Islamic charitable foundations, and some tribal demands, like lighter taxation on agriculture and more effective land registry measures, the document is mainly concerned with what it describes as the “sectarian discrimination” that underlies the power structure in Iraq. “The majority of the country” (again, meaning the Shiites) is represented by one or two ministers, it continues, chosen from circles close to the regime. The document denounced the sectarian hiring policies adopted in government and the administration and called for them to be changed. It also complained of the neglect afflicting healthcare, education and other public institutions in Shi’ite regions, especially in the south of Iraq. It called for an end to Shiite exclusion from judicial bodies and demanded that the majority of judges should be Shiites (as per the 1925 Constitution that stipulated that judges should come from the majority religious current), that a Shi’ite judge should sit on each circuit of the Court of Cassation, and that Jaafari jurisprudence should be taught at law faculties.9

So the sectarian equilibrium turns violent when its order is disrupted, as happened in July 1958. Batatu noted:

In upsetting the old power structure and the old class configuration, the revolution [of 1958] has disrupted the delicate balance between the various ethnic and sectarian communities of Iraq, and basically between the Arabs and Kurds and the Shi’is and Sunnis, mainly owing to the unevenness in the social developments of these communities. One practically unhappy consequence has been the revolt of the Kurds [of 1961] (Batutu, 1978, p. 807).

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This disruption of the existing equilibrium will happen twice more in pivotal moments in modern Iraqi history: in 1991 and 2003.

In 1991, after the defeat of the Iraqi army by the international coalition in the first Gulf War, Saddam Hussein’s regime appeared to be on the verge of collapse, which made a redistribution of the balance of power between the competing identities look possible. So that period saw sharp sectarian confrontation, which manifested itself in the 1991 Shiite Rebellion in the south and mid-Euphrates under the slogan “Mākū wali ilā ‘Alī, nīād qā‘īd Ja‘afarī” (No ruler but Ali, Imam of Shiites, we want a Jaafari leader), which is clearly a call for a religious state under Shiite leadership, in the state’s violent reaction and the massacres that accompanied it and in the political discourse that accompanied the events and went beyond competition of identities to reproduce the dominant stereotypes of the ‘Sunni tyranny’ and ‘Shiite traitors’.

The uprising in the south was followed by years of debate and bickering over the sectarian issues, both inside Iraq, where the government reorganized the country into ‘white’ (Sunni) provinces and black provinces for the Shiite and Kurdish population, and abroad, where Iraqi politicians and researches discussed the sectarian question more intensely than ever before.

Most of the literature discussing the sectarian question in the country appeared in the 1990s, or the late 1980s at the earliest. Some fundamental works were written, though most of them approached the issue from the angle of Shiite exclusion from power since the foundation of modern Iraq. Shiite claims about injustice and exclusion from power, although old, found their clearest and most comprehensive expressions during the 1990s. Some notable works in this field:


**Political Sectarianism as Recognition of Diversity**

In 2003, the fall of the regime and the power void re-launched the conflict between the various components of Iraq. This time, though, the American operator did not limit its action to playing competing identities off against each other, but rather contributed to shaping the new state. More precisely, after April 2003 the Americans worked to change the definition of Iraq from a nation state to a multi-identity state whose institutions are built to express all these identities.

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Before and during this process we saw a copious output of literature explaining that Iraq is an ‘artificial’ state, invented by British colonialism in the first quarter of the 20th century and that this ‘inven-
tionality’ is the reason for the collapse of the Iraqi state. This thesis started emerging in Western writings, especially in the US and the UK, around the mid-1990s, or from the end of the first Gulf War in 1991 according to Isam al-Khafaji. Toby Dodge’s *Inventing Iraq: The Failure of Nation Building and a History Denied* (2003) is seen as the archetype of this thesis.

On the one hand, this thesis was an attempt to understand the crisis of the Iraqi state, but on the other it was an attempt to justify American plans to redefine the identity of the Iraqi state. And it was criticized by Iraqi and Western writers and researchers that adhere to what I describe as ‘Iraqi nationalist romanticism’. The core of their criticism is that the idea of an ‘invented’ Iraq is a simplistic orientalist proposition. Instead they argue that the formation of the ‘Iraqi nation’ – while certainly not as old as ancient Mesopotamian civilizations as the modern state’s propaganda claimed in an attempt to base Iraqi identity on the two pillars of ‘Arabness’ and Mesopotamian roots – dates from before British occupation, to at least the early 18th century, when Baghdad gradually emerged as the centre of the three Ottoman governorates of Baghdad, Mosul and Basra. According to Isam al-Khafaji:

> Since the 18th century Baghdad slowly but steadily emerged as the administrative and economic centre of what would become modern Iraq. The governors of Baghdad gradually assumed responsibilities covering the whole territory of today’s Iraq. And Ottoman sultans mandated them with this responsibility as long as they carried it out competently and it did not stoke either their ambitions or calls for independence from the empire. The affirmative role of Baghdad and its governors was backed up by some economic developments, chief among which were successful attempts to use the Tigris for navigation and the settlement of border disputes with Persia (Al-Khafaji, 2012, pp. 106-107).

More broadly, al-Khafaji does not deny that the modern political map of the region was shaped by the great colonial powers, but:

> The great powers, driven by the desire to maximise their political and economic benefit from colonialism, could not ignore the long-term processes that brought some groups together or separated them from others. Colonial powers could, and did, play on some population segments in the lands they controlled, but this could not have worked if it did not coincide with strong local interests (…). The formation of modern states in the Middle East was a case of the articulation of local social structures with established regional and international forces and factors. (…) The formation of modern Iraq, Syria, Lebanon, and the Gulf principalities was the product of long-term economic and social processes that operated within the context of the region’s integration in the global market. The colonial powers tried to subjugate these provinces but in the end, and regardless of their intentions, they had to adapt to the economic, social and political realities of these societies (Al-Khafaji, 2012).

In my opinion, it would be difficult, and probably without interest, to try to answer the question of whether Iraq, at any moment of its history before or after the British occupation, did constitute a ‘nation’. Not only because the ‘nation’ as a demographic, socio-political entity might be a pure product of the European historic experience specifically and the fact that it was abstracted into a concept and turned into a mechanism applicable outside Europe by colonial ‘nation-building’ projects does not mean that societies outside Europe are capable of building or accepting a ‘nation’-like demographic-political structure, but also because the answer would in any case be ideological and politicized. It is more important, in my point of view, to examine two programmes applied in

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Iraq within the past 100 years. The first, carried out by the British, governed the drawing of maps in the first quarter of the 20th century and was based on a nationalist perspective that saw Iraq as a ‘nation’ or as capable of becoming a nation. The second was a pluralist programme applied by the Americans that drew on their own political and cultural experience – what some researchers describe as the ‘multi-cultural state’ – and was based on a pluralist perspective that saw Iraq as a collection of distinct identities. The Americans tried to build political institutions to reflect this diversity. The first draft of this pluralist system was the Law of Administration for the State of Iraq for the Transitional Period (also called the Transitional Administrative Law, or TAL), issued in March 2004 as an interim Constitution. It was purely an American proposition, with no input from the Iraqi political elite (which, at the time, was made up mostly of figures of the former opposition to the Saddam regime), whose ideas for a post-Saddam state did not go beyond the same notion of a ‘nation state’ with a special status for the Kurdish region, as some studies have shown. The Iraqi elite did not think in terms of a multi-cultural state or one with composite identity. The American design contained all the elements of a pluralist system – decentralization, federalism, proportional representation, mutual vetoes – seen as the ideal system for divided societies, now that Iraq had been redefined as a divided society. Parallel to that was the traditional practice of distributing senior political and state positions among the representatives of the major identities of the country. However, the permanent Constitution of 2005, drafted by an elected Iraqi commission, saw the re-emergence of a majoritarian tendency that tried systematically to eliminate major aspects of the pluralist system. In fact, as a political document, the 2005 Constitution contains two contradictory tendencies, one pluralist, inherited from the transitional administrative law, the other majoritarian, which does not adhere to a pluralist model.

The second tendency was led by the Shiites political elite that, possibly because of its traditional nationalist background or because of the political mindset that comes with being the demographic majority, had little time for the idea of a multi-identity state. Thus, some major components of the pluralist system were eliminated (mutual veto, legislation by absolute majority to guarantee national consociation, and so on) in favour of a majoritarian system that is working to suppress pluralism, including the federalist principle. The past few years, for example, saw attempts to redefine Iraqi federalism away from the US or German model to make Iraq into a centralized state containing a ‘special status region’, following the Spanish or Italian models.

**The Constitution of 2005 saw the re-emergence of a majoritarian tendency that tried systematically to eliminate major aspects of the pluralist system.**

The majoritarian tendency in the 2005 Constitution formed the basis of the exclusionary practices later adopted by Prime Minister Nouri al-Maliki in his eight years in office (2006-14), who tried to impose his control on all branches of government and public institutions: on parliament (by limiting its legislative and monitoring roles), on the judiciary and other independent commissions, on the military, the media, in addition to a host of draft laws that limit freedom of expression. As to partnership with other identities

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in the institutions of power, Maliki, on top of his rejection of any decentralized arrangements and his total control over security decisions, refused to activate or develop the political bodies that were intended to deepen the principle of partnership. These include the Council of Union, intended by the Constitution as the second chamber of the Iraqi parliament with a consociational authorities mode; it has yet to be formed or convened, or the National Council for Strategic Policies, a body bringing together representatives of the main identities and charged with defining the broad policy orientations of the country.

It seems clear that the Shiite elite does not believe in a composite identity for the country. Instead they dealt with the post-2003 state through the tradition of the nation state, reproducing the nationalist belief in a unitary identity for the country – albeit one that is not identical to the identity adopted after the foundation of the modern state in 1921.

A way to contain (or window-dress) this problem was to distribute chairmanship positions among the main identities of the country, while keeping the partnership limited to the sphere of execution, not high-level decision-making. This strategy not only produced a failed state, incapable of offering basic services (first and foremost, security), but also failed to build a marginal or secondary concept of partnership.

The most dangerous aspect here is that a system built on the recognition and institutionalization of ethnic identities that failed to offer equal partnership for these identities in governing bodies only led to deeper attachment to these identities at the expense of the national identity, to the point of severing all exchange – in the literal sense – between Iraqi components. Exchange, according to Jürgen Habermas, is the foundation of the public sphere.

Thus the multi-ethnic state that ended up dominated by the spirit of the nation state proved no better at ending identity competition than the nation state that had been submerged and subjugated by the identity competition. In both cases, political sectarianism was the expression of a crisis within the regime, which is why both regimes fell: the nation state regime fell in 1958 and ended in 2003, and the multi-identity regime fell in June 2014.

Although one could argue that other elements contributed to the fall of these regimes, such as internal class contradictions, international factors, foreign military occupation, or the challenge of radical organizations, it remains that it is first and foremost tied to the failure of the state’s internal logic.

In both cases political sectarianism turned into general mobilization of communities based on narratives that place identity competition in an ahistorical context, based on the idea of absolute historic rights and the pure evil of the ‘other’. We will come back to this point in discussing the structure of sectarian argumentation as pure discourse.

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This mobilization made communities capable of waging holy war on the other; an existential war whose soldiers and victims lack understanding of its political context, Thomas Hobbes’ original “war of all against all”.

**A NATION WITHOUT BORDERS**

The experience of authoritarian regimes in the region, having adopted a unitary identity as we discussed above, prevented cross-border movements of opposite identities, or movements of identities that differ from the state’s unitary identity. This was the case even though, in Iraq, the state itself adopted a cross-border identity, pan-Arabism, as part of its ideology. This led it to get involved in cross-border projects
based on this identity, such as supporting pan-Arabist movements in various parts of the world, similar to what non-governmental identity movements do today. The Islamic Dawa Party, founded in the late 1950s to stand against the rising leftist and communist tide, became an expression of Shiite identity and its narrative about exclusion from power. And although it did find echo outside Iraq, especially in Shiite circles in Lebanon and the Gulf, as the first Shiite political organization in the modern era, its formula as an Arab Shiite party with branches outside Iraq did not develop and did not inspire others to follow its example. Yet the collapse of states in the eastern part of the Arab World allowed such identity movements to come to the fore. The collapse of the state, in the case of Iraq, is seen in the fact that it went from being an authoritarian state to being a failed state. The dominance of identity movements could be one of the hallmarks of a transitional period, whose duration is anybody’s guess, but it will certainly be one of the decisive factors in shaping a new map for the Arab east.

Indeed, the discrepancy of in-fighting identities over lands whose identities are defined in contradiction to the fighting identities is in itself a historic discrepancy resulting from lack of understanding of ongoing developments. National borders no longer have any value to these identities that see themselves as broader and more real than these artificial borders. What we see here is not only the failure of a nation-building project that could not bring itself to accept the melding of pre-modern ethnicities in one national identity based on the polity but instead tried to build a unitary nation based on ethnic identity, it is also the tendency of ethnicities (or identities contradicting the state’s unitary identity) to invent a new, post-nation-building form: that of an alternative nation, with a political identity corresponding to sectarian or ethnic identity. This alternative nation is broader and older and goes beyond modern-state national identity.

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The scene right now is that of armed conflict between forces based on transnational religious, ethnic or sectarian identities: the Islamic State (ISIS) calls on Sunnis all over the world to come to Iraq to fight Iraqi Shiites on their land, while the Abbas Brigade, an Iraqi Shiite militia, is fighting Syrians on their land to defend Shiite shrines there, and the Kurdish Peshmerga fighters cross into Syrian territory to defend Syrian Kurds from other fighters, some of whom are Syrian.

CONCLUDING QUESTIONS:
MODERNIZATION OR DEMOCRACY?
This troubling situation poses a number of problematic questions that usually surround waves of change in the non-Western world, and in our region in particular, especially now that it is rocked by three profound and interconnected disruptions: the failure of the post-authoritarian state in Iraq, the receding of hope brought about by the Arab Spring and the rise of what can generally be described as ‘religious radicalism’.

Specifically, can a nationalist, just and pluralist political system contain the raging rivalry between identities? Can genuine democratization bridge over this rivalry? Can democratization anticipate structural social and cultural modernization? Can political reform stand in for cultural reform? Or is it the case that cultural modernization can be brought about by the political sphere, or by a state that decrees modernization as in some notable experiences in the region? Is there a path to modernization different from the Western path? Is there logical inevitability that could open a path to modernization in the region along the model of European modernity? Again,
does the problem lie in the failure of the modernization project and its reduction to abstract tools? Can the modernization project coexist with extant pre-modern structures?

Indeed, can we move forward without a global vision that encompasses all these complications and without confronting these problematic questions with all their heat and turbulence?
REFERENCES


