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## **Nationalism, regionalism, sectarianism and identity politics in Post-Saddam Iraq**

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### **Abstract**

The article aims to explore the dynamics of nationalism, regionalism, sectarianism, and identity politics in post-Saddam Iraq. Further, it explores the transition from an Arab-centric authoritarian form of nationalism during Saddam to a more fractured and complex national identity like Rubik's Cube, that is trying to solve Iraq's diverse ethnic and religious complications. This paper also emphasises the notable impact of Kurdish nationalism and regionalism in contesting conventional nationalist narratives. Moreover, examines the rising sectarian conflict between Sunni and Shia Muslims in the struggle for political dominance. Furthermore, this study analyses the phenomenon of identity politics, when different factions establish their own interests within the context of nation-building. Also, this study offers valuable insights into the complicated dynamics of Iraqi society and its ongoing transition towards a democratic future.

**Keywords:** Arab-centric nationalism, Post-Saddam Era, Identity Politics, Sectarianism, Kurdish Nationalism, Sunni-Shia Conflicts, Ethnic Diversity, Political Transition in Iraq

### **Introduction**

The national identity of Iraq has seen a major shift subsequent to the regime of Saddam Hussein. The fall of authoritarian rule marked not only a political upheaval but also ignited a re-evaluation of Iraqi national identity. It brought to the fore the complexities and nuances of various socio-political forces at play. Particularly, Sectarianism has gained unprecedented prominence post 2003, as the power vacuum left by Saddam's fall and the subsequent political restructuring have led to heightened sectarian conflicts. These conflicts between Shia and Sunni groups play a crucial role in shaping discourse of both political affiliations and social tendency in Iraq. This research explores how sectarianism has influenced the political outlook and national identity, particularly hindering efforts towards national unity and democracy. Moreover, Regionalism, in the context of the Kurdish question, adds another layer of complication. Focussing on their distinct cultural and historical identity, the Kurdish movement for autonomy and self-determination are continually challenging the traditional Arab oriented perspective of Iraqi nationalism. The aspirations and actions of the Kurdistan Regional Government (KRG) <sup>[1]</sup> have profound implications for the nationalist discourse. It underscores the need for a nuanced understanding of regional influences on national identity. Furthermore, identity politics in Iraq (a product of its rich yet complex social fabric) has emerged as a significant force. Therefore, this article examines how various groups within Iraq defined by ethnicity, religion, and regional affiliations navigate the political domain to assert their identities and interests. It has significant implications for the nation-building process in Iraq, also influencing policies, governance, and the very notion of what it means to be an Iraqi.

Historically, Nationalism in Iraq has been shaped by the narratives of Arab unity. It is now being redefined in the context of a fragmented polity and a pluralistic society. During Saddam Husein era, the concept of nationalism was used as a tool for authoritarian control. Now, there is a little change in fabric of nationalism. Sectarian identity is deciding the basic element of it. That is why, it is said that nationalism is a complicated and varied notion that may take on several meanings and uses, depending on the circumstances. It is fundamentally about developing a common identity and a feeling of belonging within a certain group or country. However, the definition, construction, and mobilisation of nationalism may have a profound influence on social, cultural, and political life. In Iraq, the discourse surrounding nationalism has shifted radically in recent years. It has new voices and viewpoints questioning historical beliefs and attitudes. These developments have brought monumental obstacles and new possibilities. Therefore, this study will look at how nationalism is developing in Iraq, so that we may obtain a better grasp of the complicated notion of nationalism.

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This study has also been formulated to investigate the forces that are driving change in social fabrics and political transformations<sup>[2]</sup>.

After the US-led invasion of Iraq in 2003, the discourse of nationalism has been changed radically. Firstly, a sovereign nation was invaded on false premises, the leader (Saddam Hussein) was ousted from power and finally hanged till death on 30 December, 2006. Before it, Iraq was under full control of the supreme leader (Saddam Hussein) and the discourse set by him was ultimate discourse of Iraqi nationalism. Arab unity was at the heart of it. Saddam was the firm believer of centralised governance system. However, after his demise, there was a resurgence of sectarian violence, but this time followers of Shia sects were in power, and atrocities were increasingly happening against Sunni and Kurds. This provoked a fresh arguments and views about the nature of Iraqi nationalism. Many organisations started to promote their own interpretations and understanding of nationalism, which were in general opposing each other. This has resulted in a great deal of political insecurity and uncertainty in Iraq. At the same time Kurds were also asserting their demand for greater autonomy and more participation in the government. Besides sectarian identity; mostly Sunni and Kurds have also a distinct culture, language, and history that set them apart from the rest of Iraq. Also, the movement for Kurdish identity has challenged Iraqi nationalism's traditional Arab-centric philosophy to a cultural and racial one<sup>[3]</sup>.

Kurds' movement for nationalism has also shown that Iraq is made up of several ethnic and religious communities, each with its unique history and culture. Many Iraqis believe that Iraq is a multiethnic and multireligious state with a rich past that precedes the contemporary nation-state. The collapse of Saddam Hussein's administration, and the accompanying sectarian bloodshed, has caused a rethinking of what it means to be an Iraqi. There is increasing acknowledgment that Iraq is a varied and complicated country, and that any concept of Iraqi nationalism must account for this diversity.<sup>[4]</sup> The rise of a Kurdish nationalist movement, increased interest in Kurds' history, sectarian glorification and the demise of Saddam Hussein have all led to a re-evaluation of Iraqi nationalism. This also has led to some political challenges and unpredictability in Iraq socio-political dynamics. Moreover, it has also presented new opportunity to nurture a diverse and inclusive sense of belongingness.

### **Iraqi Nationalism from Autocracy to Democracy**

In post-Saddam era, Iraq has come across explicit change in the discourse on nationalism, particularly during its challenging turn from autocratic rule of Saddam to democratic governance of coalition government. During Saddam rule, the concept of nationalism was strictly regulated and often exploited for political ends, there were no space for opposition. Saddam's regime positioned itself as the protector of Iraqi sovereignty and national identity. In the name of protecting Iraq, Saddam was always protecting his regime by promoting xenophobic form of nationalism<sup>[5]</sup>. Following the collapse of Saddam's regime in 2003, Iraq had the monumental task of establishing a democratic and progressive society that respect the diversity, civil rights and different identities of its people. A significant hurdle in this journey has been the sectarian conflict between Sunni and Shia Muslims, a historical divide that has been a source of

conflict and violence in the country for years. Moreover, the Kurdish independence movement has been one of the most significant challenges to the traditional discourse of nationalism in Iraq. The essence of Kurdish nationalism is the demand of greater autonomy in northern Iraq and possibly the separation from Baghdad.

In September 2017, facing continuous neglect from Iraq's central government, the Kurdistan Regional Government (KRG) held a referendum. This initiative apprehended great importance for Kurds and antagonism for the central government. Around 92% of the 3.3 million Kurds supported separation from Iraq<sup>[6]</sup>. Despite such a huge support, the referendum faced harsh criticism from both the Iraqi central government and the international community. After the referendum, the KRG intended to initiate talks with Iraq's central government, capitalising the strong pro-independence sentiment as a negotiating tool. However, it went other way; Iraq, along with Turkey and Iran, imposed economic sanctions on Kurdistan. Furthermore, the Iraqi military and *Hashd al-Shabi*<sup>[7]</sup> recaptured lands that the Peshmerga (KRG Army) had taken over from the Islamic State in 2014. Consequently, the Kurds lost substantial territories and oil resources they had controlled earlier, and they could not even get independence either.<sup>[8]</sup> Although the referendum did not achieve its intended goal, it underscored the Kurds' deep-seated yearning for self-governance. This event hindered the importance of peaceful co-existence and inclusive discussions to address the Kurds' legitimate rights (promised by the Iraqi government) and hopes within the broader national context<sup>[9]</sup>.

### **Propaganda Machinery Shaping Discourse**

When we examine the invasion of Iraq by America through the lens of a sophisticated propaganda campaign, it is argued to be a manifestation of mass-mediated discourse shaped by think tanks and organized claim makers. We find that the rationale for Iraq invasion was systematically constructed over a decade as a "public conspiracy" by the Project for a New American Century (PNAC). The Bush administration's propaganda campaign was primarily focused on vilifying Iraq and its leader Saddam Hussein, attributing responsibility for attacks on the United States.<sup>[10]</sup> Today, after the publication of Chilcot Report 2016,<sup>[11]</sup> it is explicitly clear that Saddam Hussein's perceived threat was purposely exaggerated. The decision to launch military action in Iraq was based on a propagated threat dossier disseminated by British intelligence agencies. Several warnings about the possible consequences of the invasion were disregarded, especially about the aftermath of the invasion. The lack of a coherent post-invasion strategy led in a protracted period of instability inside Iraq. Furthermore, the report criticises the government's poor attempts to track Iraqi civilian casualties throughout the war, demonstrating a lack of concern for the conflict's humanitarian implications. All of these elements point to a flawed decision-making process that culminated in one of the most contentious military acts of the early twenty-first century<sup>[12]</sup>.

The media significantly influences public opinion and thought; however, it is said to be the fourth pillar of democracy. Its main responsibility is to raise the people's voice, it may be against government or any supra national body. But, it has been seen many time, that the media acts as a powerful tool for spreading a government's policies and also worked as propaganda machinery like Rwanda Radio

[13]. Media also incite social and political unrest by promoting divisive and exclusionary discourses. It is also the fact that, in many countries, media has played a key role in advocating for a strong and unified national identity rooted in cultural nationalism; often through propagations that favor ideologies of dominant class or majority. In some cases, the media has aided supranational bodies or powerful nations of the world to reconstruct and destabilize political systems of weaker nations. That is why, it has been criticized for promoting divisive, exclusionary and sometimes nationalist ideologies, that led to the marginalization of minority and oppressed groups. There have been instances where the media is seen as fueling negative sentiments against certain regional, religious, or ethnic communities, intensifying internal tensions at national level. Regarding this opinion, *Thanassis Cambanis*, senior fellow at the *Century Foundation*, recalls his time as a journalist in Iraq during the 2003 war. He emphasised the effort of journalists, including himself, to adequately report on Iraq's intricacies in the face of deceptive narratives peddled by American leaders and officials. Despite their best efforts, journalists were unable to fight the powerful government misinformation campaign by the United States, which often distorted the situation of Iraq. *Cambanis* also considers journalism's failure on persuading public opinion on the real facts, and on the ongoing struggle against official narratives and disinformation. His report emphasises the difficulties that journalists confront in combat zones, and on their constant battle against widespread misleading information [14].

#### **Sectarian Divides and the Crisis of Secular Nationalism**

Nationalism and sectarianism have been more closely linked in modern politics of Iraq. The majority of discussions is on controversies concerning the role of sectarian identity in moulding political and nationalist discourse. *Hobsbawm* once predicted that the influence of nationalism in the realm of politics throughout the 21st century is anticipated to be less formidable compared to its prominence in the preceding century. [15] This prediction seems to be true in case of Iraqi nationalism, but not so true in context to Kurdish one. In fact, it has re-emerged with strong force in post-Saddam Iraq. It came as the old wine in a new bottle with strong sectarianism, regionalism and religious politicking since the Shia majority in Iraq has gained political influence, as most of Kurds (98%) are Sunni Muslim [16]. This has also resulted into terrorism, with extremist organisations utilising sects to further their political goals. It is argued that the central leadership in Iraq has been engaging in sectarian identity politics, even more than Saddam's era. Most of the time they are alleged to work in the interest of Shia sect, while previous administration was alleged to support Sunnis. It led to further exclusion and marginalization of the Kurds and other ethno-religious minority groups [17]. This situation raises questions about the US and Iraqi leadership's commitment to fostering an inclusive form of nationalism that values diversity and aims to unite people across religious and ethnic lines. Notwithstanding, all these challenges, efforts have been initiated to involve peoples' dialogue and cooperation among various groups, aiming to promote more united and inclusive nationalism. For example, the *Tishreen* protest of 2019-21 symbolized a widespread desire for effective governance and a unified state. A key slogan of this movement was the call for a

united Iraq. This also reflected in their slogan "We want a nation." This phrase captures the essence of the protesters' aspirations for better national unity and unbiased governance [18].

It has been more than twenty years since Saddam Hussein's regime was overthrown, but Iraq is still facing continuous violence and conflicts among its Sunni, Shia, and Kurdish populations. The ongoing state of affairs are putting the stability of its developing democratic system at risk. Instead of creating an inclusive government, the Iraqi leaders are fuelling the fire of internal conflict for political gain. It is argued that the situation is linked to the broader regional dynamics, such as the *Arab Spring*, emergence of *ISIS* and the Sunni opposition to Shia regime, these all have due to transnational sectarian divides. Moreover, Shia-dominated political system has created an environment ripe for extremism, particularly among alienated Sunnis and Kurds. The tenure of *Nouri al-Maliki*, a Shia Prime Minister, aggravated Sunni alienation and Shia rivalries. He did little to bridge the gap between different sects and groups. Therefore, to avoid further disintegration or to overcome this new authoritarian tendency, Iraq needs to focus on a political framework that emphasizes individual liberty over sectarian ties.

#### **National Identity and Democratic Principles**

The complex interplay between nationalism and democracy varies based on historical, cultural, and political factors. Evidently, Post-Saddam Iraq is still struggling to establish a democratic system. However, managing the diverse ethnic and religious groups like Sunnis, Shias, and Kurds is a major challenge to this goal. Iraqi nationalism splits into two: a united Iraqi identity based on Arab nationalism and distinct ethnic or sectarian identities based on regional, sectarian and cultural affiliation; and, the latter often impedes democratic progress. Sectarianism, for example, can cause political instability, public discontent, and violence, obstructing the growth of a prosperous democracy. On the other hand, a broader and inclusive Iraqi nationalism could accelerate democratic development by uniting various groups through shared values and common goals. A united identity may perhaps lead to increased cooperation across diverse groups, enhancing governance and ultimately leading to prosperity. For example, the balance between nationalism and democracy is evident in India. Indian nationalism since independence in 1947 put great focus on *unity in diversity*. It was crucial during the independence struggle against British colonial policy of *Divide and Rule*. Indian democracy flourished with regular and transparent elections process that made no community feels alienated. However, these days' rising religio-cultural nationalism has sparked tensions between different religious communities that also have potential to hinder the ongoing progress and social harmony. In this case even the current political leadership of India is solely responsible but not like Iraqi one. As, the influence of nationalism on democracy depends largely on political leadership that how he/she manipulates the existing diversity of a society. An inclusive form of nationalism that values and embraces diversity strengthens democracy by fostering unity and communal harmony. In contrast, a narrow and exclusionary view of nationalism (favoring one group over others) can undermine democratic values that leads to intolerance, conflict, and ultimately the social division.

### Education System and its Impact on Nationalism

The educational system plays an important role in shaping nationalist ideologies. The way education is structured, administered and delivered can foster either an inclusive view of nationalism by imparting secular education or a more exclusive one by propagating communal content. The ruling party or groups often influence this by reshaping the historical narrative to highlight the achievements of past leaders while minimizing the contributions of minority groups and those outside the government's influence.

In Iraq, the education system has been deeply affected by politicization and sectarianism. During Saddam era, there was a strong focus on Arab nationalism, often overlooking Iraq's rich cultural and religious diversity. Post-Saddam, attempts have been made to reform education to foster a more inclusive understanding of nationalism. However, sectarian and political divisions continue to challenge the Iraqi education system. Concerns are growing about the spread of exclusive ideologies within schools and other educational institutions, particularly in the region governed by the Kurdish population. These challenges highlight the complexity of educational reform in Iraq. There is an urgent need for policies that not only preserve but also promote Iraq's diverse cultural and religious heritage, ensuring that the education system contributes positively to the development of a broad and inclusive nationalism.

### Regional Identities and the impact of Global Incidents

In post-Saddam era, the domain of nationalism in Iraq is a complex blend of regionalism, sectarianism, ethnic diversity, and foreign interventions. Let us deconstruct it to understand how these elements (except sectarianism that has been discussed earlier) interplay and shape the national discourse. Initially, let's consider the Kurds' reaction to two decades ago Saddam's fall during the US invasion. It was met with jubilation among the Kurds<sup>[19]</sup>. Kurds assisted US military during invasion in order to fulfil their ambition of independence; however, their dream has been marred with obstacles, leading to a mixed bag of emotions. While there's been some progress but it was overshadowed by political chaos, regional instability, corruption, and a spike in ethnic and sectarian conflicts. It's like embarking on a journey towards a dream destination, only to find the road riddled with unexpected and daunting challenges. Iraq's national scene is further complicated by the presence of varied regional identities and movements. Often, these groups prioritize local concerns over national agenda and created friction with the central government. Imagine a team where each member has a different game plan, then coordinating efforts become challenging, often led to conflicts and misunderstandings.

Now, let's examine the impact of foreign interventions and global events. The 1990 Gulf War and the 2003 US-led invasion are two pivotal events that have profoundly shaped Iraqi nationalism. The Gulf War, sparked by Iraq's invasion of Kuwait<sup>[20]</sup>, was perceived by many Iraqis as an infringement on their national sovereignty and dignity. Saddam Hussein's regime, marked by authoritarianism and oppression, harnessed nationalist rhetoric to rally people against foreign intervention. Hussein framed the war as a resistance against imperialistic ambitions, fostering a strong sense of national pride and defiance<sup>[21]</sup>. The aftermath of the Gulf War saw economic sanctions<sup>[22]</sup> and the continued presence of foreign military forces, which further fueled

nationalist sentiments. These were seen as ongoing violations of Iraq's sovereignty, intensifying feelings of national victimhood and resistance against perceived foreign aggression. The 2003 invasion, ostensibly aimed at eliminating weapons of mass destruction and liberating Iraqis from Saddam's tyranny. But, in fact, it was largely viewed by Iraqis as an unjust attack on their national sovereignty. The presence of foreign troops was met with significant opposition, driven by a desire to protect national integrity. The post-invasion era witnessed a surge in nationalist sentiment transcending sectarian and ethnic lines, focusing on a narrative of national freedom and sovereignty. This period also necessitated a re-examination of Iraqi national identity, highlighting the country's diverse ethnic, religious, and regional makeup; even Kurds were included in the government. But, the occupation and subsequent political reconstruction efforts led to a power vacuum, complicating the nationalist narrative. Various groups endeavoured to assert their identities and visions for Iraq's future, akin to a scenario where multiple architects attempt to design a single building, each with their own unique blueprint. Therefore, managing internal divisions while maintaining a narrative of national sovereignty amidst foreign interference remains a significant challenge. To manage a nation is a balancing act. It requires a nuanced understanding of internal socio-political fabrics and a concerted effort to forge a cohesive and inclusive national identity.

### Conclusion

As a scholar exploring the complex nature of Iraqi nationalism, it is interesting to observe how the phenomenon has evolved over time. Considering the shift from Saddam Hussein's era to the post-2003 landscape as an important turn Iraq had to take. Because, it is argued that Saddam's nationalism was a tool of repression, a kind of command that never accepted dissent and diversity. But post-2003, the scenario changed dramatically. We saw the emergence of sectarian conflict and a hunger for democratic governance. This shift was not just a change in political domain; it was a profound transformation in the essence of Iraqi nationalism. How do we reconcile these contrasting eras? It's like trying to mix oil and water. They are part of the same national story but with starkly different characteristics.

Now, let us explore the Kurdish question. The Kurds' struggle for autonomy, especially highlighted by the 2017 referendum is a pivotal chapter in this narrative. Though, the referendum did not lead to independence, it was a loud and clear statement of their enduring aspiration for self-governance. This brings us to a crucial question: How can Iraq balance these diverse aspirations while maintaining national cohesion? It is like a family dinner where everyone eats different meal, then how can a single dish satisfy all?

The role of propaganda, particularly during the US-led invasion, adds another layer to this complex picture. The US administration's narrative and the challenges journalists faced in presenting an unbiased view underscore how media can shape, and sometimes distort, public perception. Think of it as a game of telephone, where the original message gets twisted with each retelling. Moving further, the rise of the Shia majority and the sidelining of Sunni and Kurdish voices have only deepened the sectarian divide, in post-Saddam era. It is a delicate balance, like walking a tightrope

where one misstep can lead to a fall into the abyss of conflict. Just imagine; what if Iraq embraced a more inclusive form of nationalism? This does not mean ignoring sectarian identities; rather, it is about acknowledging and celebrating them within a broader Iraqi identity. Visualize a mosaic, where each piece retains its uniqueness but contributes to a beautiful collective image. This is where education plays a critical role. Post-Saddam educational reforms aimed at inclusivity are struggling against the tide of ongoing sectarian and political tensions. It is like trying to plant a garden in rocky soil; the potential for growth is there, but the environment is challenging. Finally, the impact of regionalism and international events has been considered seriously in the shaping and reshaping of Iraq. The intricate interplay of regional identity (Kurds) politics with central government policies, and the influence of events like the Gulf War and the US-led invasion; all highlight the dynamic nature of Iraqi nationalism. It's a narrative constantly being rewritten and a story is in continuation. Therefore, the evolution of Iraqi nationalism is not just a study of a nation's history; it is a reflection of its ongoing struggle to forge a unified yet diverse identity. The path ahead is full of challenges, but also ray of possibilities there, if handled with care. It's a journey of navigating the complex terrain of sectarian divides, regional aspirations, and the quest for democratic inclusivity. As scholars, we continue to watch, analyse, and perhaps learn from this ever-evolving saga of nationalism in Iraq.

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