

# Who are the elite groups in Iraq and how do they exercise power?

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## Question

*Who are the elite groups in Iraq (political, religious, economic) and how do they exercise power (through administration; through tribe; other)?*

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# 1. Summary

The 2003 US-led invasion of Iraq transformed Iraq's political settlement by ejecting the previous elites from power and by initiating state-building processes with previously marginalised elites and different governance principles. Iraq's current day elites and institutions are the inheritors of that process. This review summarises the post-2003 processes that structure the nature of Iraqi politics today, it then explains how elites exercise power within these processes, and who those elites are.

## Key findings about the nature of political power and how power is exercised include:

- **Ethno-sectarian identities** have always been present in Iraq, but have deepened since 2003. The US-led invasion changed the political settlement by disbanding the Ba'ath Party (and its favouring of Sunnis), while the previously marginalised Shia community gained power post-2003, due to its larger population size, and its central role in the constitution process. The Kurds also gained power as the Kurdistan Region became autonomous, with its own government, president and parliament. The constitution thus institutionalised and reinforced ethno-sectarian divides and claims to power.
- **The constitution** was drafted and approved very quickly and is widely acknowledged not reflect a national consensus. By excluding key Sunni politicians and their followers, this exclusive elite bargain has contributed to transforming the insurgency in Iraq into a sectarian war. Many Sunnis rejected the state-building processes initiated in 2003.
- **Sectarian-based patronage and corruption** followed from the re-articulation of Iraqi politics along sectarian lines.
- **Elections** play an important role in shaping how elites exercise power, particularly with other elites. And while they are the main mechanism for changing the elites in direct control of the central state apparatus, they act more to 'reshuffle', rather than substantively change, who is in and who is out (Haddad, 2017)
- **Elite-citizen relations** have been damaged by weak state capacity to deliver basic state services, by the disenchantment with divisive sectarian politics, and by anger at increasing poverty, inequality and corruption. Calls for reform are growing, as embodied by the protest movement that started in 2015.
- **Political violence** has been endemic as the state has been unable to withstand pressure from local, national, regional, and international state and non-state actors. This weakness has allowing rival factions to compete for control and influence (Mansour, 2018a). However, the widespread Sunni rejection of the post-2003 order may be waning, as they tire of war, and as the fight against ISIS<sup>1</sup> went some way to uniting groups across Iraq.
- **Tribalism** as a source of social and political organisation has been declining over decades. However, its legacy is strong and tribal ties 'often take precedence over national loyalties and broader ideologies' (Marr & Al-Marashi, 2018, p.16)

## Key findings about Iraq's elites include:

- **Central government elites** – the May 2018 elections saw a surprise result as Muqtada al-Sadr's "Sairoon" coalition won the most seats, but not enough to be an outright winner. Negotiations are ongoing.
- **Intra-Shia rivalry** - The current political settlement is shaped and contested by intra-Shia rivalry between three political blocs, finds Mansour (2018a, p.15-17):

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<sup>1</sup> Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS), also referred to as Daesh, or IS.

- The Sadrist movement led by al-Sadr, and joined to a large non-sectarian protest movement. The coalition derives power and legitimacy from its ability to assemble demonstrations and protests.
  - A right-wing Dawa faction led by Nouri al-Maliki. The faction derives power and legitimacy from its role in fighting ISIS since 2014 through paramilitary groups and militias, its close relations to Iran, Maliki's previous public popularity, and through his approach of targeting opponents.
  - The Nasr coalition, led by the current Prime Minister Haider al-Abadi. The coalition derives power and legitimacy from ISIS's defeat, al-Abadi's successes in improving key ministries, and in gaining support to fight ISIS from allies beyond Tehran.
- **Sunni and Kurdish leaders** 'remain weak due to internal rivalries, weak institutionalisation, and their off-and-on boycotts of Baghdad' (Mansour, 2018a, p.15).
  - **Sunnis** have not had strong political representation since 2003 due to: the deliberate exclusion of representative Sunni leaders from governance processes, the rejection of the post-2003 democratic processes by many Sunnis, de-Ba'athification, and Sunni distrust of Sunni politicians (Seloom, 2017). But this may be changing.
  - **Kurds** post-2003 were very influential in Iraq's political settlement, gaining autonomy, land and resources. However, their influence waned significantly, as they rejected Iraq's political system, and boycotted parliament and the central government, thus losing their foothold in it.
  - **Iraq's public sector ministries** are largely under the control of the central government elites, and their patronage networks.
  - **A range of non-state armed groups** have emerged in Iraq seeking to capture resources and power in the vacuum left by the weak Iraqi state, poor governance, and endemic conflict post-2003 (especially the threat of ISIS and the collapse of the Iraqi army).
  - **Religious elites** play a central role in political and social life, especially for Shias.
  - **Economic elites** are restricted by weak growth in the private sector, outside of the oil sector.

A medium amount of literature was found during this rapid literature review – the majority of it focusses on the party political elites that control, and compete over, central government, and its patronage networks. There was very little literature focussed on religious or economic elites. This review includes sources from think tanks, policy, academia, and some news reports/blogs, where necessary, for an up-to-date perspective on the 2018 election. The literature is gender-blind and does not include information on disability.

The literature is somewhat contradictory in that it universally describes Iraqi elites according to their sectarian affiliation, and discusses how elites use sectarian identity to mobilise people and achieve political gains. Yet it also critiques the use of sectarian analysis as relying on a simplistic 'populist primordialism' (Dodge, 2018), and as being 'never fully convincing or useful on its own' and 'is especially dated today' (Haddad, 2017, p.2). While this review uses sectarian terms to frame and organise the analysis, it does so by understanding identity to be socially constructed (Fearon & Laitin, 2000, p.843).

## 2. Nature of political power and how it is exercised

Since the US-led invasion in 2003, and the introduction of an ethno-sectarian majoritarian power-sharing system, sectarian groups and claims have been the predominant structural force in shaping Iraq's political structure, the hierarchy of elites, and how they exercise power. While

ethno-sectarian identities<sup>2</sup> have always been a feature of Iraqi politics and society, the literature widely identifies these identities to have deepened, become more polarised, and transformed into sectarian conflict in post-2003 Iraq (e.g. Matin, 2018, p.6; Marr & Al-Marashi, 2018, p.12).

## Change in the political settlement

The Arab Sunnis' had traditionally dominated political and social life in Iraq, with a particularly stronghold over politics at the end of the twentieth century through Saddam's Hussein's Ba'ath Party (Kuoti, 2016). Although the Ba'ath party officially championed Iraqi national identity, it effectively favoured Sunnis. Conversely, the Shia had been historically excluded from 'administrative positions, from the military, and from government-sponsored education institutions...the Shia, so long excluded from government, came to be deeply alienated from it, although the Shia had their own educational institutions to train clerics...and an independent source of finances' (Marr & Al-Marashi, 2018, p.10). This changed from 2003 onwards.

Following the US-led invasion of Iraq in 2003, the US forces and the then new Iraqi leadership decided to: disband the Iraqi army; disband Saddam's Hussein's Ba'ath Party (also removing members above a certain level from state organisations); and draft a new constitution (Jawad, 2013). The US appointed committee that drafted the constitution was dominated by Shia and Kurdish representatives, many of which had been living in exile for a long time. The members of the drafting committee were chosen according to their representation of Iraqi sectarian groups, setting off a path towards a more sectarian style of politics. This ruptured the previous political settlement, and in its place emerged a new political settlement favouring Shias.

## Ethno-sectarian power-sharing

The constitution establishes Iraq as a consociational democracy, based on the consociational model, apportioning power to ethnic groups according to population size (Kuoti, 2016). Groups with the largest proportion of the population benefit from the single-district legislature (Shiites and Kurds), and then tend to dominate the parliament (Kuoti, 2016). And although it was not clearly stated in the constitution, an 'informal arrangement' occurred after 'by which certain groups were designated to control various branches of the government' (Kuoti, 2016). The previously marginalised Shia community gained the balance of power after 2003, due to its much larger population size, and its central role in the constitution process. While the previously dominant Sunni community lost power, reflecting its much smaller population, and its peripheral role in the negotiation of the constitution (Yahya, 2017; Kuoti, 2016). The constitution also recognised the Kurdistan Region as autonomous, with its own government, president and parliament. It thus institutionalised and reinforced ethno-sectarian claims to power and divides.<sup>3</sup>

The constitution was drafted and approved very quickly through closed-door negotiations, and without Iraqi constitutional expertise (Jawad, 2013). It is widely acknowledged that the constitution does not reflect a national consensus due to the lack of public debate and the deliberate exclusion of some groups (particularly the Sunnis) (Yahya, 2017; Kuoti, 2016; Dodge, 2012). By excluding key Sunni politicians and their followers, this exclusive elite bargain has contributed to transform the insurgency in Iraq into a sectarian war (Dodge, 2017). Many Sunnis rejected the state-building processes initiated in 2003. Without the Ba'ath party, they lacked political parties that could represent their needs, and they typically feel alienated from power and suspicious of state institutions (Mansour, 2018a; Yahya, 201). While the wide ranging

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<sup>2</sup> Iraq has three major demographic groups marked by linguistic and religious cleavages, and located in different areas of the country. Linguistically, 75-80% of Iraqis speak Arabic; 15-20% speak Kurdish. There has not been a census for decades, but it is estimated that: Iraq's Arab Shia's make up 45-60% of the population; its Arab Sunnis make up 15-20% of the population; and its Kurds make up 15-20% of the population (Marr & Al-Marashi, 2018, p.12-13). These cleavages are described as creating three communities: the Arab Shia, the Arab Sunnis, and the Kurds. (Marr & Al-Marashi, 2018, p.9).

<sup>3</sup> For an analysis of how this sectarian politics emerged, culminating in ISIS, see Matin (2018)

concessions granted to the Kurds 'have been a major factor in maintaining the chaotic situation that pervades most of Iraq', argues Jawad (2013, p.3).

'The sectarianisation of political life not only made political action outside sectarian confines exceedingly difficult, if not impossible; it also meant that supremacy within one's own sect was the main way of acquiring national power and influence' (Yahya, 2017). Citizen-state relations are now mediated by sectarian communities and leaders, that derive their legitimacy from representing their group, rather than the broader citizenry. Ethno-sectarian leaders – political and religious - have drawn on traumatic memories and discourses of victimhood to unify and mobilise their communities. Yahya (2017) also highlights how taking an identity politics perspective, rather than national politics perspective, has 'opened the door to greater external influence', especially from Iran and the US.

## Patronage politics

The structuring of Iraq's politics around sectarian claims has fuelled a system of sectarian-based patronage and corruption, with control over public sector positions and resources a key source of patronage (Kuoti, 2016; Yahya, 2017; Tabaqchali, 2017). 'While certain communities have undoubtedly benefited more than others at specific periods of time' Iraq's power-sharing system is run by 'coalitions of oligarchs whose influence derives mainly from their ability to use state institutions to distribute favors to their clients, often at a significant cost to a majority of citizens' (Yahya, 2017). E.g. 'Government procurement contracts are controlled by political parties that either auction them off, or set up shell companies to award contracts to themselves. These contracts are then sub-contracted, or simply never fulfilled, with funds siphoned off by beneficiaries on the way' (Atlantic Council, 2016).

Huge reconstruction funds for Iraq ended up benefiting a narrow Iraqi elite, and their US counterparts (Yahya, 2017). While 'alliances between politicians and businessmen created environments conducive to crony capitalism' such as lax oversight measures leading to 'unprecedented levels of theft' by the political elite, government employees, and American companies (Yahya, 2017). Political power in Iraq can be understood as dominated 'by a collection of power centres and power brokers of varying strength and influence who combine to form 'the state', and they are 'linked to a collection of foreign powers and patrons who are equally likely to work at cross-purposes' (Haddad, 2017, p.6).

## Democratic processes

Elections in post-2003 Iraq play an important role in shaping how elites exercise power, particularly with other elites. And while they are the main mechanism for changing the elites in direct control of the central state apparatus, they act more to 'reshuffle', rather than substantively change, who is in and who is out (Haddad, 2017). In 2005 grand ethnic and sect electoral alliances were standard, however, Iraq's political system has since fragmented, with bitter divisions between different Shia elites leading to different Shia coalitions (Haddad, 2018, p.5).

Iraq's parliamentary system means that voters elect an electoral alliance, which then engages in post-election negotiations to build a coalition to rule, nominate a prime minister, and form the next government (Kouti & Ala'Aldeen, 2018, p.3). This has meant that in the three parliamentary elections since 2003, the winning individual has not become prime minister (Mansour, 2018a, p.15). In 2018 the election was dominated by three main coalitions led by established political entities and political personalities, which was (predominantly) organised along ethno-sectarian lines, with the exception of the Muqtada al-Sadr's Saeroun Alliance, which positioned itself a cross-sectarian. Smaller political parties thus forge alliances with the main coalition leaders according to 'political expediency and nationalist sentiments', and in 2018 there were 27 registered electoral alliances (Kouti & Ala'Aldeen, 2018, p.3).

## Elite-citizen relations

The literature widely reports that citizen-elite relations have been damaged by weak state capacity to deliver basic state services, by the disenchantment with divisive sectarian politics, and by anger at increasing poverty, inequality and corruption. The public mood in Iraq 'has moved from anti-American during the US occupation to anti-Iranian and generally anti-elite in more recent years' (Mansour, 2018b). And many Iraqis today 'blame the gap between citizen and elite, rather than the Sunni-Shia conflict, for causing state collapse' (Mansour, 2018a, p.12).

'Corruption has permeated all aspects of public life in Iraq, leading to poor service delivery and a monumental waste of public funds... One in five Iraqis lives below the poverty line, despite residing in a country with vast oil wealth that experienced rapid rates of growth over the last decade. The concentration of wealth in the hands of a corrupt political elite damages the legitimacy of the state, and in some cases drives people towards embracing extremist ideologies' (Atlantic Council, 2016). There is a sense that the elites from all three groups have benefitted from Iraq's oil wealth, yet that this wealth has not trickled down; and also the state has not translated the vast funds to rebuild Iraq into developmental gains for the many (Mansour, 2018a, p.12). Voter turnout at the May 2018 parliamentary election was very low at 44.5% (compared to a 60% turnout in 2014, and 70% in 2005), with widespread voter disillusionment that the elections would not bring about 'real change' (Mansour, 2018b).

Calls for reform are growing, as embodied by the protest movement that started in 2015. It emerged first in response to the crisis in service delivery, and it then expanded to criticise the broader political system of power-sharing and its corruption, taking on a character that was cross-sectarian, cross-class and cross-region (Yahya, 2017). Many hope it may indicate that Iraqi politics is moving towards issues-based politics and away from identity-based politics (Mansour, 2018a).

However, the governing elites and their political parties are entrenched in the system, and are 'deeply invested in maintaining the status quo' (Atlantic Council, 2016; Haddad, 2017; Haddad, 2017). 'As major politicians, or their appointees, are viewed as representing a given community, there is virtually no accountability. Any reaction against their poor performance can be perceived as being directed against their sectarian or ethnic community' (Yahya, 2017).

Sunnis feel particularly alienated from Iraqi politics and society. The de-Ba'athification process, while only aimed in theory at Ba'ath Sunnis at a senior level, also marginalised Sunni non-elites by removing their representation while fostering an ethnocentric model of governance (Dodge, 2012). Secular and nationalist Iraqis were also marginalised (Dodge, 2012).

Iraq's elites tend to be men. Women represent 25% of parliamentarians, but the gap is much larger in education and economic participation. The percentage of men holding secondary school certificates or higher is 28% compared to 16% of women. While 72% of men are economically active compared to 13% of women (UNDP, 2014, p.31).

## Political violence

The Iraqi state has been unable to 'withstand pressure from local, national, regional, and international state and non-state actors. Iraq's weakness has allowed rival factions to compete for control and influence in a perpetual struggle for power. At times, this weakness has led to inter- and intra-ethno-sectarian violence, based on sub-national identities', which ultimately led to the rise of ISIS in 2014 (Mansour, 2018a). Power is thus also exercised through political violence, through state and non-state armed groups, including: bombing of public spaces, car bombs, political assassinations, election violence, punitive justice carried out by non-state actors, and state violence against protestors, among others. 'The motivation for violence has been to

subvert the government, capture political power, and establish a new system of rule or even an Islamic State' (Kuoti, 2016).

Kuoti (2016) argues that Sunni violence against the Shiite-led government and its supporters from 2004/5 should be understood as a response to the exclusionary way that the constitution process happened, and in the context of local power struggles between the ascendant Shiite majority and the declining Sunni minority. Having lost political power through what they saw as an illegitimate method, the Sunnis sought power through violence (Kuoti, 2016). The weaknesses and perceived illegitimacy of the Iraqi state post-2003 also facilitated the rise of ISIS, as widespread marginalisation and intimidation made people abandon the regime in favour of alternative security providers (Krieg, 2017).

However, the Sunni rejection of the post-2003 order may be waning. The fight against ISIS went some way to uniting groups across Iraq, and it also devastated many areas of the country, especially Sunni areas, prompting many to focus attention on the humanitarian recovery. Haddad (2017, p.2) suggests that 'the irreversibility of the post-2003 order is more accepted today than ever before. Be it Iraqi Sunnis or regional Arab states, the empowerment of Iraq's Shia and Shia-centric political actors is no longer a contentious issue: it is a fact of life (Haddad, 2017, p.2).

## **Tribe, town and nation**

The cleavage between town and tribe is also an important social divider in Iraq. Tribes, with their tribal organisation structures, power structures, and values, have historically dominated Iraq's countryside – and some urban areas. 'Much of the rural population failed to put down deep roots in the soil. The settled village community with its attachment to the land - the backbone of the social structure throughout most of the Middle East - has been a missing link in Iraq's social fabric. Instead of love of the land, loyalty to family and tribe has dominated Iraq's social and political life' (Marr & Al-Marashi, 2018, p.16).

Tribalism as a force of power and source of social and political organisation in Iraq has been declining over decades. This is mainly due to rapid urbanisation (with increasing shares of the population living in cities, an increased number of cities, and the linking up of cities with the countryside), the increased economic and political power of cities, the expansion of the state into the countryside, and the spread of education (especially to the countryside). However, the legacy of tribalism is strong and, 'in political life, family, clan, and local ties often take precedence over national loyalties and broader ideologies' (Marr & Al-Marashi, 2018, p.16).

However, there now appears to be a resurgent Iraqi nationalism felt and expressed across Arab Iraq, following the legitimacy and popularity of the war against ISIS and the mass self-sacrifice of the Iraqi forces (especially the non-state armed Popular Mobilisation Forces (PMF) volunteers). Such sentiments have not been present in this extent since the 1980s Iran-Iraq war (Haddad, 2017, p.3).

## **3. Iraq's elites**

### **Central government elites**

#### **May 2018 elections**

Parliamentary elections in May 2018 saw a surprise result as the Shia cleric Muqtada al-Sadr's "Sairoon" coalition won the most seats, but not enough to be an outright winner. The top-three vote-winning coalitions are now undergoing negotiations to form the next government (Mansour, 2018b). The top five results were:

- The Sairoon bloc, led by Al-Sadr - won 54 seats
- The Fatah bloc, led by Hadi al-Amiri - won 47 seats
- The Nasr coalition, led by the current Prime Minister Haider al-Abadi - won 42 seats
- State Law Coalition, led by Nouri al-Maliki – won 25 seats
- Kurdistan Democratic Party, led by Nechervan Barzani – won 25 seats

Each coalition will now need to make political concessions, which could diffuse power across different elites groups - where each coalition leader gets a government office. This will limit the ability of one leader to introduce wide-ranging or immediate reforms. However, the 'establishment parties that still hold power over state institutions, including many ministries, will not easily give up their claims, jeopardising the chances for reform' (Mansour, 2018b). Al-Abadi will remain in office until the new government is formed, a process which will likely take months. 'In previous government-formation processes, blocs have aligned with and against each other based on ethno-sectarian identities' (Mansour, 2018a, p.15).

#### **Intra-Shia rivalry between blocs<sup>4</sup>**

Mansour (2018a, p.15) summarises the current political settlement as shaped and contested by intra-Shia rivalry between three political blocs:

**The Sadrist movement led by Muqtada al-Sadr** (also known as the Sairoon coalition) (Mansour, 2018a, p.18):

- At one end of the spectrum, Muqtada al-Sadr leads a populist wing in the Iraqi Shia political community. Sadr prefers not to be a politician himself, but he heads a political party, al-Ahrar, and a paramilitary group, Sarayat al-Salam.
- Sadr is sometimes considered a chameleon of Iraqi politics due to his drastic shift from the head of the Mehdi Army, accused of committing sectarian killings during the Iraqi civil war (2006-2008), to an Iraq-first nationalist calling for an end to militias.
- In 2016, Sadr joined forces with a large protest movement (initiated in 2015). Sadr brought the movement to the mainstream and organised several marches, demonstrations, and a sit-in inside the parliament. The coalition derives power and legitimacy from its ability to assemble demonstrations and protests. Through this he allied with secularist, nationalists, communists, women's rights activists, and he even has popular support from Iraqi Sunnis (after his calls for Iraqi nationalism and an end to sectarianism)
- Picking up from the protest movement, Sadr's main stance is twofold: target corruption and push back against Iranian or US foreign interference.
- While Mansour (2018a) hopes al-Sadr may move away from identity-based politics to issues-based politics, Yahya (2017) argues that al-Sadr co-opted the protest movement to have a sectarian framework.

**Right-wing camp of the Dawa<sup>5</sup> party aligned with former Prime Minister Nouri al-Maliki** (Mansour, 2018a, p.17):

<sup>4</sup> Mansour (2018a) provides a very comprehensive analysis of these and Iraq's other elite actors, this subsection is a brief synthesis of Mansour's analysis.

<sup>5</sup> The Dawa Party is the largest Shia political party in Iraq, the largest party in the State of Law coalition, and is the oldest Shia Islamist party (established in the 1950s). It gained considerable power after 2003, with all parliamentary elections since then electing a Dawa member as prime minister (Ibrahim al-Jaafari – 2005; Nouri al-Maliki - 2006-2014; and Haider al-Abadi - 2014-present). The Dawa party is divided into two factions led by Abadi and Maliki (Mansour, 2018a, p.16).



- At another end of the spectrum, former Prime Minister Nouri al-Maliki leads an influential, right-wing faction of the mainstream Dawa party, that derives power and legitimacy from its role in fighting ISIS since 2014 and its close relations to Iran. Maliki has significant public popularity (evident in his 2014 election victory).
- When in power, part of his approach included targeting opponents - e.g. he refused to work on a US initiative to employ and fund the Sunni tribes; he also targeted Shia opponents by exploiting their internal differences.
- Rather than building strong state institutions, Maliki personalised his power and began relying on paramilitary groups and militias - a departure from the Dawa line. Under his premiership seven paramilitary groups were operational in Iraq and some in Syria (with some defending the Bashar al-Assad regime).
- Maliki is a strong ally for Iran and has created relationships with pro-Khamanei and pro-wilayat al-faqih (governorship by the clerics) proxies operating in Iraq.
- While in Iraq, stepping down from an institution does not equate to a loss of power, Maliki's is unlikely to return to institutional power, and is likely to continue to rely on proxies in parliament, the executive and the judiciary to maintain influence.

**The Nasr coalition, led by the current Prime Minister Haider al-Abadi** (Mansour, 2018a, p.16-17):

- Between these two camps is al-Abadi's more centrist faction of the Dawa party. His legitimacy and power is derived from ISIS's defeat, and his successes in repairing key ministries such as the Ministry of Defence.
- Abadi 'argues for strong state institutions, and remains committed to two key issues: the need for a strong state security apparatus (rather than reliance on paramilitary groups) and the need to steer away from both wilayat al-faqih (governorship by the clerics) and Iranian influence'.
- Abadi does not want one single foreign power to dominate Iraq but seeks to balance Iranian hegemony by dealing with the US, Saudi Arabia and other regional and foreign players. During the battle against ISIS, Abadi gained an upper hand by seeking support from allies beyond Tehran. In 2015 he asked for US coalition support - much to the distaste of Iran and the pro-Khamanei PMF groups.
- Abadi presents himself as the champion of a more conciliatory, somewhat western-leaning, institutions-based, reform minded Iraqi nationalism' (Haddad, 2018, p.5).

In a paper examining Iraqi Shias from 1991 to 2016, van Veen, Grinstead and El Kamouni-Janssen (2017) find:

- There is a high degree of continuity of individual Shia leaders and elites in Iraq's governance at the level of the central state;
- Coalitions between Shia parties have been unstable, ad hoc affairs aimed at winning the vote, carving up public authority and resources, and/or responding to an imminent threat;
- Religion-based political influence is strong on issues on which the Shia community is united, but limited on issues on which it is not; and
- Shia political parties unite temporarily in the face of an external threat, especially if called upon by their religious leadership, but this tends to be short-lived and does not reduce opportunistic political behaviour.

Other political forces include: The Islamic Supreme Council of Iraq (ISCI); The National Wisdom Trend (Hikma); Asaib ahl al-Haq (AAH) (Mansour, 2018a, p.18-20).

## Sunni and Kurdish elites

Mansour (2018a) highlights that ‘Sunni and Kurdish leaders remain weak due to internal rivalries, weak institutionalisation, and their off-and-on boycotts of Baghdad...Although the Sunnis and the Kurds may act as kingmakers or spoilers for the next Iraqi prime minister, the leader will most likely come from the Shia camp’ (Mansour, 2018a, p.15).

Since 2003, Sunnis have not had political representation like the Shia or Kurds due to: the deliberate exclusion of representative Sunni leaders from governance processes, the rejection of the post-2003 democratic processes by many Sunnis (e.g. by not voting), the hollowing out of Sunni leadership through the de-baathification process, and the distrust many Sunnis have of the Sunni politicians (Seloom, 2017). Haddad (2017, p.2) explains that ‘the sheer scale of the devastation that Sunni-majority areas have suffered, the mass displacement, the complete disarray if not redundancy of Sunni political elites have left Iraq’s Sunni communities with few options other than to try to secure their interests by working with the Shia political classes. This has led to the emergence of new frameworks of political power at the local level. By remaining in their provinces and working with Iraqi security forces in the fightback against IS, these local actors have attained a degree of credibility lacking amongst pre-2014 Sunni political leaders and they have also secured greater access to sources of patronage through their association with Baghdad-linked power brokers. It may be too early to say with any degree of certainty but this may signal the emergence of new leaders at the local level who may supplant the pre-2014 Sunni political elite at the provincial level’.

In the 2018 election it was predicted that Sunnis would likely support Alawi’s National Alliance (promoting a mixture of secular and nationalist policies), or al-Abadi (due to his successes in reclaiming land from the Kurds, and in saving Iraq from ISIS, disintegration, and potential nationwide civil conflict) (Kouti & Ala’Aldeen, 2017, p.6).

While the Kurdish post-2003 were very influential in Iraq’s political settlement, gaining autonomy, land and resources. Mansour (2018a, p.27) highlights that their initially pragmatic approach lost out to nationalism, and internal divisions, and by 2017 their influence has waned significantly as they rejected Iraq’s political system, boycotted parliament and the central government, thus losing their foothold in it.

## State/public sector elites

The Iraqi state and its public sector ministries is largely under the control of the central government elites, and their patronage networks. The public sector is ‘grossly inflated’ with salaries making up to 80% of some Ministries’ budgets (Haddad, 2017). Many state-owned enterprises have been defunct since the 1990s, but still officially employ and pay large numbers of staff (Krishnan et al, 2014). A key obstacle to reform of state-owned enterprises includes reluctance on the part of the government because of the significant social costs of closure or downsizing (with large lay-offs).

The De-Ba’thification process post-2003 was effective at changing the public sector elites, but was very damaging to the public sector’s capacity. ‘Many of the state’s most competent administrators were fired overnight from an administration already severely weakened by two wars and more than a decade of sanctions, thus removing what was left of the state and its institutional memory’ (World Bank, 2017, p.12). The firing of 120,000 teachers and doctors after 2003 negatively impacted services and led to many of these personnel leaving Iraq (Yousif, 2016, p.226). Decades of conflict and insecurity have continued to fuel a “brain drain” out of Iraq. ‘The emigration of hundreds of thousands of competent and educated Iraqis fleeing the sectarian violence that erupted after 2003 led to a degradation of the civil service and a serious impairment of public services and of economic functioning overall’ (Sassoon, 2012, p.4).

## Security sector actors

A range of non-state armed groups have emerged in Iraq seeking to capture resources and power in the vacuum left by the weak Iraqi state, poor governance, and endemic conflict post-2003 (especially the threat of ISIS and the collapse of the Iraqi army).

The Shia-dominated Popular Mobilization Forces (PMF) is one such umbrella non-state armed group, that includes an estimated 35-40 non-state armed groups including (Abbas, 2017; Haddad, 2017):

- Pre-existing Shia armed groups that were active from 2003 to 2011
- Armed wings of Iraqi political parties
- New armed groups that emerged especially in response to a fatwa from the religious Shia cleric Ayatollah Sayyid Sistani calling for citizens to take up arms against ISIS
- Many smaller groups emerged across Iraq on tribal lines driven purely by local security considerations
- A distinct group operating in Turkmen areas

The number of members of the PMF umbrella group is estimated to be 60,000 (Mansour & Jabar, 2017) up to 141,000 members (Abbas, 2017).

Mansour and Jabar (2017) highlight that:

- It contains three distinct factions with respective allegiances to Ayatollah Ali Khamenei, Ayatollah Ali al-Sistani, and Muqtada al-Sadr.
- It was central to early efforts to roll back ISIS, but is less important following the regrouping of the state's military forces.
- Prime Minister al-Abadi's government struggles to control the PMF. Rather than integrate it into existing state military forces, he has thus far recognised the PMF as a legitimate, state-affiliated entity.
- The PMF has become part of a growing intra-Shia power contest. This pits al-Maliki, (the "godfather" of the PMF), against Sadr, who calls for disbanding the "imprudent militias," and Abadi, who advocates reducing and controlling the PMF.
- Some PMF subgroups have assumed political roles and will seek to leverage their roles in combatting ISIS to win votes in Iraq's 2018 elections.
- The PMF is divisive, poorly understood, and plagued by internal divisions, as it is both recognised by the state and at the behest of nonstate leadership figures.

Close links between political and militarised groups have further 'exacerbated existing political divides along sectarian lines and further weakened governance' (World Bank, 2017, p.2). Whether the state should recognise and authorise Iraq's plethora of non-state armed groups is a key contention in Iraqi politics today (Mansour, 2018a). Meanwhile, power struggles in the broader Middle-East region are playing out in Iraq, with external actors supporting sectarian factions and militias, outside the control of the government. This is a key destabilising factor that threatens government legitimacy (World Bank, 2017, p.3).

## Religious elites

Religious elites play a central role in Iraq political and social life, particularly in the Shia community, where leadership is based on religious scholars. This gives the Shia community 'stronger leadership and a greater sense of cohesion than its Sunni counterpart' (Marr & Al-Marashi, 2018, p.9-10). Sunnis tend to identify less with communal identity and be more loosely structured than the Shia community.

Ayatollah Ali al-Sistani is the highest Shia religious authority in Iraq (Seloom, 2017). Al-Sistani has played important roles in many political and social events through issuing statements, e.g.

on: preventing a Shia militant insurgency against the US-led invasion; supporting the new democratic political process in Iraq; inspiring citizens to take up arms in the PMF umbrella militia against ISIS; negotiating with and subtly supporting the 2015 protestors; recommending Iraqi voters do not vote for leaders that have not delivered on their promises; and forcing former Prime Minister Maliki forced to step down (Seloom, 2017; Yahya, 2017).<sup>6</sup> Sistani has clarified that 'he believes religious leaders should not be involved in the administration of the state' (Mansour, 2018a, p.18).

## Economic elites

The literature does not discuss Iraq's economic elites much, this may be because Iraq's monolithic oil-based economy has centralised economic power in the hands of the political elites. Growth in the private sector, outside of the oil sector, has been particularly constrained by the dominance of state-owned enterprises, restrictive regulations, lack of access to finance, shortage of skilled labour and inadequate infrastructure. Most non-oil private firms have been crowded out by state-owned enterprises (Idris, 2018).

The constitution provisions related to control of oil resources and revenues particularly benefits the Kurdish-dominated north and Shiite-dominated south (where the largest oil and gas resources are). Indicating again that the constitution drafters advanced their own sectarian group's interests (Kuoti, 2016).

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<sup>6</sup> See <http://1001iraqithoughts.com/2018/02/09/elections-and-old-faces-how-often-do-iraqs-political-elite-change/>

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## About this report

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