Sectarianism and Elite Strategies in Fueling Conflict: Evidence from Iraq under Saddam Hussein and Nouri Al Maliki

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SECTARIANISM AND ELITE STRATEGIES IN FUELING CONFLICT:
EVIDENCE FROM IRAQ UNDER SADDAM HUSSEIN AND NOURI AL
MALIKI

by

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ABSTRACT

What contributes to sectarian conflict? Some existing literature essentializes sectarian identities and blames ancient hatred between different groups as the cause of conflict, this thesis argues that sectarian conflict occurs when sectarianism is politically employed by elite actors facing state weakness. The proposed theory suggests that a drop in state capacity regardless of the cause, can motivate political elite actors to instrumentalize the salience of sectarian identities as a form of either repression or cooptation targeting the sectarian outgroup for the purposes of regime survival. The theoretical claims in this study are examined using a qualitative comparative case study analysis of the Saddam Hussein and Nouri Al Maliki regimes in Iraq. The findings reveal that both Hussein and Maliki instrumentalized sectarian rhetoric and exploited divisions as a strategy of gaining or preserving political power during periods of increased state weakness. For example, Saddam’s use of the Faith Campaign fueled the increased salience of sectarian identities in Iraq while Maliki’s political purge campaigns marginalized the Sunnis. Furthermore, the approach of this study reveals variation in the forms of regimes that can successfully exploit and instrumentalize sectarian rhetoric, ranging from minority and majority sectarian coalitions to personalist autocratic and semi-democratic governments. The findings of this thesis can allow policymakers to identify the root causes of sectarian based conflicts more accurately. In addition, ethnic and sectarian identity groups can be influenced by politicians and potentially shaped by external actors under certain conditions outlined in the thesis.
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LIST OF ABBREVIATIONS

AQI   Al Qaeda in Iraq
CPA   Coalition Provisional Authority
INIS  Iraqi National Intelligence Service
ISF   Iraqi Security Forces
JRTN  Jaysh Rijal al-Tariq al-Naqshabandi
MSNSA Ministry of State for National Security Affairs
OCINC Office of the Commander in Chief
SCAF  Supreme Council of the Armed Forces
SCIRI Supreme Council of Islamic Revolution in Iraq
UIA   United Iraqi Alliance
UN    United Nations
US    United States
CHAPTER ONE: INTRODUCTION

Homs was previously a city where Sunnis coexisted with Alawis and other religious minorities for decades prior to the escalation of violence and government crackdown in Syria during summer 2011. In fact, there is some evidence suggesting a limited role of Alawis in joining the anti-government protests in the early stages of the uprisings (The Guardian, 2011). However, in July 2011, Syrian Alawis loyal to the regime targeted predominantly Sunni areas in Homs in response to the killing and dismembering of three Alawi loyalists (Voa, 2011). Resulting in the deaths of at least 30 people and the torching of Sunni shops (Ibid.). The attacks in Homs were not an isolated case, similar examples of violence had been also observed in Iraq (Frontline PBS, 2020) and Lebanon (Chehayeb, 2021). These attacks are an example of violence defined by sectarianism or ‘ta’ifiya’ as it is known in Arabic. This term is believed to have been coined in the 20th century to describe a state representing the antithesis of a modern and developed national state that promoted co-existence among all citizens regardless of differences in religious identity (Makdisi, 2000).

Why do people that share many aspects of their existence yet slightly differ in religious/sectarian identity suddenly engage in brutal violence targeting one another? There is wide consensus that sectarianism has increasingly defined 21st century conflicts in the Middle East (Byman, 2014; Holtman, 2014; Ghobadzdeh & Akbarzadeh, 2015; Tomass, 2016; Abdo, 2017). A sharp contrast to when scholars expressed increased skepticism less than a decade earlier (Gause, 2007; Valbjørn and Bank, 2007; and Maoz, 2007). However, much scholarly contention remains on how to examine the role of sectarianism in the region and its salience
among various conflicts in the Middle East. Primordialism is the most dominant and popular approach that essentializes sectarian identities to a point that it becomes “the defining trait of the Middle East” (Haddad, 2020). Hence, viewing sectarian identities as constant and the primary driver of conflict (Holtman, 2014; Ghobadzdeh & Akbarzadeh, 2015; Tomass, 2016; Abdo, 2017). Alternatively, instrumentalism emphasizes the utility of sectarian identities that are sometimes employed by political elites as strategies of power (Gause 2014; Zubaida 2014; Hinnebusch, 2017). Other approaches suggest that the salience of sectarian identities is determined by state institutions (Dodge 2014; Salloukhet al. 2015) or constructed as security threats (Darwich and Fakhoury 2016; Hashemi and Postel 2017).

The following thesis seeks to contribute to the debate on the salience of sectarianism. In doing so, it challenges the mainstream primordialism narrative that essentializes divisions in sectarian identities as the root cause of conflict in the Middle East. Instead, it proposes a theoretical framework derived from instrumentalism, whereby the salience of sectarian identities is contingent on their employment by political elite motivated by state weakness as a strategy of preserving the status quo. For instance, political elite in Syria (CNN, 2011), Saudi Arabia (Matthiessen, 2012), and Bahrain (Al Jazeera, 2011) exploited and inflamed sectarian divisions as a strategy to delegitimize and antagonize political opposition stemming from the sectarian outgroup during the Arab Spring (Haddad, 2020).

Furthermore, the proposed theory emphasizes the role of state weakness as a catalyst for conflict in contexts involving instrumentalized sectarianism. As a drop in state capacity not only encourages elites to exploit sectarian differences as a means of dividing political opposition, but also encourages individual participation in non-state security organizations (Scacco, 2021; Ash,
organized along ethnic or sectarian lines. Thus, increasing the likelihood of violence among competing sectarian groups.

To evaluate the proposed theoretical claims, the methodology employed in this thesis relies on a qualitative comparative analysis of two distinct contexts involving elite actors instrumentalizing sectarian identities when faced with state weakness. The first case involves Saddam Hussein’s regime in Iraq tracing its history of instrumentalism and key events that weakened the Iraqi state capacity under Saddam’s reign. The second case contextualizes the rise of Maliki to power and his shift to instrumentalism following the 2011 U.S. military withdrawal that significantly undermined Iraqi state capacity during his reign.

The findings depict that the consequences of the Iran-Iraq war, Gulf War, and the 1991 Uprisings on Iraqi state capacity motivated Saddam to increasingly instrumentalize sectarian identities in the 1990s, primarily through the Faith campaign beginning in 1993 as a strategy of regime survival. However, these instrumentalist policies that continued to be carried out by his Ba’ath successors and other Sunni elites precipitated the Iraqi civil war in 2006 following the U.S invasion and the toppling of Saddam’s regime in 2003. Similarly, the decay of Iraqi state capacity following the mass withdrawal of U.S. troops from Iraq in 2011 motivated Maliki to instrumentalize sectarian identities to repress and purge his main Sunni political rivals from government as a strategy of preserving his grip on power. Consequently, inflaming sectarian tensions by inducing Sunni outrage that spiraled into violence, thus precipitating a second reiteration of the Iraqi civil war in 2012-13. The implications of these findings highlight the crucial role held by elite actors in fueling sectarian violence through instrumentalist rhetoric and/or policies in contexts of state weakness. Hence, informing policy makers that sectarian conflict is not a constant or fixed phenomenon emanating from ancient hatred between different
sectarian communities. Instead, sectarian identity can be shaped and influenced by political actors under certain conditions, mainly state weakness and instrumentalist policies.
CHAPTER TWO: LITERATURE REVIEW

Defining Sectarianism

The understanding of sectarianism can be derived from its root sect or \textit{tai'fah} in Arabic, based on its classical Islamic descriptive concept. The term \textit{tai'fah} refers to \textit{fi'ah} meaning faction (Bishara, 2018). The Quranic understanding and use of the word \textit{tai'fah} views a sect as a group that is part of a bigger group or collective such as “a \textit{tai'fah} of the believers” (Ibid.). Hence, the term sect is conceptualized as referring to a subgroup of people in reference to a larger group or nation. The sectarian identity of a group can be seen as a sub-identity in reference to a shared identity with a larger group that a sect can also identify with whether along ethnic, religious, or national lines. For instance, Shi‘ites can be viewed as a subgroup of Islam with a distinct sectarian identity entailing unique beliefs and practices. However, they still identify with and are members of the larger Muslim nation regardless of these minor differences. This understanding will serve as a critical component in the conceptualization of sectarian conflict later. As it identifies and defines the relevant actors organized into warring groups or sects in contexts involving sectarian conflict.

After establishing the understanding of sectarianism based on its root, it is important to discuss the various meanings the term occupies in the literature on the Middle East. For instance, Makdisi (2000) considers sectarianism as referring to “the deployment of religious heritage as a primary marker of modern political identity”. Wimmer (2013) views sectarianism as the religious offshoot of ethnic identity. Bishara (2018) defines sectarianism as an affiliation defined
by fanaticism to a subgroup of people associated with a religion where its belonging dictates self-identity (Bishara, 2018). According to Cheterian (2021), sectarianism is conceptualized as a political order where religious-sectarian identity creates political consequences. Political inequality is central to this definition as it focuses on the position of different individuals in a hierarchical framework based on their sectarian group’s access or relationship to power in a society (Ibid.). Sectarianism has also been employed by some authors to refer to a policy (Ayoub, 2013), political system (Bashkin, 2010), or the sect equivalent of racism (Kadhim, 2010).

The term sectarianism is problematic as it not only lacks coherent theoretical conceptualization as noted by the prominent Lebanese scholar Mahdi ‘Amil (Frangie, 2012) but is also rarely defined in the literature as it is instead assumed (Haddad, 2017). In fact, in a review of 120 works on sectarianism in both English and Arabic, nearly 83 works failed to make an attempt at defining sectarianism (Ibid.). Instead, the meaning of the term is often assumed (Ibid.). Hence, some scholars such as Haddad (2017) have called for the term to be “permanently discarded” (Ibid.).

Regardless, the aim of this thesis is not to dispute or debate what the nature of sectarianism is or is not, or what its true definition entails. There is extensive work tackling this issue as briefly mentioned above⁠¹. Instead, the thesis will borrow components from various definitions to inform its approach and understanding of addressing the term sectarianism in relation to sectarian conflict. Particularly important, is referencing elements of Makdisi’s (2000) definition regarding “the deployment of religious heritage” and Bishara’s (2018) understanding

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¹ See Haddad’s (2020) work “Understanding “sectarianism”: Sunni-shi’a relations in the modern Arab World” for a detailed dive into the scholarly debate and use of the term sectarianism.
of sectarianism as self-identity being contingent on fanaticism to a subgroup of people associated with a religion. The works of Makdisi (2000) and Bishara (2018) facilitate the conceptualization of sectarian conflict based on parallel features between the concepts of sectarian and ethnic identities. Specifically, when approaching these concepts from the theoretical perspective presented by Chandra (2006) that emphasizes descent-based identities. This definition proposes that ethnicity is a form of identity that is largely determined by descent-based attributes, both physical and historic/cultural (Chandra, 2006). The prior refers to physical features such as skin tone while the latter encompasses name, place of birth, and origin of parents/ancestry (Ibid.).

Chandra’s definition emphasizing the role of descent that is largely facilitated by kinship in determining ethnic identity draws resemblance to the definition of sectarian identity as proposed by Makdisi (2000). This is based on the mechanisms of descent and kinship, in his definition sectarianism refers to “the deployment of religious heritage as a primary marker of modern political identity” (Makdisi, 2000). Religious heritage is primarily inherited based on one’s lineage and kinship. This is usually passed down from one generation to another, parents’ own religious identity will dictate the identity and hence religious heritage adopted by their offspring. Therefore, it can be argued that religious heritage falls under the category of descent-based identities and qualities as suggested by Chandra (2006). Religious heritage like ethnicity can also be shared among a group or subgroup of people, thus forming an ethnic group and sectarian group or sect as defined by Bishara (2018). Moreover, ethnicity and religion can be viewed as largely intertwined, in so far as religious identity possesses the capacity to become ethnically salient (Little, 2011). In this context, defining traits of an ethnic group such as language and customs occupy significant religious connotations (Ibid.).
The provided definition of sectarianism derived from parallels between ethnic identity and previous descriptions of sectarianism in existing literature serves to clarify how the term is understood in this thesis. Especially, since the debate on sectarianism is so deep and complex that many authors opt not to clearly define the term and instead resort to an assumed definition as demonstrated by Haddad’s (2017) review. In addition, the provided definition of sectarianism based on the discussion above seeks to satisfy how sectarian conflict is conceptualized in this thesis which will be further discussed in more detail in the next section.

**Conceptualizing Sectarian Conflict**

Although sounding unique, sectarian conflict is not entirely different than other forms of intrastate conflict such as civil and ethnic wars. Especially when warring groups are organized based on shared group identity such as religion or ethnicity. In the context of ethnic conflict, intergroup hostilities occur between different warring groups competing over autonomy or political power that are organized based on ethnic identity (Horowitz, 1985). For instance, this characterizes conflicts in Israel/Palestinian territories between Palestinians and Israelis (Horowitz, 1985; Rouhana, 1997; Mitchel, 2000), Nigeria between Christians and Muslims (Jacob, 2012), and India between Hindus and Muslims (Horowitz 1985; Brass, 1997). Similarly, sectarian conflict is characterized by a form of violence occurring between competing actors organized into different groups based on differences in sectarian /religious identity, otherwise known as different sects (Bishara, 2018). This organization indicates that sectarian conflict is largely characterized by a defining sectarian element. As discussed earlier this sectarian element
referring to sectarianism broadly, involves an emphasis on religious identity/heritage (Makdisi, 2000) among a subgroup of people (Bishara, 2018) and its salience in reference to individuals’ self-identity (Makdisi, 2000; Bishara, 2018).

The Debate Over the Causes of Sectarianism

As stated earlier, the primary aim of this thesis is contributing to the primordialism vs instrumentalism debate regarding sectarian identities through determining when sectarianism becomes salient. Hence, it is important to briefly define each of these approaches and others that may serve as alternative explanations. Primordialism, also known as the maximalist approach (Haddad, 2020), essentializes sectarianism above all and views sectarian identities as natural and constant, thus conflict between different sectarian groups becomes inevitable (Holtman, 2014; Ghobadzdeh & Akbarzadeh, 2015; Tomass, 2016; Abdo, 2017). On the other hand, instrumentalism views group identities as flexible and instrumentalized by elite actors in pursuit of power and resources (Gause 2014; Zubaida 2014; Hinnebusch, 2017; Valbjørn and Hinnebusch, 2019). The remaining approaches consist of constructivism and institutionalism. The prior approach views group identities as constructed rather than given and can influence perceptions of reality, thus lying in between primordialism and instrumentalism (Darwich and Fakhoury 2016; Hashemi and Postel 2017; Valbjørn and Hinnebusch, 2019). The latter approach considers the generation and salience of sectarian identities to be contingent on institutional arrangements that can either undermine or amplify these identities. Especially important to consider is that the collapse of state institutions can cause individuals to reposition their identities.
and loyalties along sectarian lines (Dodge 2014; Salloukhet al. 2015; Valbjørn and Hinnebusch, 2019).

After identifying each of the major approaches towards tackling the origins of sectarianism, the following section will discuss why instrumentalism is the most suitable approach for analyzing the causes of sectarianism and how it is less constrained than other competing approaches. Especially, when factoring in the assumption that political actors have agency and can choose whether to engage in sectarianism or not. In addition to the assumption of how politicians can rationalize sectarian policies for furthering their own political purposes, that is the preservation or consolidation of power.
CHAPTER THREE: THEORY AND HYPOTHESIS

Why Instrumentalism?

As stated earlier, the research question I aim to explore in this thesis is “What contributes to sectarian conflict?”. The foundation of my theoretical framework is primarily derived from instrumentalism (Gause 2014; Zubaida 2014; Hinnebusch, 2017) and how this approach is employed by elite actors (Matthiessen, 2012; Hashemi 2016; Hinnebusch, 2017; Haddad, 2020) facing state weakness. The instrumentalist approach has been selected as it not only fundamentally opposes primordialism but allows for a more generalizable analysis of sectarian conflict that can extend to include wider contexts that are absent of restricting conditions posed by other approaches. For instance, institutionalism requires the presence of state institutions to determine the salience of sectarian identities and sectarianism broadly in a society (Dodge 2014; Salloukhet al. 2015). Constructivism imposes restrictions such as analyzing sectarianism based solely on speech acts (Waever, 1995; Buzan et al. 1998; Vuori, 2008; Atland and Ven Bruusgaard, 2009) by elites framing sectarianism as a security threat (Darwich and Fakhoury 2016; Hashemi and Postel 2017). Alternatively, instrumentalism does not rely on state institutions to determine the salience of sectarian identities and sectarianism broadly but on the actions of elites. The scope of these actions can extend beyond just speech acts as limited by constructivism, but also include actual policies and securitizing acts (Bigo, 2002) instrumentalizing sectarian identities.
The following sections will outline and discuss the primary theoretical mechanism of state weakness in influencing elite actors to instrumentalize sectarianism and the rationale behind such decisions. It is important to make clear that the motivating assumption of this thesis is that elites have agency and a lot of freedom to influence sectarian divisions and public perceptions in general. Moreover, the following sections will explore the effects of instrumentalism on the salience of sectarian identities among the public, also referred to as popular sectarianism. Hence, fomenting sectarian violence and conflict.

The Role of State Weakness in Fueling Sectarianism

State weakness simply defined as the absence of a monopoly of legitimized authority within state territory (Weber, 1965), or failure of conventional sovereignty (Krasner, 2004), has been extensively researched and suggested to be a primary contributor to various forms of intrastate conflict (Krasner, 2004; Fearon & Laitin 2003). State weakness can be caused by a variety of different events including foreign occupation, military fragmentation, institutional collapse, insurgency, and civil unrest. However, the aim of this thesis is not exploring the nature of the driving factors behind state weakness, but rather investigate its effects regardless of the cause on facilitating instrumentalism and ultimately sectarian conflict. Hence, the thesis assumes that state weakness has already occurred regardless of how and that both elite and mass behavior is reacting to the occurrence of state weakness. Another crucial assumption to note is that elite actors are not deliberately inducing state collapse/weakness to facilitate sectarianism. This is due to the conventional principle governing the rationale of all politicians as rational actors, referring
to the prioritization of their political survival above all else that is sometimes directly tied to their own physical well-being. Hence, it would be irrational to assume that any elite level political actor would induce state weakness in any way, shape, or form as state capacity is directly tied to politicians’ interest in survival.

State weakness has also been suggested to fuel participation in ethnic violence at the individual level (Scacco, 2021). This is achieved through a conceptual push/pull relationship between individuals perceiving state incapacity/weakness that are being pushed to engage in violence by poverty/physical insecurity and their motivation to join non state actors/organizations that is pulling them to fight based on powerful local social ties organized along ethnic lines (Ibid.). These pull factors especially regarding powerful local social ties can be reiterated along sectarian lines as well. Hence, justifying why individuals may seek to reposition their identities and loyalties along sectarian lines in the context of state institution collapse as conveyed by the institutionalist approach of sectarianism (Dodge 2014; Salloukhet al. 2015; Valbjørn and Hinnebusch, 2019). Especially when considering that state weakness can encourage individuals to rely on non-state security organizations that can be oriented based on identity along ethnic (Ash, 2022) or religious/sectarian lines. These identity-oriented security organizations can glorify in-group superiority and equate group interests to that of the individual (Ibid.). Consequently, individuals are more likely to engage in violence to protect the interests of the identity group in the absence of the state against another outgroup, thus increasing the likelihood of intergroup violence organized along ethnic or sectarian lines.

In contexts of sectarian conflict, this thesis joins Hinnebusch (2017) in his assertion that state failure “paves the way for instrumental sectarianism to become militant and violent” (Hinnebusch, 2017). In this scenario, the regime no longer has the coercive power to not only
repress other sects but to also provide basic security and physical protection for its citizens. Thus, creating contexts where uncertainty is high and subsequently the self-perception of insecurity is also high (Ash, 2022). As sectarian violence heightens individuals become more susceptible to instrumentalism, thus becoming more easily convinced that members of the outgroup pose immediate threats. This effect compounded by the high self-perception of insecurity from state failure subsequently drives individuals to increasingly align and even mobilize with non-state armed groups emerging in the power vacuum that can provide security (Scacco, 2021; Ash, 2022). These groups are also typically organized along sectarian lines for the purpose of protection. However, these sect militias such as Hashd Al Sha’ibi in Iraq do not always operate defensively as they can escalate violence by engaging in brutal activities such as neighborhood cleansings targeting the sectarian outgroup (Reuters, 2008). Consequently, the present theoretical framework presents state weakness/failure as a catalyst for sectarian conflict in contexts involving instrumentalized sectarianism by elite actors in multi-sect societies.

Before moving onto the next section, it is important to briefly address the institutionalist approach to state weakness and their emphasis on the role of state institutions in ethnic and/or sectarian based conflicts in general. Some institutionalists view institutions as a barrier to ethnic violence (Varshney, 2003). As state institutions such as parliaments, assemblies, or bureaucracies can act as institutionalized channels for ethnic conflict to be resolved rather than erupt into violence on the streets such as riots or pogroms (Ibid.). This also includes informal institutions such as those concerned with regulating economic activity that do not necessarily exist within the official capacity of the state (Ibid.). Others such as Brass (1997) argue that “institutionalized riot-systems” explain Hindu-Muslim violence in India. These systems are comprised of state affiliated actors such as provocateurs and riots specialists dedicated to
framing events at the town-level as relating to a broader ‘Hindu-Muslims conflict’ and in some cases inciting violence (Ibid.). Nonetheless, I argue that state institutions by design neither promote nor act as barriers to ethnic violence. Hence, both state and informal institutions are neutral in their effect on how elites instrumentalize sectarianism. It is up to elite actors themselves whether to employ institutions as a means of repressing or amplifying sectarian identities. More importantly, it is state weakness instead as outlined earlier, that guides the motivations of elite actors in instrumentalism and the subsequent inflaming of sectarian tensions leading to violence among the public.

The following section will discuss why elite actors resort to instrumentalism and suggest ways in which periods of state weakness can encourage elites to instrumentalize sectarian identities.

**Elite Preferences**

The role of elites in instrumentalism can be derived from their motivations in instrumentalizing sectarianism for different political purposes such as consolidating or preserving power. Hence, rulers can be driven to exploit and manipulate sectarian identities to form their loyal power bases as a strategy of cooptation. This can be achieved by coopting strategically relevant actors into the regime (Gerschewski, 2013) based solely on sectarian identity. Generally, the function of cooptation is to primarily ensure intra-elite cohesion (Ibid.) and regulate the power exercised by other strategic actors or non-political elites in a manner that
does not impede the regime’s exercise of power (Shleifer and Treisman, 2000). In addition, the regulatory mechanism of cooptation ensures that no single competing actor becomes too powerful in a way that threatens the regime (Gerschewski, 2013), thus the function of cooptation is instrumental to regime survival.

Cooptation is mainly facilitated by two methods: formal channels such as democratic institutions in the form of parliament, parties, or elections (Gandhi and Przeworski, 2006) and informal channels encompassing neo patrimonial networks, patronage, or clientelism (Stefes, 2006). The connection between cooptation and sectarianism is underscored by informal channels listed in the latter method. Practices associated with neo-patrimonialism, clientelism, or patronage can facilitate the creation of ruling coalitions based on sectarian identity. Hence, perceived loyalty to the regime and access to power via cooptation depends on sectarian identity. This is evident in the Syrian Assad regime, Hafez Assad exclusively appointed loyal members of his own Alawi sect to fill senior positions within the Syrian regime especially in the security apparatus to ensure loyalty (Holliday, 2013). For instance, the appointment of Mohammed Nasif Kheirbek as the director of the Syrian General Intelligence Directorate (Ibid.).

Another strategy motivating elites to instrumentalize sectarianism involves repression. Elites may seek to exploit sectarian divisions in fragmented societies as a means of ‘delegitimizing political opposition’ (Haddad, 2020) and repressing any form of dissent. This is mainly a byproduct of the negative connotations inherent to the term sectarianism or ta’ifiya based on certain interpretations² that depict sectarianism as a deviation from established norms.

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² For example, the interpretation of analyst and commentator, Yusuf al-Dini on the etymology of sectarianism: “We are therefore dealing with a quantitative concept denoting a minority that differs from what is predominant [sa’id]”. (p.32, Haddad, 2020).
along either religious or national lines (Ibid.). The negativity associated with sectarianism arguably stems from its lack of a coherent definition that is widely accepted in the literature. Hence, in some instances the loosely defined term of sectarianism can fuel the stigmatization of legitimate expressions of sectarian identity such as Ashura rituals associated with Shi’a identity (Ibid.). As they may be perceived as deviants or outsiders. Consequently, political elites can weaponize the negativity imbued in sectarianism to undermine the legitimacy and integrity of the message conveyed by dissenters. Thus, depicting members of the political opposition as criminals, traitors, and members of the outgroup.

The employment of sectarianism as a tool of repression by elites is present in the contexts of Syria (CNN, 2011), Bahrain (Matthiesen, 2012), and Saudi Arabia (Al Jazeera, 2011) during the Arab Spring. Although some of these protests encapsulated legitimate sect-based grievances such as protesting discriminatory hiring practices based on sectarian identity in Bahrain (Haddad, 2020). The sectarian tone of these protests was ultimately exploited and inflamed by the same regimes facing protests as a strategy to delegitimize and antagonize political opposition stemming from the sectarian outgroup (Ibid.). Therefore, the Syrian regime immediately resorted to labeling the opposition group as led by Sunni terrorists and Islamic extremists (CNN, 2011). Similarly, both the Bahraini and Saudi regimes successfully engaged in a bid of discrediting political opposition by framing the protest movement as a seditious plot by Iran (Al Jazeera, 2011; Matthiesen, 2012).

An important caveat to consider in this subsection is that not all elites are identical or political in origin or nature. There are different variations of the elite in any society such as the business/financial elite or military elite that can possess strategic value to a regime (Gerschewski, 2013). This raises an important question regarding the role of elite actors in
instrumentalizing sectarianism. Do different types of elites share similar motivations in politically employing sectarianism? Not necessarily since different variations of elites may have inherently different motivations. For instance, the political elite are typically motivated by regime survival or gaining power while the business elite may be driven by maximizing profits and other financial interests. Hence, depending on the type of elites, some may view instrumentalized sectarianism as unnecessary or in some cases conflicting with their core interests. In the case of business elites, they may view the act of or association with instrumentalizing sectarianism as potentially limiting their profits. Since introducing sectarian practices may restrict the amount of business opportunities and transactions made within a society. Hence, the business elite should not really care about the sectarian identity of individuals but rather the financial opportunity or gain they potentially encompass. In fact, businesses relationships between different sectarian/ethnic groups have the potential of building informal institutions that can prevent sectarian/ethnic conflict as they can facilitate intercommunal relations based on mutual economic benefits (Varshney, 2003).

Regardless, political elite actors are especially motivated by state weakness to resort to instrumentalism as a means of ensuring regime survival. During periods of high state incapacity, the resources of the elite become limited, thus their capability to maintain regime security and political power becomes weakened. Therefore, political elites become especially vulnerable to political opposition whether that stems from popular uprisings, riots, coups, or insurgency. The various existential threats posed by these events to political elites becomes subsequently heightened. Under these dire circumstances, political elite actors are confronted by two options if they seek regime survival: co-optation or repression.
Although cooptation is a viable option it is highly risky during periods of low state capacity as it is potentially seen as a concession to the demands of regime outsiders including political foes. Hence, the act of cooptation on behalf of the reigning political elite may be viewed as a sign of weakness emboldening political opponents and others to demand further concessions while exceedingly pushing the limits of their demands. In some cases, political opponents and other actors may seize this opportunity (perceived weakness) to completely overthrow the regime and depose the existing ruling political class whether through exile, prison, or worse. Consequently, political elite actors may view repression as the only viable path to regime survival. In this context, instrumentalism can be perceived and employed as an effective and low cost strategy of dividing political opposition based on the inflammation of sectarian identities and tensions. More importantly, the value of instrumentalism as a tool of repression is highlighted in its ability to delegitimize and antagonize members of the opposition group in a manner casting them as members of the outgroup whether be criminals, traitors, or terrorists. As evident in the Syrian regime’s reaction to the Arab uprisings in 2011 as discussed earlier.

State weakness specifically motivates political elite actors to instrumentalize in multi-sect societies, whether as a strategy of cooptation or repression targeting the sectarian outgroup for the purposes of regime survival. As mentioned earlier, state weakness inhibits the regime’s capacity to withstand threats to its survival whether in the form of mass mobilization of protests or the emergence of armed opposition groups contesting the state’s monopoly over security and territory. Hence, instrumentalism is viewed as a viable and cost-effective strategy that can keep the regime’s opposition divided and, in some cases, may eliminate the need for costly enforcement, especially when the coercive capacity of the regime is previously undermined.
Popular Sectarianism

As highlighted earlier, state weakness can drive increased participation in ethnic violence at the individual level due to its effect on increasing the overall sense of insecurity in a society (Scacco, 2021). In other words, individuals tend to feel increasingly threatened and fearful due to perceptions of the state no longer fulfilling its most fundamental role of guaranteeing security and order for its citizens. Hence, feelings of fear and physical insecurity push individuals into participating in violence. Moreover, the absence of the state in the provision of basic security facilitates the rise of non-state security actors and organizations that can substitute the state’s role in security. However, these non-state security organizations are typically organized along ethnic (Scacco, 2021; Ash, 2022) or sectarian lines and may only guarantee security for their members. Thus, powerful local social ties that are typically organized along ethnic/sectarian lines pull individuals (Scacco, 2021) that are members of the ethnic or sectarian in-group to join and engage in violence against any member of the outgroup. Additionally, these identity-oriented organizations tend to glorify in-group superiority using chauvinistic rhetoric (Ash, 2022), thus inflaming sectarian tensions and violence in a multi-sect society experiencing state incapacity. Concurrently, individuals can become more susceptible to instrumentalism and sectarian rhetoric at the hands of elite actors, thus fueling sectarian conflict.

It is important to note the distinction in the effects of state weakness and elite motivations on popular sectarianism. State weakness tends to increase the susceptibility of a multi-sect population to become more sectarian. For example, state weakness denotes a failure in government to fulfill its most fundamental purpose legitimizing its existence, that is the provision of security. The heightened sense of insecurity and fear may render individuals to
increasingly look for alternative forms of identity to satisfy their security needs (Hashem, 2006), thus increasing their susceptibility to sectarianism. Whereas elite motivations in the form of instrumentalist policies and/or rhetoric is what triggers the increased adoption of sectarian attitudes by individuals. Since instrumentalist policies/rhetoric dramatically drive the salience of sectarian identity among the public, thus facilitating an increased sectarian awareness and adoption of sectarian attitudes among multi-sect societies.

Populations can also be susceptible to instrumentalized sectarianism due to other factors such as the failure of secular politics in the developing world. Failed experiences with secular political movements can motivate individuals to look for other alternatives such as those organized along sectarian or any identity-based lines causing the resurgence of religious politics (Haddad, 2011). For example, Esposito and Voll (1996) commenting on the Islamic world in the 1990s claim: “the most effective opposition to authoritarian regimes is expressed through a reaffirmation of the Islamic identity and heritage.” Similarly, societies with weak national identities can be more prone to sectarian based movements or rhetoric as they may identify more closely to their secondary identities such as ethnic or religious/sectarian identities.
Figure 1: Effects of State Weakness on Elite Choice and Popular Sectarianism

Figure 1 illustrates the interactions between state weakness, elite choice, and popular sectarianism as outlined in the proposed theoretical framework. Whereby state weakness motivates political elite actors to pursue instrumentalist policies as a cost-effective strategy of cooptation or repression during periods when the regime’s capacity to withstand existential threats is diminished. In addition, state weakness increases the susceptibility of the population to sectarianism. Whereas elite choice in pursing instrumentalist policies and/or rhetoric activates popular sectarianism by driving the awareness of sectarian identities and salience, thus increasing the adoption of sectarian attitudes by the population in multi-sect societies.

The following section will present contexts where instrumentalized sectarianism as outlined in the proposed theoretical model apply. Specifically, involving multi-sect societies.
suffering from some form of state incapacity and the presence of political elite actors motivated to pursue instrumentalist policies and/or rhetoric for political gain.
CHAPTER FOUR: RESEARCH DESIGN

Case-study Selection and Salience

The context of the Middle East was specifically chosen as it has been swept by a wave of sectarian conflict within the past two decades. Sectarian conflict in the Middle East is typically analyzed through the primordial lens of the Sunni-Shia schism that emerged following disputes over Prophet Muhammad’s succession after his death in the 7th century. The Sunnis and the Shi’ites are two major groups separated by language, tradition, and religious practices/beliefs competing for power first in Iraq, then later all over the Middle East according to the primordialism narrative (Nasr, 2007).

The sectarian divide in the Middle East is crucial to understanding the region’s political climate, specifically the ongoing regional cold war between Saudi Arabia representing the authoritarian Arab Sunni sphere and Iran representing the revolutionary Farsi Shi’ite sphere, both competing for regional dominance and influence (Gause, 2007). This sectarian divide has inflamed the sectarian tone in conflicts in Iraq, Syria, and Yemen where competing political actors and warring groups have increasingly organized along sectarian lines (Sunni, Shi’ite, Alawite) and continue to engage in intergroup violence.

The onset of this wave of sectarian conflict was partly facilitated by the events of the Arab Spring in 2011 that has led to the collapse and severe weakening of several governments in the Middle East (Byman, 2014) such as Syria, Yemen, and Iraq that have all suffered from
subsequent sectarian conflict. Hence, providing the treatment of state weakness when analyzing modern or recent sectarian conflict in the Middle East.

I aim to operationalize the effects of state weakness on motivating elite choice in fueling sectarian conflict via instrumentalism within the Middle East through the qualitative case study of Iraq within the past 2-3 decades. Iraq is no stranger to sectarian conflict, as it has embroiled the country for the past two decades following the 2003 US led invasion and the subsequent deposing of Saddam’s regime. Furthermore, Iraq offers a unique case for investigating the interaction of instrumentalized sectarianism, state failure, and elite choice across two different periods involving two different regimes within the same country. The first refers to Saddam Hussien’s regime pre-2003 while the second encompasses the regime of Nouri Al-Malki post-2003.

These periods provide two distinct case studies of Iraq that highlight the interaction of instrumentalized sectarianism and elite choices with decaying state capacity. Furthermore, the comparative case study of Iraq provides the avenue to potentially unravel original insights into this theory through underlining the proposed interaction through the lens of a minority government of the personalist autocracy variant (Saddam Hussein’s regime) against a majority government of the semi-democratic type (Nouri Al Maliki’s regime). This allows for variation in the types of regimes that can successfully instrumentalize sectarian identities for political gain ranging from minority to majority sectarian coalition governments. Hence, this may imply that any sectarian group regardless of minority or majority status within a multi-sect society may view any sectarian outgroup as an existential threat, thus resorting to instrumentalized sectarianism. For instance, minority sectarian coalition governments may view instrumentalized sectarianism as necessary to keep a larger sectarian outgroup in check by ensuring that the
centers of power are occupied by members of the sectarian ingroup, thus ensuring a competitive advantage for the minority ingroup regardless of being outnumbered. For example, the Alawis and the Assad regime in Syria.

Moreover, the direct comparison may reveal similarities and/or differences in the motivations of elite actors of different regime types (minority-personalist or majority-semi democratic) in pursuing instrumentalism when confronted by state weakness. Do elites in minority and majority sectarian governments rationalize instrumentalism similarly when confronted by conditions of state weakness? The case study selections of the selected Iraqi regimes as laid out further allows for a shorter proximity of time in changes from minority to majority sectarian coalition governments. Hence, the chosen time frame provides a point in time where the susceptibility of people to be influenced by instrumentalized sectarianism is higher than in any other preceding period given recent experiences with sectarianism exercised by the state.

\textit{Iraq A: The Saddam Hussien Regime}

The first period refers to the personalist-autocratic regime of Saddam Hussien. This regime instrumentalized sectarianism throughout the 1990s following the Iran-Iraq war by introducing heavy Sunni religious rhetoric in the form of the 1993 Faith campaign. This campaign marks an attempt to rebrand the previously secular Ba’athist regime into an ‘Islamist’ regime (Baram, 2011). At this period the state capacity of Iraq was first weakened following the
highly expensive Iran-Iraq war in the previous decade and later again following the first Gulf War. Not to mention the crippling sanctions placed on Iraq throughout the 1990s and the effects of the 2003 U.S. led invasion that completely toppled the Iraqi state. The period of 1990-2003 provides ample opportunity for the state failure treatment in various forms that potentially guided Saddam Hussien’s motivations to fundamentally rebrand his regime away from secularism and into the embrace of Islam and instrumentalized sectarianism. This is evident in various examples of the regime’s Faith campaign including the investments into building new mosques in Sunni provinces and opening the doors to preachers from various corners of the Muslim world as part of the regime’s effort to expand Quranic/Islamic education in the country (Ibid.). Instrumentalism may have been perceived as strategic by Saddam Hussien in that period given the weakened state of Iraq and the Shi’ite threat posed by its adversarial neighbor Iran. Especially, since Iraq’s majority Shi’ite mobilized into an uprising on the street in the southern provinces calling for Hussien to step down (Zenko, 2016). I argue that the aftermath of 2003 and mainly the departure of Hussein’s regime following a decade of sectarian instrumentalization by Hussein resulted in Iraq’s first experience with brutal sectarian conflict in the 21st century, the Iraqi civil war in 2006-2007.

One important potential counterargument to discuss here is the suggestion that the outbreak of civil war in Iraq in 2006 occurred during a time of transition from a personalist-authoritarian regime to a semi-democratic government. Hence, the cause of civil war was primarily due to political chaos involving a newly established semi-democratic government lacking sufficient state capacity to establish authority, and the large presence of foreign forces in the form of the U.S. military overseeing the transition of government and power. This would serve as an alternative explanation to why civil war broke out in 2006 rather than inflamed
sectarian tensions brewing for years if not decades prior due to the instrumentalist policies of the Ba’athist regime. Nevertheless, I argue that this explanation is severely limited in explaining why the primary competing groups excluding the U.S. military were organized along sectarian lines. This limitation underscores the value of the theory and corresponding explanation provided by this thesis that more accurately traces the primary factors in the precipitation of Iraqi civil war, and more importantly explains why the main combating groups were organized along sectarian lines.

Iraq B: The Nouri Al Maliki Regime

The second period immediately follows the events of the Iraqi civil war with the installation of the Shi’ite dominated semi-democratic style government through U.S. state building efforts. This regime headed by Nouri Al Maliki similarly employed sectarianism as its predecessor, however in this case to favor the Shi’ites that have traditionally been repressed by Saddam while severely marginalizing the Sunnis. The sectarian instrumentalization during this period was achieved at a period of low state capacity following the mass departure of U.S. armed forces from Iraq in 2011. At that time, the Iraqi regime under Maliki began to severely struggle with maintaining a monopoly over coercive force. As it grossly overestimated its state capacity that was heavily contingent on the previous expanded U.S. military presence in the country. Hence, Maliki may have been motivated by the departure of U.S forces to expand his use of instrumentalism targeting the Sunni’s including the persecution of Sunni political elites such as
Finance Minister Rafe al-Essawi (Arango & Gordon, 2013) and the use of Iraqi security forces to crackdown on protests in Sunni towns such as Hawija leaving dozens dead (Arango, 2013).

The conditions presented by Iraqi state weakness following the departure of U.S troops in 2011, and the subsequent expanded use of discriminatory sectarian policies by Maliki orchestrated the resurgence of Sunni and Shi’ite militias. These sect militias gained traction in the public sphere and dragged Iraq in a second bout of sectarian conflict between the Shi’ites dominating political power and the alienated Sunnis that mobilized in mass protests. I argue that the instrumental sectarianism employed by Maliki’s notorious policies discriminating against Sunnis such as the political purges (Arango & Gordon, 2013) and the decay of state power following the departure of U.S. forces facilitated a second wave of sectarian violence/conflict to erupt in Iraq.

Data & Methodology

As mentioned earlier the methodology employed in this thesis consists of a qualitative comparative case study of Iraq, that was originally planned to be based on a combination of primary and secondary sources in English and Arabic. The primary sources consist of official government records belonging to various elements of the Ba’ath party in Iraq such as documents and audiotapes. These records are primarily stored at the Conflict Records Research Center at the National Defense University and part of the Ba’ath Regional Command Collection stored at the Hoover Institution in Stanford University.
However, firsthand access to these documents requires special permission in advance and traveling to the locations where they are housed such as Stanford or the National Defense University. Given logistical limitations and the limited time I have to finish this thesis, I could not ensure firsthand access to these valuable documents. Instead, my research relies on the existing interpretation of relevant documents by previous scholars that have gained access to these documents such as those by Sassoon (2011), Baram (2014), and Blaydes (2018). Moreover, some of the data used consists of primary source data such as audio recording and meetings between relevant government officials in their original format in Arabic collected and translated by myself as necessary to include in my analysis. For example, I used an old television broadcast found on YouTube depicting former Prime Minister Zubaidi telling other Ba'ath officials to exterminate the Marsh Arabs in the south following the 1991 Uprisings³. As for the secondary sources, these entail a combination of peer-reviewed academic articles, books, relevant news articles, and U.N reports along available and relevant U.S State Department documents/reports.

³ Source: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ZTb1qJgPaT8
Prior to discussing instrumentalism during the reign of Saddam Hussien, it is important to contextualize the proposed theoretical framework by briefly discussing prominent events that dramatically shaped the fate of Hussein’s regime and Iraq as it is the starting point of this thesis. Especially in regard to understanding the broader environment that transformed the secular Ba’athist regime of Saddam Hussien into one that embraced sectarianism with the introduction of the Faith campaign in 1993. The Iran-Iraq War (1980-1988), First Gulf War (1990-1991), and the subsequent 1991 Iraqi Uprisings are significant events that weakened the state capacity of Iraq. Hence, as I argue fundamentally reoriented the rationale of elite actors in Hussien’s regime to pursue the instrumentalization of sectarianism to amplify the salience of the Sunni-Shi’a divide among Iraqi Arabs. Elite motivation in pursuing instrumentalism in this case can be perceived as a form of regime survival, especially following the uprisings in 1991.

Moreover, the regime’s targeted persecution of Iraqi Shi’as in 1991 even following the successful repression of the southern uprisings represents a crucial moment regarding the origins of sectarianism in Iraq. As the Iraqi Shi’a became a deliberate target of the regime for the first time since the establishment of the modern Iraqi state (Makiya, 1993). Especially when considering that less than a decade earlier, the Iraqi regime was cautious in maintaining a non-sectarian position on religion in Iraq (Helfont, 2015). In fact, the regime openly embraced Shi’a
symbolism to fuel the nationalist sentiments of Iraqi Shi’as during the onset of the Iran-Iraq war (Blaydes, 2018).

The weakening of the Iraqi State into the 1990s

The Iran-Iraq War (1980-1988):

In September 1980, Iraq preemptively attacked Iran on the pretext of territorial disputes and following a series of serious domestic events in Iraq including: the attempted assassination of Deputy Prime Minister Tareq Aziz in April 1980 by an Iraqi of Iranian origin, the subsequent execution of prominent Iraqi Shi’a cleric Muhammad Baqir Al-Sadr, and the mass deportation of thousands of Iraqi Shi’as to Iran (Blaydes, 2018). The ideological threat presented by the 1979 Islamic revolution in Iran to the Sunni-led regime in Iraq undoubtedly influenced Saddam’s calculus to invade (Ibid.), especially since the Iraqi regime may have feared that the Iranian revolution would be exported to Iraq (Baram and Rubin 1993). However, Saddam Hussien may have been motivated by more strategic considerations such as reclaiming Iraqi rights to the Shatt Al-Arab water way (Blaydes, 2018). As the Khuzestan province was an immediate target of interest early in the war due to its Arab population and more importantly broad coastline, thus expanding Iraq’s oil exporting capability (Johnson, 2011). In addition, Saddam was motivated to
attack Iran as a means of containing Iranian support to the Kurdish insurgents in northern Iraq (Blaydes, 2018).

Regardless, the Iraqi regime assumed that the course of the war would ensure a swift and decisive victory for Iraq due to the perceived political vulnerability embedding Iran in the aftermath of the Islamic revolution. However, reality depicted a severe Iraqi miscalculation as they overestimated their capabilities while misinterpreting the direction and capacity of the Iranians at the time (Chubin and Tripp, 1988). Hence, the conflict quickly evolved into a war of attrition where the Iranians possessed clear favorability due to their larger population size and resources, despite the technological advantage of the Iraqi military (Blaydes, 2018). The consequences of the war on Iraq were immense as it plunged the Iraqi economy into a debt of $80 billion (Abdullah, 2006) and yielded 500,000 Iraqi casualties according to the Correlates of War Project⁴. Both of these figures represent excessive blows to Iraqi state capacity in the aftermath of the Iran-Iraq war, thus indicating early signs of state weakness.

Another important observation during the Iran-Iraq war is the non-sectarian position maintained by Hussein’s regime at the time of the conflict (Helfont, 2015). Throughout the war, the regime’s political elites did engage in instrumentalism, but organized this strategy along ethnic and linguistic identity rather than sectarian lines. This was largely aimed at convincing Iraqi Shi’as to fight the Persian enemy (Dawisha, 1999). To do so the Iraqi regime made it a focal point to continually emphasize the difference between the Arab identity of Iraq and the Persian character of the Iranians (Chubbin and Tripp, 1988). This strategy proved successful, as the Iraqi Shi’as were fearful of a political and cultural conquest by Iran despite sharing their

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religious identity with a majority of Iranians (Baram, 2014). Even the Iraqi Shi’as who did not support Saddam’s regime were also unwelcoming to the idea of establishing a Shi’a theocracy as in Iran (Khoury, 2010). At the same time, the Iraqi regime embraced the Shi’a identity during the war to promote nationalism among Iraqi Shias (Blaydes, 2018) by celebrating Shi’a holidays and offering financial support to decorate Shi’a shrines as part of unique rituals (Cockburn, 2008).

The Gulf War (1990-1991):

In August 1990, Saddam Hussein led an Iraqi invasion of Kuwait due to billions of dollars of war debt accumulated in the previous Iran-Iraq conflict (Abdullah, 2006) as mentioned earlier. In addition, Kuwait rejected demands to forgive Iraq of billions of dollars in war debt and refused to slow down its oil production based on an OPEC directive to spike oil prices in 1989 (Alnasrawi, 1994). Hence, Saddam Hussein viewed the invasion of Kuwait as a potential remedy to the severe economic crisis confronting his country (Alnasrawi, 1992). Nevertheless, Iraq’s aggression against Kuwait sparked both international outcry and fears in neighboring Gulf countries, particularly Saudi Arabia that invited U.S. Forces to be stationed on the Saudi-Kuwait border as part of Operation Desert Shield (Dycus et al., 2020). This development quickly evolved into an offensive effort by a U.S led coalition to attack Iraq and drive its forces out of Kuwait as part of Operation Desert Storm (Ibid.).

The consequences of the Gulf War on the Iraqi state were dire as the aftermath of the conflict left Iraq with crippling sanctions and devastated its infrastructure (Alnasrawi, 1992).
Following the invasion of Kuwait, the foreign assets of the Iraqi state were frozen, and the United Nations placed an embargo on all forms of trade with Iraq despite its heavy dependency on imports (Ibid.). The effects of the embargo severely undermined the capacity of the Iraqi state as it nearly halved its GDP from $66 billion in 1989 to $35 billion in 1990 and cut off essential supplies such as military goods for the Iraqi Armed Forces (Ibid.). Additionally, the relentless 41-day bombing campaign by the U.S led coalition spared no target in the Iraqi infrastructure, both military and civilian including: bridges, oil facilities, telecommunication networks, power stations, hospitals, and transportation (Ibid.). According to one U.N report, Iraq emerged in the aftermath of the Gulf War as “relegated to a pre-industrial age, but with all the disabilities of post-industrial dependency on an intensive use of energy and technology” (Wenger, 1991). Hence, it is clear the outcome of the Gulf War severely weakened the capacity of the Iraqi regime at that time.

The Iraqi Uprisings (1991):

In the aftermath of the war, Iraq witnessed a series of uprisings breaking out in various cities following publicly televised statements by President H.W Bush calling on the Iraqis to rise and remove Saddam Hussien from power (Zenko, 2016). The uprising initially erupted and spread around in southern areas with a clear Shi’a majority such as Basra, Najaf, Karbala, and Nasiriyya (Ibid.). However, it was soon followed by similar rebellions consisting of Kurdish Iraqis in the North. These protests were largely disorganized, spontaneous, and violent as they targeted Ba’ath party officials and other regime elements through mob attacks and killings.
(Blaydes, 2018). It is important to note that although the majority of participants in the southern uprisings were Shi’as, the Shi’a identity itself did not dictate whether or not an individual participates in the uprisings (Ibid.). As many Iraqi Shi’as including those living in southern cities opted out of participation in the uprisings, and stayed at home instead (Graham-Brown, 1999) or fled out of fears of retaliation by the regime (Blaydes, 2018).

Nonetheless, it seems that the Iraqi regime could not ignore the disproportionate participation of Shi’as in the 1991 uprisings given their concentration in Shi’a majority areas. In the wake of the uprisings, the regime relied on loyalists from Sunni areas considered to be the bedrock of the Ba’ath party to crush the uprisings in the south (Mackey, 2002). The Sunni majority province of Anbar particularly proved to be critical in aiding the regime’s efforts in repressing the revolts (Dawisha, 2009).

The sectarian dimension of the regime’s response to the largely Shi’a uprisings in 1991 becomes clearer after the revolts were repressed and the regime regained security control over the southern provinces. For example, the regime began discriminately targeting Shi’a families of individuals suspected of anti-regime behavior to force confessions and any information regarding the previous uprisings (Blaydes, 2018). This became a common strategy by the regime in exercising collective punishment against Iraqi Shi’as. As evident by the remarks of Muhammad Hamza Al-Zubaidi, former Prime Minster in Saddam’s regime, was recorded instructing regime officials to eradicate certain Marsh Arab tribes in the south that were predominantly Shi’a in response to the uprisings⁵. Even individuals who had no relation to the revolts became targeted and disappearances of suspected individuals became a common tactic by the regime (Ibid.). In

⁵ Source: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ZTb1qjgPaT8
fact, persecution of the Shi’a had become so severe that it became comparable to the Kurdish
experience with the Iraqi Ba’ath regime (Mackey, 2002).

State-Sponsored Sectarianism & Instrumentalism

The Shift to Instrumentalism:

The Ba’athist regime in Iraq traditionally maintained a formal reputation of secularism,
Saddam himself claimed that the Ba’ath does not mix religion with politics. Going as far as
claiming that the secular doctrine of the Ba’ath ideology would replace the Islamic doctrine
which he viewed as incompatible with the modern age (Baram, 2011). Nonetheless, regional
developments mainly the rise of Khomeini and his Islamist regime in neighboring Iran during
1979 created a new rift of spirituality and renewed the call for religiousness that spilled over into
Iraq. Specifically, in the immediate aftermath of the Islamic revolution where Iraqi Shi’as
amassed on the streets in Iraq to protest the Ba’ath regime and pledged allegiance to Muhammad
Baqir Al-Sadr to rise as the “Iraqi Ayatollah Khomeini” (Alaaldin, 2019). The Iraqi regime
responded by brutally repressing these demonstrations (Baram, 2011) and executed Sadr
alongside his sister Amina bint Al-Huda (Blaydes, 2018).

Furthermore, the renewed call for religiousness in Iraq is evident in the early years of the
Iran-Iraq war. Referring to the humiliating defeats suffered by the Iraqi forces at Khorramshahr
and Abadan in May 1982, followed by a withdrawal of Iraqi forces from several Iranian territories (Baram, 2011). This allegedly signaled to the Iraqi public that the Iraqis were losing due to something inherently wrong with the secular ideology of the Ba’ath regime while the Iranians were winning due to the religious nature of Khomeini’s Islamist regime (Ibid.). Consequently, many Iraqis including Ba’ath party members became increasingly more religious between 1979 and 1982 (Ibid.). These developments and events signaled early signs towards changes in the Ba’ath regime’s calculus towards the role of religion in Iraqi politics and society. Prompting what appears to be a fundamental shift in the regime’s stance on religion from opposition to cooptation that would unfold in subsequent years. This began with instrumentalizing Islam first in the sphere of foreign policy regarding achieving the regime’s policy objectives with its conflict in Iran (Helfont, 2014) and later spread towards domestic politics (Bengio, 1998; Long, 2004; Rohde, 2010; Sassoon, 2011).

The earliest efforts by the regime to coopt religion is evident in an attempt to bolster its Islamic legitimacy to undermine domestic Islamic opposition and promote its policy objectives in its conflict with Iran. In April 1983, the Iraqi regime with the assistance of Saudi Arabia established the first Popular Islamic Conference in Baghdad that attracted hundreds of religious scholars and Islamist activists to the Iraqi capital (Helfornt, 2014). The aim of this conference was “to undermine Iran’s Islam themed propaganda” (Ibid.) that typically framed the Iraqi Ba’ath regime as unislamic and infidel. For example, the conference utilized an interpretation of Surat Al Hujra [49:9] that found fighting among Muslims to be forbidden, thus pushing for a ceasefire as Saddam wanted during a time where the Iran-Iraq war was stuck in a stale mate (Ibid.). However, the Iranians refused, and this fueled the conferences interpretation depicting the Iranians as oppressors against a fellow Muslim nation, thus undermining the Iranian religion.
themed propaganda against the Iraqi regime while also promoting the policy objectives of Saddam regarding the ceasefire. This became even more evident in the second Popular Islamic conference that attracted more prominent actors in the Islamic world and classified the Iran-Iraq war as a form of internal religious conflict (Ibid.).

The PIC later known as Popular Islamic Conference Organization (PICO) became such a valuable regime tool that the Iraqi regime dedicated a building in Baghdad to become its headquarters in 1987 (Ibid.). Subsequently, PICO continued to promote the policy objective of the Iraqi regime by publishing Islamic books that depicted Khomeini as a heretic and the 1979 revolution as a Shi’a/ethnic separatist movement by the Persians that resent the historical Arabic dominance of Islam (Ibid.). This is in line with previous attempts by the Ba’ath regime to continually emphasize the difference between the Arab identity of Iraq and the Persian character of the Iranians (Chubbin and Tripp, 1988).

The shift to instrumentalism is also evident in the domestic sphere of Iraqi politics as the Ba’ath regime saw instrumentalism as a viable strategy for controlling domestic Islamic opposition. Traditionally the Iraqi regime responded to political activism stemming from Islamic groups with brutal repression. For example, one of the primary targeted Islamic groups was the Da’wa Party that was established in the 1950s by Iraqi Shi’a clerics as a direct competitor to the growing Arab nationalism ideology (Corboz, 2015), thus emerging as a direct rival of the Ba’athist regime in Iraq (Blaydes, 2018). In 1980, membership in the Da’wa Party was made punishable by death (Aziz, 1993; Jabar, 2003). Even relatives of executed Da’wa Party members were punished by the regime as they were barred from employment in certain government agencies (Blaydes, 2018). However, this strategy was recognized by Hussein as politically undesirable given its potential in undermining regime support from some religious segments of
the population (Hiro, 1991). As a result, the Iraqi regime switched to a strategy of cooptation regarding certain religious elites with substantial societal influence. Some regime officials believed that clerics could be conditioned to support regime policy interests (Blaydes, 2018). Hence, it was proposed that monthly meetings occur between special Ba’ath committees and clerics to discuss topics of interest in the areas of politics and social issues (Ibid). These committees were designed to either gather support for the regime or eliminate opposition (Helfont, 2015).

Another focal strategy of cooptation involved the hawzas or centers of Shi’a scholarship, organization, and social bonds (Litvak, 1998) in Najaf and Karbala. Students of the hawzas were actively monitored and approached by the regime to be recruited as spies for the Ba’ath party, thus providing direct monitoring of hawza students and enhancing the surveillance capabilities of the Iraqi regime (Helfont, 2015). In addition, special committees were created to investigate and report on religious institutions such as the hawzas. These committees were headed by senior Ba’ath officials such as Izzat Ibrahim Al-Duri (Ibid.). The findings of these committees which would later translate into regime policy under Hussein’s approval (Ibid.) entailed constant surveillance and reducing the size of hawzas (Kadhim, 2013).

The Iraqi regime’s stance on religion continued to shift towards expanding its role among the regime and in a more public manner moving into the 1990s. Especially following the death of Ba’ath Party founder Michel Aflaq in June 1989 (Baram, 2014). Aflaq was a Syrian-born Christian (Jordan, 2023), but the Pan Arab Leadership published a communique following his death claiming that he embraced Islam on his death bed (Baram, 2014). In January 1990, Saddam Hussein added the words Allahu Akbar or “God is Greatest” to the Iraqi flag (Baram 2014; Helfont, 2014) in anticipation of the Gulf War. At the same time Hussein broadcast a radio
message calling for all Arabs and Muslims to launch a jihad against U.S. Forces stationed in Saudi Arabia and the Saudi regime itself for inviting foreign aggressors onto the holy lands of Mecca and Medina (Murphy, 1990).

Another example of what some scholars have labeled as the Islamization of the Iraqi regime (Baram, 2014; Rohde, 2010) is the heavy adoption of Islamic rhetoric and Quranic verses/references in his speeches during that period (Bengio, 1998). For example, the use of the basmala or “in the name of God” to open his speeches and Allahu Akbar to end his speeches (Ibid.). Hussein also exclusively signed his letters with the phrase Abdalla al mu’min or “the servant of Allah, the believer” during the Gulf War, to create this image depicting himself as a true Muslim fighting against non-believers including the West and Arab leaders such as Saudi Arabia (Ibid.).

This section portrayed how the secular Ba’athist regime fundamentally shifted its stance on religion towards instrumentalism as a means of achieving strategic policy objectives through various examples. In the foreign sphere, instrumentalizing religion was crucial in bolstering the public religious image of the Iraqi regime that served various functions including: countering the Islamic themed propaganda of Iran, garnering support from the Muslim World through PICO, and denouncing the legitimacy of the Gulf War involving the collaboration of foreign troops with Muslim Arab nations. Regarding the domestic sphere, the Iraqi regime switched from repression to cooptation in its approach with confronting domestic sources of Islamic opposition. This entailed coopting religious elites to be conditioned along the objectives of the Ba’ath party and employing the hawzahas as surveillance centers through the recruitments of its students as spies for the regime.
The Faith Campaign 1993:

In 1993, Saddam Hussein launched what is called *al-hamla al imanyah* or a “Faith Campaign” that was allegedly headed by Izzat Ibrahim Al-Duri (Al-Mukh, 2004), one of the members of Saddam’s inner circle or the ‘Old Guard’ (Sassoon, 2016). One of the core objectives of the Faith campaign was solidifying the regime’s hand in reshaping and controlling the religious landscape in Iraq (Helfont, 2018) that originally began with policies introduced in the 1980s such as the cooptation of religious elites. In addition to the establishment of regime sponsored religious institutions. For example, Saddam’s Islamic University that was designed to cultivate a new generation of Ba’athized Islamic scholars and eventually religious elites (Ibid).

To continue this work and solidify the regime’s grasp onto the religious landscape, the Ba’athist regime required a monopoly over the interpretation of religion that is in line with Ba’athist ideology of nationalism. This Ba’athist interpretation “depicts Islam as the embodiment of Arabism” (Ibid.) and would ultimately supplant other religious interpretations through the Faith Campaign. Hence, the Faith Campaign entailed policies designed to enable regime loyalists to occupy the religious institutions in Iraq (Ibid.). For example, the date of the Faith Campaign’s announcement was likely deliberately coincided with the graduation of the first class of students from Saddam’s Islamic University (Ibid.). As these students can be trusted by the regime to propagate the Ba’athist interpretation of Islam in mosques and other religious institutions.

Moreover, to help aid the replacement of individuals in religious institutions with fully Ba’athized religious scholars, the regime introduced policies banning individuals from giving sermons at mosques without permits obtained via the regime’s security services (Ibid). The regime also went beyond supplanting religious scholars and leaders with those that were
Ba’athized, the security services were deployed throughout the 1990s to ensure that the religious elite would achieve the social control policies of the regime or at a minimum operate in a state of compliance (Ibid.). This was primarily achieved through constant heavy surveillance and violence in some instances. Hence, the Iraqi regime created a system backed by coercion, surveillance, and violence that the religious elite could not operate outside of during the last decade of Saddam’s rule (Ibid.)

Moving beyond the regime’s efforts to assert dominance over the religious sphere, the Faith Campaign also introduced radical changes to the daily lives of Iraqis in a manner that would embrace Islam and shift religion towards the center of citizen affairs. For instance, closing down nightclubs (Baram, 2014) and banning the public consumption of alcohol (Haddad, 2011; Baram, 2014). In addition, the campaign launched a massive bid towards Qur’anic education and Hadith, that now became the center of national intellectual dialogue (Baram, 2014). Primary education was re-ordered around the emphasis of teaching and reciting the Quran in Iraq, Saddam opened the doors for Islamic teachers from all over the region to accommodate for the gap in religious teachers (Ibid.).

The sectarian dimension of this campaign is highlighted through the emphasis of the Sunni interpretation of Islam despite the Shi’a majority of the population. For instance, the Iraqi regime allegedly more openly tolerated Sunni and Suffi rituals whereas Shi’a rituals remained strictly controlled (Haddad, 2011). In a private meeting with a Sudanese cabinet minister in 2002, Saddam mentions how Iraqi judges are barred from the bench if they fail an examination on their knowledge on the sunnah al nabawiya, that is the Sunni tradition of Islam (Baram, 2014). This examination of Sunni knowledge similarly applied to top ranking party and state officials according to the meeting (Ibid.)
Saddam also invested into huge construction efforts of building new and grand mosques in Sunni provinces despite the war-torn economy that was crippled by international sanctions (Ibid). Moreover, Saddam began implementing aspects of Sharia law into his governance such as the amputation of the hand for crimes involving theft and robbery (Haddad, 2011; Baram, 2014). Saddam’s Faith campaign even attracted attention and praise from the Ba’ath’s fiercest critiques in the region (Haddad, 2011). For example, Saudi Salafi cleric Safar Al-Hawali speaking in February 2003: “Iraq is living a [religious] awakening that no one but an ingrate would deny?”6. He further questions whether the state of Islamic education anywhere else in the Muslim world can compare to that of Iraq in the 1990s, even the Gulf states that he critiques for not dedicating every day for Islamic education to students (Ibid). Another study published on the same Islamic website where the commentary of Al-Hawali can be found how “a Dr. Abdul Lateef Humeim advised Saddam on the necessity of safeguarding the Hadith and the Sunna, especially given the rafidha’s accusations against the hadith of the Sunnis” (Haddad, 2011).

An important caveat to mention is that despite what looks like increased motivation by the Iraqi regime to promote religion and piety, “the regime remained suspicious of excess piety” (Sassoon, 2011). For example, Saddam’s eldest son Uday published articles in his newspaper Babel warning about the potential dangers of the Faith Campaign in opening the doors to fundamentalist and radical Islamist currents into Iraq (Baram, 2014). Furthermore, based on primary source documents in the form of private official records obtained from the Ba’ath Party, Sassoon (2011) argues that the Iraqi regime “publicly launched a faith campaign but simultaneously, behind the scenes, continued to be anti-religious and to repress any sign of real

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6 The original source of this quotation is found in an Islamic website for Muslim scholars to comment and share research titled “islammemo.cc” but has been deactivated since 2011. Hence, the quotation and translation itself has been adapted from Haddad’s (2011) book titled Sectarianism in Iraq: Antagonistic Visions of Unity.
religiosity.” This seems to be true based on the earlier discussion of how the regime undertook expansive efforts to assert dominance over the religious sphere during the campaign. For example, monopolizing the interpretation of Islam based on the Ba’athist view and the infiltration of religious institutions by planting Ba’athized religious scholars in them (Helfont, 2018). Not to mention, requiring permits for sermons that can only be obtained via the state security services (Ibid.). Other instrumentalists similarly argue that Saddam only cared about the appearance of piety but was never actually pious himself at any point throughout his lifetime (Long, 2004). This argument is based on the lack of any mention of piety in Saddam’s early life nor his family in his biographies including those that were regime approved by Iskander or Matar and those that were not by Said Aburish (Ibid.)

The introduction of the Faith Campaign in conjunction with the expanded instrumental role of religion in the Ba’ath regime during the 1980s has sparked a debate among scholars regarding whether these events/policies reflect a genuine Islamization of the regime’s ideology (Rohde, 2010; Baram, 2014) or instrumentalism (Bengio, 1998; Long, 2004; Sassoon, 2011; Helfont, 2018). This thesis joins the instrumentalists and argues that the Faith Campaign in 1993 was largely created to employ religion for political purposes in response to the existential threats posed by previous events. Especially the 1991 Uprisings and the immense challenges posed by the UN sanctions on the Iraqi state’s ability to govern society. However, this thesis will expand on the instrumentalist position by focusing on the employment of sectarian identity specifically for political purposes rather than adopting the approach of previous research focusing on instrumentalizing religion broadly. Hence, joining the argument of Haddad (2011) stating that state-sponsored religiosity “carries the potential of accentuating sectarian difference.” This argument will be revisited and explored more thoroughly in the next section.
The New Sectarian Status-Quo

The Decline of Nationalism and the Rise of Sectarianism:

The 1990s in Iraq witnessed a significant recession in the sense of Iraqi state nationalism (Haddad, 2011) largely due to the events of 1991 and the UN sanctions that stripped the Iraqi state of considerable resources and undermined the Ba’athist nationalist ideology. In the words of one former Iraqi diplomat: “in the 1990s al-hiss al-watani or nationalism was severely weakened because there was no nation; there was a person. You were not defending Iraq anymore, you were defending Saddam and this was a sentiment shared with people across Iraq.”\(^7\) This is in sharp contrast to what the same former diplomat said when commenting on the 1980s where he alleges Iraqis stood behind the same regime in fighting Iran and identified with the Iraqi nation (Ibid.). Moreover, the contraction of the Iraqi state forced it to withdraw from dominating all affairs in Iraqi society except those deemed essential for regime survival (Allawi, 2007). This created a social vacuum that became predominantly occupied by religious networks offering alternative symbols of identity than the declining Iraqi national identity (Ibid.).

The subsequent rise of religious piety among the Iraqi public that was also state sponsored largely through the Faith Campaign has led to an increase in sectarian self-identification (Ibid.) as mentioned at the beginning of the previous section. The logic behind this phenomenon is based on the simple observation that an increase in religious piety among an

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\(^7\) This interview was conducted by Fanar Haddad with Faris al-Ali in Amman, December 2008. Adapted from Haddad (2011) book titled *Sectarianism in Iraq: Antagonistic Visions of Unity*, p.110.
individual causes an increase in dependency on religious rulings and exposure to theological disputes (Ibid.). Consequently, a pious individual is more likely to increasingly adhere to a specific school of thought, the stricter the adherence the more likely it is for an individual to exclude non-adherents from his religious outlook on life and cast them as members of the outgroup or the ‘other’ (Ibid.). In addition, the differences between different schools of thoughts or sects become more prominent based on an increased understanding and consciousness of the differences between the rituals, historical traditions, and symbolism behind Sunnism and Shiism as an example. Hence, awareness of sectarian differences and the subsequent self-identification among an increasingly pious population becomes heightened as is the case in Iraq during the 1990s.

Nevertheless, it is important to emphasize again that this increase in public religiosity was mainly state driven. As the regime first created a narrative that emphasized the Arab identity of Iraqis to unite the population regardless of sectarian identity to fight the Persian enemy during the Iran-Iraq war in the 1980s. Then in the following decade, the regime shifted its instrumentalist narrative to amplify the divisions and salience of sectarian identities relating to the Sunnis and Shias in Iraq during the 1990s. This transition is explained in detail in the previous section.

This is evident in the engagement of political elite actors in sectarian rhetoric around this timeframe. For example, in addressing the 7th class of the Saddam Institute for the Study of the Holy Quran in 2001, Izzat Ibrahim Al-Duri reflected on the Faith Campaign and emphasized its importance: “Look at Iraq today… how the great people under the leadership of this great party, is similar to the manner the Prophet and his associates behaved [and ruled]” (Sassoon, 2016). The sectarian reference in this statement is mentioning the associates or companions of the
Prophet Muhammad that are widely accepted by the Sunnis and rejected by Shi’as. Hence, elevating the qualities of the Companions by mentioning how the Faith Campaign has conditioned Iraqi society to become ‘better’ and ‘holier’ based on a comparison with the Companions is a clear example of sectarian rhetoric. In this case, Duri, a regime elite actor is elevating the historical understanding of one sect (Sunnis) over the other (Shi’a). This becomes more evident when Duri follows up on his statements with additional sectarian rhetoric such as mentioning to the students how Saddam is following in the footsteps of the Caliph Ummar (Sassoon, 2016). Again, we see an elite regime actor correlate piety and morality with a historical figure appealing to one sect only.

Sectarian Repression of the Shi’a pre-2003:

The increased awareness of sectarian identities in Iraq due to the instrumentalist policies of the Iraqi regime during the 1990s created a sectarian status quo. Sectarian identities began to increasingly move towards the center of public affairs, thus increasing their salience. In the words of al-Qawazini (2008): “Anyone who tells you that the 1990s did not witness a chasm between Sunnis and Shi’as is lying to you! Of course, a ‘them’ and ‘us’ mentality became widespread.”9 At the same time, the Iraqi regime continued to exploit sectarian identities for political purposes. For example, following the death of Grand Ayatollah Abu Qasim Al-Khoei, the Iranian-Iraqi Shi’a marji’i or high-ranking religious scholar, the regime wanted to replace

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9 This interview was conducted by Fanar Haddad with Iraqi lawyer, Uday al-Qazwini in Amman, December 2008. Adapted from Haddad (2011) book titled Sectarianism in Iraq: Antagonistic Visions of Unity, p.112.
him with an Arab such as Muhammad Muhammad Sadiq Al-Sadr (Long, 2004; Haddad, 2011; Helfont, 2018). In the early to mid-1990s it seems that the regime did attempt to coopt Sadr (Helfont, 2018) and the relationship between Sadr and the regime was allegedly stable until 1997 (Cockburn, 2008). However, this relationship turned sour as Sadr began to be critical of Saddam’s Islamic qualifications (Long, 2004) and increasingly voiced opposition through Friday sermons at the mosque that were not controlled by the regime and saw attendance of thousands of Sadrists (Blaydes, 2018). Consequently, this prompted the assassination of Sadr by the regime in 1999 (Haddad, 2011) sparking public outrage and the mobilization of his followers on the streets that ended with brutal repression killing dozens by regime security forces (Cockburn, 2008). In the aftermath of these events, the Ba’athists deployed their coopted Shia religious networks to deflect the blame for Sadr’s death by pointing the accusation towards Israel (Helfont, 2018). Yet this did not prevent the subsequent riots by thousands of Iraqi Shi’as all over Iraq in response to Sadr’s assassination in what became known as the “al-Sadr Intifada” (HRW, 2005).

The targeted repression based on sectarian identity goes beyond just the killings of senior Shi’a scholars and repressing their supporters, the Iraqi regime deliberately interfered with Muharram, one of the holiest Shi’a pilgrimages. The regime would arrest Iraqi Shi’as attempting to perform the pilgrimage by foot as it viewed mass assembly as a potential threat (Helfont, 2018). One Shi’a pilgrim who interpreted the Faith Campaign as an open invitation to pilgrimage, was arrested and violently tortured for 6 months in the Ba’ath Party’s Office in Karbala (Ibid.). Ali Hassan Al-Majid, Saddam’s cousin and senior member of the Ba’ath party played an instrumental role in devising plans to covertly target Shi’a pilgrims attempting to perform the Muharram (Ibid.). Apparently, Ba’ath party members would be positioned along the
roads covertly to intercept pilgrims and convince them how the ritual is un-Islamic and a Persian invention (Ibid.). Hence, convincing pilgrims to go back home through taxis operated by covert Ba’ath party members that would collect the names and addresses of pilgrims then share them with the regime’s security services (Ibid.).

Al-Majid also explicitly directed and commanded Ba’ath Party members to conduct systematic arbitrary arrests, extrajudicial killings, torture, and the collective punishment of Iraqi Shia’s that were suspected to be involved in the al-Sadr intifada, March 1999 (HRW, 2005). In fact, the regime conducted collective punishment against the Shi’as in a similar manner to the regime’s earlier response to the 1991 Uprising. Families of suspected Shi’as were targeted, detained, tortured, and killed despite having no real involvement in the riots (Ibid.). For example, a sixth grader was arrested and detained for 40 days based on the accusation of affiliating with an opposition group and being a Sadrist (Ibid.).

Sectarianism and Conflict post-2003

The U.S Invasion of Iraq 2003:

Before delving into the new political reality and chaos that unfolded in Iraq post-2003, it is important to briefly mention and discuss the effects of the very event that precipitated the fall of the Iraqi regime, collapse of state authority, and the power vacuum in Iraq. On March 20th,
2003, the United States alongside British support launched an invasion on Iraq (Laub et al., 2023) with the aim of toppling Saddam’s regime under the pretense of Iraq continuing its weapons of mass destruction programs (New York Times, 2002). Within a few short weeks, U.S. forces reached the outskirts of Baghdad surrounding the capital while the Iraqi Armed Forces essentially disintegrated (Allawi, 2007). The fall of the regime was marked by the U.S. forcefully entering Baghdad on April 9th, 2003, and the subsequent symbolic scenes of Iraqis with the aid of Marines in toppling the infamous Saddam statue on Firdaus Square (Shadid, 2003).

The effects of this invasion are profound insofar that it caused the collapse of central authority in Iraq and created a power vacuum. This is evident in the “emergence of local power groups” (Allawi, 2007) that are non-state actors such as Islamists and tribal elements in various towns and cities primarily in the south and areas bordering with Iran (Ibid.). For example, Nasiriya fell under the control of an alliance between local tribesmen, the Da’wa Party, and returning Ayatollah Muhammad Baqir al-Nasiri (Ibid.). Basra became controlled by various Sadrists groups, the Supreme Council for the Islamic Revolution in Iraq (SCIRI), and the Fadhila Party (Ibid.). The collapse of central authority in Iraq is further made evident by the severe bouts of looting, vandalism, and destruction of public property following the fall of Baghdad on April 9th (Ibid.). Nearly all government buildings, embassies, villas of the elite, hospitals, power stations and barracks were targeted, looted, vandalized, and some set on fire such as the National Library (Ibid.). The breakdown of Iraqi civil society and the ensuing unrest was fueled by the disappearance of the Baghdad police force that was once 40,000 strong, absence of fire fighters, and more importantly the willing ignorance and failure of the Coalition forces to assert a strong military policing presence in the areas under its control (Ibid.).
A New Political Order:

Despite being hell-bent on toppling Saddam’s regime and launching a preemptive invasion against Iraq to achieve this goal, the United States at the time had no real plan to effectively administer the country in a post-Saddam Iraq (Allawi, 2007). Regardless, new political realties began to emerge almost inevitably following the collapse of Saddam’s regime. The most significant development was the lifting of the taboo on sectarian identity (Allawi, 2007; Haddad, 2011). Particularly relevant to Iraqi Shi’as that were now confronted with a new reality enabling them to establish what they viewed as “a long suppressed sectarian identity” (Haddad, 2011). This is evident in the immediate moves made by Shiite leaders and parties to fill the vacuum left behind by the collapse of Saddam’s regime (Cole, 2003). As mentioned in the previous section several cities fell under the control of Shi’ite entities such as Nasiriya under the Da’wa Party. Not only was the ascendancy of Shi’a sectarian identity present among religious leaders and parties, but also among regular Iraqi Shi’as themselves that increasingly looked towards their religious elites. For example, several predominantly Shi’a towns in southern Iraq witnessed demonstrations calling for ‘Islamic rule’ (Allawi, 2007). Similarly, several thousand Shi’as amassed in mosques and halls to hear the first Friday prayers following the fall of the regime that called for “the establishment of an Islamic order in Iraq” (Ibid.).

Alternatively, the Sunni Arabs in Iraq faced a different reality. For example, they were compelled to face the sudden decline of their dominance as a community in the new Iraqi political order that was unfolding (Ibid.). This is unprecedented in the modern political history of Iraq, as the Sunni Arab community had never previously acknowledged the sectarian nature of Iraqi politics that had advantaged their community for decades by Sunni dominated regimes
Moreover, the Sunnis also suffered from an identity crisis as they had always previously identified with the Iraqi nation-state ideology that had been espoused by the Ba’athists and their predecessors for decades (Hashemi, 2006; Haddad, 2011). Unsurprisingly, this cold confrontation with a new reality where the Sunnis have lost their sectarian advantage and arguably national identity has fueled heavy resentment in the community. Especially when they perceived that Iraqi politics would now be revamped around sectarian identity in the post-Saddam order due to the growing sectarian consciousness of the Iraqi Shia (Allawi, 2007).

Furthermore, the Sunnis interpreted the invasion as the overthrow of an Iraqi system of authority by an external and alien force that had become an arbitrator in dictating Iraq’s political future (Ibid.). Hence, a large part of the Sunni Arabs rejected the occupation and formed a base primarily consisting of old Ba’athists but also including businessmen and tribesmen from which violent resistance would later emerge (Ibid.). This was largely fueled by a sense of fear and impending marginalization that would turn out to be true. For instance, Bremer’s decision to dissolve the Iraqi Armed Forces (Al Jazeera, 2003) disproportionately affected the Sunni community as tens of thousands of previous Sunni officers had lost their only source of employment and livelihood (Allawi, 2007).

These new emerging realities in the post-2003 period created a new political order where the salience of sectarian identities have been pushed to the center of this order and became heavily politicized. On the one hand, the growing Shi’a sectarian consciousness inevitably propelled to the top of the political pyramid as it more openly asserted itself in the vacuum (Ibid.). It is important to remember that the growing sectarian awareness of Iraqi Shia’s had been in effect since at least the preceding decade (Haddad, 2011) and was largely fueled by the
instrumentalist policies of the Ba’ath regime. For example, the Faith campaign and the targeted persecution of the Shi’a throughout the 1990s.

On the other hand, the Iraqi Sunnis become more aware of their sectarian identification only following the collapse of Saddam’s regime and the subsequent demise of the previous non-sectarian national identity. Resulting in what Hashim (2006) calls ‘identity disenfranchisement’, describing when people resort to communal identities in the absence or failure of a state as a means of satisfying individual security needs (Ibid.). Hence, the Sunnis resorted to their sectarian identity in the wake of the previous regime’s collapse (Haddad, 2011). This was further exacerbated by signs of impending Shia’ domination in the post-2003 order. As facilitated by the policies of the Coalition Provisional Authority or CPA that was largely influenced by returning Iraqi opposition exiles wanting to ‘right sectarian wrongs’ (Ibid.). For example, the de-Ba’athification policies and the formation of the Iraqi Governing Council dividing membership based on the highly disputed perceived numerical weight of communal/sectarian identities (Ibid). Thus, guaranteeing the domination of the Shi’a due to their clear majority while marginalizing the Sunnis due to their minority status and especially links to the Ba’ath regime.

Moreover, the same elite actors that pursued instrumentalist policies to exploit sectarian divisions in the 1990’s continued to instrumentalize the salience of sectarian identities in the post-2003 political order. For example, Izzat Duri previously headed the Faith Campaign in 1993 that was largely responsible for driving the increased salience of sectarian identities among Iraqis, particularly the Shi’a during that era as discussed earlier. Similarly, following the collapse of the Ba’ath regime, Duri instrumentalized the new Sunni sectarian consciousness and fears of marginalization to launch an insurgency against the occupation and Shi’a. This will be discussed in further detail in the following section.
Instrumentalism and Sectarian Civil War (2006-2007):

The sectarian nature of the post-2003 political order as discussed earlier provided ample opportunity for instrumentalists to capitalize on the heightened salience of sectarian identities in Iraq. Especially concerning the Sunni Arabs that increasingly resorted to their communal/sectarian identity and legitimately feared their security due to the political ascendancy of the Shia and the marginalization of Sunnis. Abu-Musab Al-Zarqawi provides the clearest example of an elite actor capitalizing on the heightened salience of sectarian identities post-2003 in Iraq by inflaming sectarian tensions for political gain. Zarqawi was originally from Zarqa, Jordan who started out his early life as a criminal that gets radicalized during his incarceration in a Jordanian prison. After his release from prison, he moved to Afghanistan to receive jihadist training and allegedly met with Bin Laden in the 1990s (Breslow, 2016). Zarqawi ultimately ends up in Iraq and establishes a jihadist network that is later rebranded and named Al Qaida in Iraq (AQI) around 2004 when Zarqawi formally pledges bay’a or allegiance to Bin Laden (Ibid.).

The motivations of Zarqawi to instrumentalize sectarian identities is evident in a letter he sent to Al Qaeda leadership on January 23rd, 2004. In the letter Zarqawi described the Shia as a “sect of treachery and betrayal throughout history and throughout the ages. It is a creed that aims to combat the Sunnis.” In fact, Zarqawi aimed to inform Al Qaeda leadership of his plans to drag the Shi’as into sectarian war “to awaken the inattentive Sunnis as they feel imminent danger and annihilating death” (Ibid.).

The mechanism through which Zarqawi achieved his stated goal of fomenting sectarian civil war is through the strategic use of emotions to “create anger and spiraling violence” (Petersen, 2011). For example, staging attacks against the motorcades of Shi’a political figures (Ibid.) and detonating car bombs outside Muqtada Al Sadr’s office (Burns, 2005). Both examples represent what Petersen (2011) calls strategy I, describing the deliberate targeting of individuals with a clear distinct identity to foment anger and set in motion a spiral of violence triggered by retaliation. In other words, Zarqawi is intentionally executing attacks against figures with clear Shi’a identities to instigate anger/retaliation emanating from the Shi’a community against the Sunnis in an attempt to spiral violence into a sectarian civil war. A key element in this strategy is provoking a retaliatory response from ethnic political and security elites as they are capable of escalating violence into a spiraling chain of events (Ibid). For instance, the car bombing outside of Sadr’s office, a clear symbol of the Shi’a elite, triggered a retaliatory response by the Shi’a. Resulting in the murder of Jassim Al-Issawi, a Sunni Arab that was nominated among other members of the Sunni community for cooptation into a parliamentary committee responsible for drafting the new Iraqi constitution (Burns, 2005).

According to Petersen (2011), the bombing of the Golden Mosque in Smarra or Al-Askari Shrine in 2006 by Iraqi Sunni terrorists affiliated with Zarqawi (PBS, 2020) represents a clear example of strategy I. The attack against one of the holiest shrines in the Shi’a community triggered an angry and violent response by protesting mobs of Shi’a calling for revenge and later burning dozens of Sunni mosques (Worth, 2006). In addition to drawing in Shi’a militias such as the Mahdi Army to the streets that subsequently massacred 1,300 people, a majority of which were Sunnis as an act of retaliation (Knickmeyer and Sebti, 2006). Hence triggering sectarian
violence that would continue to spiral into civil war between Iraqi Arab Sunnis and Shi’as 2006-2008 (Haddad, 2011).

Other elite actors such as Izzat Duri, the new leader of the Ba’ath Party up until Saddam’s execution, like Zarqawi seized the opportunity to exploit the growing Sunni sectarian consciousness and fears. However, Duri’s instrumentalist goals were less radical than Zarqawi as he sought to use Sunni identity as a platform for launching an insurgency against the occupation to restore the Ba’ath order (Jordan, 2023). Following the execution of Saddam Hussein in December 2006, the Ba’ath Party fractured under different leadership (Knights, 2011). Among those was Duri who formed a Ba’ath umbrella resistance organization known as al-Qiyada al-‘Uliya li-l-Jihad wa-l-Tahrir or the Higher Command for Jihad and Liberation (Jordan, 2023). In addition, Duri established a new Sunni militia known as Jaish Rijal al-Tariq al-Naqshbandi or JRTN to serve as the primary insurgency unity of the HCJL (Ibid). This militia was led by Duri himself and consisted of previous Ba’ath Party officials, former intelligence/military officers such as the Republican Guard, and Sunni tribal elements (Knights, 2011). Even the recruitment of the JRTN emphasized appealing to the mainstream concerns of the Sunnis such as propagating fears of a Shi’a dominated government in Baghdad that is under heavy Iranian influence (Ibid.).

The post-2003 period demonstrates various examples of elite actors instrumentalizing the heightened salience of sectarian identity and divisions during that period to achieve political goals. In the case of Zarqawi, instrumentalizing sectarian divisions in Iraqi society presented an opportunity for him to gain notoriety in the international jihadist networks and culminated in his ascension to lead Al Qaeda’s branch in Iraq. It is important to note that Zarqawi is a foreign actor that suddenly appeared and capitalized on the existing salience of sectarian divisions in Iraq that were largely fueled by the instrumentalist policies of the Ba’athist regime. Alternatively, Duri
had a history of engaging in instrumentalist policies that amplified sectarian identities during the reign of Saddam Hussein such as heading the 1993 Faith campaign. In the post 2003-era, Duri continued the instrumentalist policies of his predecessors and capitalized on sectarian fears and sense of impending marginalization. His aim was to launch a Sunni led insurgency against the occupation and the Shi’a collaborators to topple the Shi’a dominated government and restore the Ba’ath regime. Hence, reversing the post-2003 Iraqi political order into one that is Sunni dominated again.
Iraq B: Nouri Al Maliki’s Regime (2006-2013)

The context surrounding the emergence of Maliki’s regime largely follows the events discussed in the previous case-study of Saddam’s regime from 1990-2003. Referring to the removal of the previous Ba’ath regime through the U.S. invasion in 2003 and the subsequent collapse of Iraqi central authority. The heightened salience of sectarian identities that has been largely state-driven and set in motion since at least the 1990s through various Ba’athist policies such as the Faith Campaign in 1993. The emergence of a new political order in the post-2003 period that is centered around sectarianism and dominated by the Shi’a. Lastly, the insurgency that carried an overt sectarian tone as it was largely instigated by Sunni elite actors and carried out by Arab Sunnis in response to the heightened salience of sectarian identities, the ascendance of the Shi’a to the top of the political pyramid in Iraq post-2003, and a sense of impending marginalization.

The narrative continues amid the sectarian civil war 2006-2008 around the time Maliki officially ascends to the role of Prime Minster on May 20th, 2006 (Al Jazeera, 2010). However, the narrative in this case-study will primarily focus on tracing the shift of Maliki’s regime from coming into power as a ‘national unity government’ (Allawi, 2007) seeking to bridge sectarian divides amidst a brutal civil war to a highly repressive Shi’a sectarian regime targeting the Sunnis. The key event during the reign of Maliki is the massive withdrawal of U.S. Armed Forces from Iraq in 2011 under the Obama administration (Landler, 2011). The significance of this event is that the state capacity of Iraq post-2003 largely rested on the presence of U.S. Armed Forces. Especially as their primary role served to contain the active insurgency seeking to overthrow the Shi’a dominated government and restore Sunni dominance. Hence, I argue that a
severe decay in state capacity marked by the 2011 U.S. withdrawal motivated Maliki to shift his rationale from cooptation to the sectarian repression of the Sunnis as a strategy of regime survival. Especially considering the sectarian threat posed by the Sunnis was indirectly contained as part of the counter-insurgency operations of the U.S. military in previous years.

Maliki’s Reign Pre-2011 U.S. Withdrawal

The Rise of Maliki to Power and the ‘National Unity’ Government:

Nouri Al Maliki was an unknown figure before his return from exile in Syria following the collapse of the former regime (Allawi, 2007). He spent his early days in Baghdad working as a low-level politician for the Dawa Party and became known for his hardline views on the Ba’athists earning him a spot on the party’s de-Ba’athification board (Parker and Salman, 2013). Maliki ascended the political ladder and emerged as a senior parliamentarian where he became the head of the parliament’s security committee under the Transitional National Assembly (Allawi, 2007). During that time, Maliki gained notoriety for vowing to hunt down Ba’athists (Parker and Salman, 2013). In December 2005, Iraq held elections for a four-year government where former Prime Minster Ja’afari narrowly secured another term (Allawi, 2007). However, he had major opposition within the United Iraqi Alliance or UIA (Shi’a bloc), Kurdish groups, and the U.S. administration that especially opposed Ja’fari due to ongoing sectarian violence (Ibid.). After a fourth month stalemate, Ja’afari stepped down on April 20th, 2006, and on the following
day Maliki emerged as the official UIA candidate for Prime Minister (Ibid.). He officially assumed the role of Iraqi Prime Minister on May 20th, 2006 (Al Jazeera, 2010).

Maliki committed to creating a ‘national unity’ image for his government early on by employing nearly all parliamentary factions to form his administration (Allawi, 2007). For example, his cabinet consisted of a Kurdish President named Jalal Talabani and Sunni vice president, Tareq al-Hashemi (Ibid.). The Sunni Arabs were allegedly satisfied with their initial representation in Maliki’s government at the time (Ibid.). In addition, Maliki announced a number of measures to bridge sectarian divides in Iraq such as ‘the prime minister’s initiative for national reconciliation’ (Ibid.). He also called out the militias as a problem that needs to be addressed and proposed guidelines allowing for certain elements of the insurgency and Ba’athists to eventually be re-incorporated into the Iraqi political process (Ibid).

At the same time, Maliki immediately began to consolidate his rule as Prime Minister by surrounding himself with individuals sharing strong personal ties including immediate family members and Dawa Party members, these individuals would become known as the ‘Malikiyoun’ (Dawod, 2012; Rayburn, 2012). For example, his son Ahmad was initially placed as an assistant in the office of the chief of staff granting him supervision of security services (Parker, 2012), yet he gradually was given more responsibilities such as supervising Maliki’s personal security and later gained the power to command military units in proceeding years (Parker and Salman, 2013). This represents one example of how Maliki positioned the Malikiyoun into a patronage network extending its influence into formal state institutions (Dodge, 2013). In other words, Maliki created a shadow state bypassing the fractured political elite that bogged down his rule due to internal disputes and circumvented virtually any democratic oversight for his position (Ibid.). In addition, Maliki established the Office of the Commander in Chief in 2007 to facilitate
his monopoly of influence and control over the entire Iraqi security apparatus (Sullivan, 2013). Hence, Maliki successfully centralized the exercise of state power into the office of the Prime Minister through his Malikiyoun network, the establishment of the OCINC, and gradually adopted a more authoritarian form of governance (Ibid.).

Maliki’s behind the scenes consolidation of power did not distract him from pursuing a public nationalist image. In March 2008, Maliki identified a conspiracy plot to unseat him from power and believed it would be instigated through an orchestrated surge of militia violence in Basra resulting in a vote of no confidence against him and his removal from power (Ibid.). In response he launched operation ‘Charge of the Knights’ that dispatched the Iraqi military to reestablish state control over Basra that was under the control of the same militias he perceived to jeopardize his rule (Ibid.). This move was favorably received by the Iraqi population that had been embroiled in ongoing sectarian violence largely fueled by warring sect-based militias for years. The boost in popularity prompted Maliki to extend the operation into Sadr city, thus driving its control out of the Mahdi Army and back into state control (Ibid).

Maliki continued to ride this wave of popularity fueled by a nationalist image into the provincial election campaign in January 2009 where he declared his coalition’s name as Dawlat Al-Qanoun or the State of Law (Ibid.). Throughout his campaign, Maliki emphasized the success of his Charge of Knights campaign that liberated Basra from militia rule and highlighted his role in combatting the expansionist policies of the Kurdish Regional Government (Ibid.). In his speeches, Maliki made sure to paint himself as an Iraqi nationalist above all by adopting a hardline stance on negotiating the presence of U.S. forces in Iraq. In addition to distancing himself from the positions adopted by the SCIRI and various Kurdish groups pushing for a decentralized federal government (Ibid.). It appeared that Maliki was pursuing a campaign to
convince the Iraqi people that his policies and leadership were guiding Iraq out of sectarianism and civil war towards law and order emphasizing Iraqi national unity. Indeed, the Iraqi public seemed to have bought into Maliki’s promises and image based on the electoral results granting Maliki’s coalition a clear majority of seats in the provincial elections (Ali, 2013).

The Weakening of the Iraqi Security Apparatus under Maliki:

Another important aspect to further discuss before moving on to the next section is Maliki’s efforts to establish total control over the Iraqi security and intelligence apparatus during his first term as Prime Minster. As mentioned earlier, this was primarily facilitated by the establishment of the OCINC in early 2007 (Sullivan, 2013). This office was staffed by Maliki’s team, lacked any form of oversight, and was able to circumvent the Ministry of Defense and Ministry of Interior (Ibid.). Thus, concentrating the control of Iraq’s security matters into Maliki alone. For example, some of the most powerful Iraqi security/military units such as the Baghdad Brigade directly answered to the OCINC at the behest of Maliki (Ibid.). The OCINC also facilitated the creation of parallel military forces such as the Iraqi Special Operations Force that were infamously known for their sectarian targeting and later became known as Fedayeen Maliki (Ibid.).

Nonetheless, Maliki’s efforts to secure control over the Iraqi intelligence apparatus were not as smooth and to some extent degraded the capability of Iraq’s intelligence services. For example, Maliki deliberately curtailed the influence and capacity of Iraq’s premier intelligence
agency, the Iraqi National Intelligence Service that was established in 2004 and directly funded and supported by the U.S. (Ibid.). The INIS was originally headed by a Sunni named Mohammed Abdullah Shahwani and its staff consisted of thousands that were predominantly Sunnis (Ibid.). To counteract INIS’s influence, Maliki established a new intelligence agency called the Ministry of State for National Security Affairs to serve as a direct competitor to INIS. The head of the MSNSA, a Shi’a named Shirwan Al-Waeli was groomed by Maliki to act as an alternative to Shahwani (Ibid.). Moreover, Shahwani’s resignation in 2009 triggered Maliki’s political purge campaigns targeting various Iraqi intelligence agencies on the grounds of De-Bathification (Ibid.). In total, Maliki expelled 376 highly experienced intelligence officers that were predominantly Sunni and replaced them with inexperienced members of his own Dawa Party (Ibid.).

Maliki’s actions of establishing total control over the Iraqi security and intelligence apparatus matches the description of coup-proofing as defined by Quinlivan (1999) regarding the exploitation of religious/ethnic ties to fill coup-critical positions such as the appointment of Waeli by Maliki (Sullivan, 2013). In addition to Makara’s (2013) definition involving the setting up of parallel military forces and security institutions. For example, the creation of the ISOF or Fedayeen Maliki to serve as a parallel military force and the establishment of parallel intelligence agencies like the MSNSA (Sullivan, 2013). However, some of Maliki’s coup proofing efforts specifically regarding the creation of parallel intelligence structures likely undermined the capacity and effectiveness of the Iraqi intelligence apparatus, thus inducing state weakness. As evident in the creation of the MSNSA that is solely tasked with undermining the influence of Iraq’s former primary intelligence agency, INIS.
Nevertheless, it is important to make clear that Maliki’s coup proofing efforts were not executed with the intention of making the Iraqi state more sectarian. Rather Maliki sought to employ these efforts to secure his power and those loyal to him. Once Maliki realized that his coup-proofing efforts weakened Iraqi state capacity around the time of the impending U.S. withdrawal, it is likely that he was further motivated to shift to instrumentalism more openly to secure his position in the Shia political space. Especially, since he may have perceived that his coercive capacity has been degraded due to his policies and the impending U.S. withdrawal, thus he would no longer be able to replicate coercive actions against other powerful Shi’a actors as he previously did with liberating Sadr city from the Mahdi Army.

I acknowledge that this section sounds a bit problematic concerning this thesis’s assumption of the exogenous nature of state weakness. However, the analysis contained here is key to highlighting the early signs of how the Iraqi security/intelligence apparatus or state capacity in general was too weak on its own. This likely further motivated Maliki to immediately resort to instrumentalism following the 2011 U.S. withdrawal that served as the backbone of Iraqi state capacity under Maliki and will be further discussed in the following sections.

**Challenges to Maliki’s Rule and the 2011 U.S. Withdrawal:**

The Maliki ‘national unity’ government seemed a success in the early years of his role as prime minister. As it appeared that he followed through on his promise to bridge existing sectarian bridges and pull Iraq out of a brutal sectarian civil war. For example, he liberated
several cities from militia control such as Basra and Sadr city, thus reestablishing state control. At the same time AQI that played a pivotal role in instigating the Iraqi civil war and spearheading the Sunni insurgency was largely contained through the continued efforts of U.S. military counterinsurgency operations killing its leader Zarqawi in 2006 (Burns, 2006). In addition to the Sahwa or Awakening movement, referring to an initiative created by Sunni tribes and other insurgents to break off from AQI and revolt against them in a bid to root AQI’s influence out of Iraq (Parker, 2009). Despite the movement representing Sunni insurgents, Maliki did not pursue repression against the entire Awakening movement. In fact, at one point Maliki ordered the release of the movement’s deputy leader Abu Ali from prison and his office blocked warrants calling for the arrests of members of the Awakening movement (Ibid.). These actions rallied the support of some Sunni insurgents around the central government headed by a Shi’a prime minister. Hence, fueling Maliki’s policy agenda of bridging sectarian divides and promoting his nationalist image that earned him victory in the 2009 provincial elections.

Nevertheless, Maliki’s nationalist platform failed to secure him victory again in the March 2010 national elections. Maliki pursued the same strategy in the previous 2009 provincial elections, hoping to take advantage of the momentum gained from a boost in his popularity and banking on his role in curbing sectarian violence. At the same time, he refused to join the Iraqi National Alliance as he previously did during the 2005 elections and ran exclusively on his State of Law platform. Hence, dividing the Shi’a vote and enabling his main political rival party Iraqiya that ran on a secular nationalist platform to win a slim majority of parliamentary seats. Maliki refused to accept the electoral results and exploited his role as head of the military to force a recount backed by a threat of ‘a resurgence of violence’ in the event of the failure to do so (Parker and Ahmed, 2010). Despite Maliki’s allegations and an actual recount of the votes, the
Independent High Electoral Commission of Iraq backed by the U.N. found no evidence of fraud and the electoral results remained unchanged (Gatehouse, 2010). This led to a post-election compromise brokered by Massoud Barzani known as the Erbil Agreement in 2010, to usher in a new national unity government headed by Maliki as prime minister but placing a number of limitations on his exercise of power (Dodge, 2013).

A few months following the tumultuous 2010 national elections, President Obama officially announced the end of the combat mission in Iraq in August 2010, stating: “all U.S. troops will leave by the end of next year” (Lee, 2010). On October 21st, 2011, President Obama appeared again revealing that 100,000 U.S. troops have been removed from Iraq since he declared the end of the combat mission in Iraq (Compton, 2011). He also announced that tens of thousands of U.S. troops would continue to leave until the last remaining soldier returns home from Iraq by December 2011 (Ibid.). However, it is important to note that several hundred elements of the U.S. military and civilian trainers were left behind to help Baghdad train the Iraqi Security Forces (Reuters, 2011). Regardless, this is a major contrast to the previous U.S. military presence in Iraq that peaked around 150,000 troops in 2007 (Connable at al., 2020). The significance of the U.S. mass withdrawal of troops represents a substantial shock to Iraqi state capacity. Especially when considering events such as Bremer’s decision to dissolve the Iraqi military in 2003, and the subsequent insurgency that dragged Iraq into a brutal civil war that was largely contained by the counterinsurgency operations of the massive U.S. military presence in Iraq. Hence, Maliki lost the backbone of Iraqi state capacity when U.S. forces withdrew due to the reality that was “U.S. troops were fighting his war and securing his rule” (Lynch, 2014).

Consequently, this likely motivated Maliki to reorient his strategy of rule from cooptation to repression. Especially, given the additional effects of Maliki’s coup-proofing efforts discussed
earlier that undermined Iraqi state capacity to consolidate his power. The reorientation of Maliki’s strategy inflamed sectarian tensions as the primary target of Maliki’s repressive policies were the same Sunnis he once coopted into his ‘national unity’ government in 2006, this will be explored in detail in the following section. Moreover, the shortcomings of Maliki’s nationalist platform, ‘State of Law’, in securing his electoral victory in the crucial 2010 national elections likely further motivated his shift to instrumentalism. This may have been perceived by Maliki as a necessary strategy to contain the threat posed by the secular and non-sectarian nationalists of the Iraqiya party, representing his main political rival.

*The Maliki Survival Post-2011 Withdrawal*

**The New Iraqi Dictator:**

Less than 24 hours after the departure of U.S. troops from Iraq in December 2011, Maliki ordered a warrant to be issued for the arrest of Vice-President Tareq Al-Hashemi on trumped up terrorism charges (Jamail, 2011). Maliki accused both Hashemi and Minister of Finance Issa Rafe Al-Issawi, two of the leading Sunni political figures in Iraqi government and leaders of the Maliki’s main rival political party of masterminding a failed terrorist attack (Pollack, 2011). Maliki was convinced that he was the target of the attack despite the lack of any credible evidence backing such claims including the alleged involvement of Hashemi and Issawi (Ibid.). The only evidence Maliki presented to the public were video tapes of forced confessions from two of Hashemi’s
bodyguards admitting the vice president was involved in various terror attacks since 2008 after they were brutally tortured in custody (Ibid.). Regardless, Maliki directed tanks to be sent to both Issawi and Hashemi’s houses while ordering an arrest for the latter (Ibid.).

Furthermore, Maliki also announced that his cabinet had dropped another prominent Sunni politician and leader in the Iraqiya party, Deputy Prime Minister Hassan Mutlaq (Ibid.). An act that clearly violated the Iraqi constitution as it required a parliament vote, something Maliki and his office had vigorously denied (Ibid.). In response, Mutlaq appeared in an interview with Al Jazeera and called on Maliki to step down because “he turned into a real dictator in this country” (Jamail, 2011). Around the same time of these events, Maliki also publicly declared in a news conference that he would drop the largely Sunni Iraqiya party as a key partner in government and move towards a government dominated by the Shi’a Islamist parties (Gutman, 2012). A move that would upend the national unity government drafted under the Erbil Agreement in 2010 at the expense of the Kurds and Sunni minority in Iraq (Ibid).

Maliki’s actions plunged Iraq into a political crisis and inflamed sectarian tensions, especially as the Sunnis were outraged at the deliberate targeting of the most senior Sunni figures in government. Not to mention the effects of Maliki moving towards revamping the nature of the Iraqi political system from power sharing to majoritarian rule that clearly favors the Shi’a due to their majority status. Hence, heightening the salience of sectarian identities in Iraq once again during a time where it is still reeling in from the brutal sectarian civil war 2006-2008. Maliki’s moves also emboldened other Shi’a elite political actors to instrumentalize sectarian identities during a time of political crisis. For example, Baha Al-Araji, the leader of Sadr’s Al-Ahrar bloc holding 39 seats in Iraqi parliament at the time, blamed the political crisis on politicians in certain
blocs that he accused of either carrying out the agendas of foreign actors or working directly with terrorists (Jamail, 2011).

The Sunni Uprisings:

Maliki’s campaign of what appeared to be deliberate political purges targeting senior Sunni political figures did not halt at deposing Mutlaq and ordering the arrest of Hashemi. In fact, he pursued the political persecution of the former vice president into the following year. During September 2012, an Iraqi court sentenced Hashemi to death in absentia after finding him guilty of playing a role in nearly 150 bombings and assassinations between 2005-2011 allegedly carried out by his bodyguards that targeted government officials and Shi’a pilgrims (Guardian, 2012). However, the fugitive vice president who fled to Turkey called the trial politically motivated and accused the government of torturing his bodyguards for forced confessions (Ibid.).

Three months later, Maliki ordered the Iraqi Security Forces toraid the Minister of Finance, Rafe Al-Issawi’s house resulting in the arrest of nearly 150 guards and employees (Gordon, 2012). This move appeared to be Maliki’s attempt at weakening his main political rivals ahead of the upcoming provincial elections in Spring, in what Issawi had publicly described as a “pre-election blow” (Ibid.). The repeated targeting of a Sunni political leader by a Shi’ite dominated government triggered outrage among the Sunni community in Iraq. Especially, since Issawi represented the last standing source of Sunni representation in the Iraqi government after Malike deposed Mutlaq and drove out Hashemi from the country (Adnan and Arango,
This sentiment is captured in the words of a Sunni shop owner in Baghdad named Ahmed Hashim: “Hashimi is gone, now Essawi, and we have no Sunni leader left to follow” (Ibid.). The Sunni outrage ultimately erupted into mass anti-government protests in the Sunni dominated provinces of Anbar, Ninweh, and Salah ad-Din (Sullivan, 2013). The protestors demanded the release of Sunni detainees and the abolition or at minimum reform of Article 4 of the anti-terrorism law that had been exploited by Maliki to persecute the Sunnis (Ibid.).

Maliki’s initial response entailed denouncing the protestors and coopting some of the Sunni tribal leaders that once belonged to the Awakening movement but were now mobilizing against him (Arango and Gordon, 2013). For example, one Sunni tribal leader in Anbar, Sheik Hamid Al-Hayes, responded to Maliki’s call to arms and denounced the anti-government protests while joining Maliki in establishing a new Sunni militia that vowed to protect the interests of Maliki’s government (Ibid.). Sheik Hayes allegedly met with Maliki on multiple occasions and managed to recruit over 3000 fighters for their new militia and pledged to provide intelligence on the activities of Sunni protestors to the police and government (Ibid.). Nonetheless, Maliki’s true response to the protests quickly unraveled when he unleashed the Iraqi Security Forces on cities experiencing mobilized Sunni protests (Arango, 2013). For instance, the city of Hawija particularly experienced intense gun fighting between Sunni protestors and ISF that left 39 civilians dead (Ibid.). This triggered further outrage by the Sunni community resulting in various tribal leaders to call for jihad against Maliki’s government (Ibid) and pushing Iraq into what seemed to be a second reiteration of the 2006 sectarian civil war. Moreover, sectarian tensions were further inflamed by a prominent Sunni religious leader living in Jordan, Sheik Abdul Malik Al-Sadi who publicly declared his support for the mobilization of Sunnis in Iraq stating: “Self-defense has become a legitimate and legal duty” (Ibid.). Protest leaders in other Sunni cities
responded to the call to arms and mobilized in solidarity with their fallen brethren in Hawija (Ibid.), thus inching Iraq closer to another brutal wave of sectarian violence.

The post-2011 period clearly demonstrates a fundamental shift in Maliki’s rationale from instrumentalized cooptation to brutal repression of the Sunnis. The mass withdrawal of U.S. forces from Iraqi in 2011 is most likely the primary precipitant to Maliki’s strategic revaluation towards a hardline instrumentalist position. Not to mention the effects of his coup-proofing efforts that likely degraded Iraqi state capacity to ensure the survival of both Maliki and his loyalists. Hence, Maliki immediately moved towards dropping the Sunnis from being coopted into his government and cemented himself in the Shi’a political sphere by moving towards majoritarian rule, marking the end of the so-called national unity government. At the same time, Maliki persecuted senior Sunni politicians by attempting to arrest them on the basis of trumped-up terror charges. Leading to some like Vice President Hashemi to flee the country. Maliki’s sectarian targeting and policies inevitably inflamed sectarian tensions and plunged Iraq into crisis as the Sunnis mobilized on the streets in outrage. Brutal government repression ensued as Maliki dispatched the ISF to crush the Sunni uprisings. The Shia dominated Iraqi state-sponsored violence targeting the Sunnis ultimately spiraled into a chain of sectarian violence dragging Iraq into a second bout of sectarian conflict.
The Negative Case: Egypt (2012)

Egypt’s first albeit short-lived democratic experience following the overthrow of Husni Mubarak’s regime and the democratically elected Mohamed Morsi presents another interesting case study for investigating the proposed theoretical model. Especially when applying it towards the latter stages of Morsi’s brief presidency before its demise through a military coup and his replacement with General Abdel Fattah Sisi. In January 2011, the revolutionary bandwagon of the Arab Spring spreads into Egypt sparking mass mobilization of anti-government protests calling for the ouster of Egyptian President Mubarak (Al Jazeera, 2011). One month later in February 2011, President Mubarak resigned his presidency (Ibid.). The subsequent 2012 national elections concluded when Egypt’s military elite officially recognized Morsi as the winner and new Egyptian President (Kirkpatrick, 2012). This came as a shock to many observers and Egyptians, especially when considering that the military elite accepted Morsi’s electoral victory over their own ally and insider, former Air Force general Ahmad Shafiq (Ibid.). Hence, implying a weakened state of the formidable Egyptian state apparatus following the 2011 revolution. This is further made evident when one of the earliest moves of Morsi’s presidency entailed successfully negotiating with the Supreme Court of the Armed Forces to return its residual power to the office of the presidency and retire some of its senior officers (Brown, 2015).

Morsi’s presidency appeared to be a success up until November 2012 when Morsi was confronted by his civil opponents and in return perceived them to be conspiring against him along side other state elements to unseat him from power and restore the military’s political role (Ibid.). Hence, Morsi preemptively moved the constitutional process outside of court review and replaced the public prosecutor with one of his own (Ibid.). This triggered a spiraling series of
events involving mobilized public protests by his opponents and a deliberate strategy by the state apparatus to undermine Morsi’s presidency. Around Spring 2013, Morsi’s presidency was confronted by an existential crisis when a new political movement labeled *Tamarod* gained public traction calling for new presidential elections (Ibid.). The leaders of this movement colluded with the state apparatus to instigate a military coup against Morsi. On July 3, the conspiracy proved successful when Sisi publicly declared that Morsi had been removed from office by the military (Kirkpatrick, 2013) and later placed in jail until he died during his trial in 2019 (Walsh and Kirkpatrick, 2019).

During his presidency, Morsi was confronted with a unique opportunity to instrumentalize sectarian identities in Egypt as a strategy to preserve his power, thus consolidating and possibly extending his rule. The conditions for instrumentalism were present around the time of Morsi’s presidency. For example, the state capacity of Egypt was weakened around the time of the 2011 revolution and the subsequent 2012 elections as evident by the concessions of the SCAF to Morsi mentioned earlier. Furthermore, Egypt is a multi-sect society consisting of a Sunni majority amounting to 90% of the population and a sizeable Christian minority representing 10% of Egyptians\(^\text{10}\). Nearly, 90% of Egyptian Christians identify with the Coptic Orthodox Church that is exclusively based in Egypt forming what is known as the Coptic sect (Ibid.).

In September 2012, clips of a highly inflammatory movie, *Innocence of Muslims*, surfaced on the internet that denigrated Prophet Muhammad and sparked public uproar in the Muslim world (Calamur, 2012). Especially Egypt that witnessed mass protests in front of the U.S

embassy in Cairo, since the film was made by an Egyptian-born Coptic Christian living in Los Angeles named Nakoula Basseley Nakoula (Ibid.). This prompted immediate fears by Egyptian Copts of impending retaliation and persecution by the country’s angered Muslim majority. Morsi could have exploited this opportunity and fueled the salience of sectarian identities to demonize the Copts and rally Egypt’s large Muslim population behind his rule. Especially, since Morsi himself hails from the Muslim Brotherhood, a Sunni Islamist party. In fact, Morsi could have incited riots to heighten ethnic/sectarian divisions between the Copts and Muslims in Egypt to incentivize the population to mobilize their political support along ethnic/sectarian loyalties (Wilkinson, 2004). Hence, increasing his public support by rallying up to 90% of the Egyptian Muslim population behind his rule as a Muslim leader and perhaps thwarting his opponents’ plans in successfully conspiring against him. To achieve this through instrumentalism, Morsi could have used rhetoric to antagonize the Copts collectively in light of the inflammatory movie or dispatched state-affiliated provocateurs to incite ethnic/sectarian riots. Similar to how state state-sponsored provocateurs frame conflict in India as Hindu vs. Muslims (Brass, 1997).

However, that was not the case as it seems that the only government reaction to the incident was limited to the general prosecutor issuing arrest warrants to several Egyptian Copts and a U.S. pastor (Reuters, 2012). Yet this move was purely symbolic as the Copts in question were living abroad (Ibid.). Consequently, Morsi missed out on the opportunity to capitalize on sectarian identities and brewing tensions as a result of the movie incident.

The Egyptian case study lends further support to the theoretical approach adopted by this thesis, that is instrumentalism with an emphasis on the role of elite actors. The conditions for setting the stage for brutal sectarian violence between the Copts and Muslims were present around 2012. For example, the state capacity of Egypt was arguably weakened following the
revolution and a new democratically elected presidency wrestling for control. In addition to the surfacing of the denigrating anti-Islam movie created by an Egyptian-born Copt and triggering massive uproar and protests on the streets by Egypt’s Muslim majority. Nonetheless, sectarian violence did not break out in Egypt in 2012 as it did in Iraq since a key component of sectarian conflict as proposed by this thesis is the role of elite actors in instrumentalizing sectarian identities. As made evident by Morsi’s failure to instrumentalize through sectarian rhetoric or policies designed to antagonize the Copts and inflame sectarian tensions to mobilize collective Muslim support behind his rule. Therefore, this further discredits the primordialism argument contending that sectarian violence would have broken out in Egypt solely due to hatred and the inherent differences in the sectarian identities of Egyptian Copts and Muslims.
CHAPTER SIX: CONCLUSION

The determinants of sectarian conflict appear to be more complex than what the primordial narrative envisages. Ancient hatred or rivalry between different sectarian groups does not appear to honestly explain inter-communal violence in multi-sect societies, especially in the Middle East. Contrary to what some literature, the media, and U.S. President Obama have claimed in their reduction of violence in the Middle East to ‘sectarian strife’ (Office of the Press Secretary, 2015). Instead, the primary precipitant of sectarian violence appears to be an interaction between state weakness, elite motivations, and popular sectarianism as highlighted by the proposed theoretical model. State weakness regardless of its cause can motivate political elite actors to pursue policies or rhetoric aimed at increasing the salience of sectarian identities in their societies. This serves as a strategy of either cooptation or repression targeting the sectarian outgroup for the purposes of regime survival. At the same time, these instrumental policies can also dramatically increase sectarian self-identification in various communities, as well as promoting the perceptions of victimhood and the sectarian outgroup as ‘the Other’. Thus, increasing tensions and the likelihood of sectarian violence to break out in the event of state failure. As the heightened sense of insecurity can encourage individuals to resort to their sectarian affiliation as a primary marker of identity and be motivated to join non-state security actors such as sect militias.

This is evident in Iraq beginning with Saddam Hussein’s regime after catastrophic foreign policy ventures in Iran, Kuwait, and the subsequent U.N imposed sanctions that crippled the Iraqi state. Hussien began to increasingly adopt instrumentalist policies as a means of
repressing the Shi’a population especially following the 1991 Uprisings that were predominantly carried out by the Shi’a in the south. For example, the notorious Faith campaign implemented in 1993 recast the secular Ba’ath regime towards an image embracing Islam, thus sparking a massive increase in religious piety among Iraqi. Subsequently fueling increased sectarian self-identification, particularly among the Shi’as that increasingly viewed themselves as outcasts and existing outside the Iraqi state due to the discriminatory repressive policies of the regime. As a result, when the United States invaded in 2003 and deposed Saddam’s regime inducing the collapse of central authority in Iraq and a new political order dominated by the ascendant Shi’a sectarian awareness. Sectarian violence broke out in Iraq shortly after due to growing Sunni fears of marginalization as a group and the inflammation of sectarian tensions by various elite Sunni actors including former Ba’athists like Izzat Duri and outsiders such as Zarqawi. Consequently, culminating in civil war.

Similarly, Maliki abandoned his non-sectarian and nationalist image in favor of an instrumentalist approach to preserve his regime following an electoral defeat in the 2010 elections and especially the mass withdrawal of U.S. forces from Iraq in 2011. The withdrawal of the U.S military from Iraq caused a severe decay in Iraqi state capacity that heavily relied on the presence of the Americans to contain the Sunni insurgency and secure the control of the government in Baghdad. Not to mention the compounding effects of Maliki’s coup-proofing policies during his first term that degraded Iraq’s security/intelligence apparatus to secure his rule. Therefore, Maliki was motivated to accommodate this gap in state capacity by immediately directing the remnants of the Iraqi state capacity to persecute and purge the Iraqi political class from major Sunni opposition. Resulting in issuing the arrests of Vice President Hashemi and Finance Minister Issawi, both of whom are top leaders in his main rival political party, Iraqiya,
and are the most senior Sunni members of government. The deliberate persecution of Hashemi and Issawi by Maliki based on fabricated terrorism charges as a means of securing his power triggered Sunni uprisings in various provinces in Iraq. The subsequent brutal response by Maliki’s regime against the Sunnis precipitated further outrage and calls for Jihad by Sunni elite actors against Maliki’s government, thus sliding Iraq into a second wave of sectarian conflict.

Besides both Iraqi case studies clearly demonstrating the mechanisms of the theoretical model at work in inducing sectarian violence, the negative case of Egypt highlighted the importance of elite actors as critical players in facilitating sectarian violence. As mentioned earlier, Egypt in 2012 had all the necessary components for sectarian conflict to break out between both Egyptian Copts and Muslims, yet violence and bloodshed were completely avoided. This is likely due to Morsi’s failure to engage in sectarian rhetoric and demonizing the Copts as the sectarian outgroup that needed to be punished for the inflammatory film created by an Egyptian-born Copt. Hence, lending further support to the instrumentalist narrative and suggesting that sectarian violence is not likely to occur in the absence of elite actors exploiting identities and/or divisions in multi-sect societies.

An important caveat worth mentioning regarding the proposed theory is the role of external actors or foreign states in instrumentalizing sectarian identities such as Iranian influence. Recent years have unraveled instrumentalized sectarianism as a corner stone of Iran’s foreign policy and bid to project power in the Middle East. This is evident in Iranian support for various Shi’a militias in Lebanon, Syria, Iraq, and the Persian Gulf in what was famously labeled as the emergence of a Shi’a crescent by King Abdullah II of Jordan (Wright and Baker, 2004; Barzegar, 2008). The instrumentalist nature of Iran’s foreign policies is also evident in its rhetoric that seeks to continually elevate its 1979 revolutionary Shi’ite ideology. This is
exemplified by Iran’s hardline stance of rejecting what it views as Western imperialism in the region, especially American hegemony (Alsaeid, 2021). In addition to the Iranian image of standing against oppression and supporting what it views as oppressed or vulnerable people such as the Shiites in Arab countries and the Palestinians (Ibid.). At the same time Iran heavily criticizes and antagonizes the Sunni monarchical regimes in the Arabian Peninsula and elsewhere throughout the Middle East as oppressors and puppets of Western imperialism. Hence, Iran views utility in instrumentalizing sectarian identities and especially division to promote its goals in exerting regional power and undermining its peers in the Gulf. Thus far Iran has witnessed success in exerting influence over Iraq, Syria, and Lebanon through its proxy Shi’ites militias.

However, all these countries where Iran succeeded in instrumentalism feature the presence of support from local elite actors such as Hassan Nasrallah in Lebanon, Bashar Assad in Syria, or Houthi tribal leaders in Yemen. Hence, lending further support for the proposed theoretical model that instrumentalism is likely to fail in the absence of local elite actors propagating sectarian rhetoric and policies even with the presence of an instrumentalist external actor. To further illustrate this point, consider Russia’s failed attempts at fomenting an insurrection in Ukraine through instrumentalizing the linguistic identity of Russian speaking Ukrainians during the Maidan Revolution in 2014. Prior to 2014, some scholars had already labeled Ukraine as divided along ethnic and linguistic lines (Arel and Khmelko, 1996; Barrington and Faranda, 2009). Two camps of Ukrainian politicians existed at the time, one side was represented by a pro-Russian oligarchy and the other reflected a pro-Ukrainian and Western oriented democratic opposition (Zhurzhenko, 2002). Both pro-Russian and pro-Ukrainian political elites have been demonstrated to instrumentalize history and linguistic identity to amplify the division between the eastern and western regions of Ukraine (Ibid.).
Russian attempts at instrumentalizing linguistic and ethnic identity to foment an insurrection during the Maidan Revolution largely failed and were limited to a pro-Russian insurgency in the Donbas that was militarily supported by Russia. However, the success of Russian instrumentalism in the Donbas is somewhat disputed as some ethnic Russians from Donbas joined a pro-Ukrainian force fighting against the separatists early on during the Donbas War 2014 (Aliyev, 2019). A key component missing in Russian efforts in instrumentalism during the events of 2014 in Ukraine is the absence of support from local elite actors. In contrast with Iran that had strategic support from various local elite actors in the countries where it has successfully instrumentalized sectarian identity as mentioned earlier. Hence, further supporting the argument that cases of instrumentalism by external factors that are absent of local elite support are bound to fail.

Nevertheless, it is important to revisit and stress the importance of the main limitations behind this study. Beginning with the data itself, mostly relied on secondary sources such as academic books, journal articles, and relevant news articles. This was not ideal especially concerning the investigation and analysis of the Saddam case-study. Originally, the plan was to use primary source material such as archived Ba’ath documents in their original format. However, these documents are archived at the Hoover Institute and National Defense University and can only be accessed in person based on obtaining prior permission. Hence, presenting significant logistical challenges that were guaranteed to be impossible to overcome given the time frame I had to complete this thesis. In response I had to rely on the interpretation of previous scholars that were fortunate enough to be given firsthand access to the documents. Another major limitation to this study is that the case studies are limited to the same region sharing similar culture, language, religion, and history. This may affect the external validity of
the results. Therefore, future research is needed that tests the same theoretical model on different contexts in different regions and perhaps rely on this study as a reference point for future qualitative comparative analysis of sectarian conflict in different settings around the world.
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