

Marius LAZĂR • Ecaterina CEPOI

SH'ISM AND STATE IN CONTEMPORARY IRAQ: FROM DISCRIMINATION TO POLITICAL POWER

Marius LAZĂR

Babes-Bolyai University,
Cluj-Napoca, Romania
ilmarius@yahoo.com

Ecaterina CEPOI

Carol I National Defence
University,
Bucharest, Romania

ABSTRACT

The paper is a reflection and an analysis of the evolution of Iraqi Shi'a in relation to the national construction processes of the state and its interactions with its regional geopolitical environment where religious identities represent a decisive element in shaping the behaviors of states or of different under- or over-state actors. The core of the research is represented by the political phenomenology of Iraqi Shi'as, but it is always contextualized within the broader context of domestic politics in Iraq and the multiple dynamics of the Persian Gulf and of the Middle East in general.

KEYWORDS

- Iraq
- Shi'a
- Islam
- Middle East
- Nuri al-Maliki

1. Introduction

In the contemporary Middle East, especially in Iran, Iraq, and Lebanon, Shi'ism does not designate only an attachment to a religious identity reference, but it reifies as an active structures in the political, social, economic, security, even military field, it becomes an agent that interferes in processes of construction, management or, on the contrary, of challenging of the statist order¹. The twelver Shi'as represents about 12% (140 million adherents) of the Muslim population inhabiting an area stretching from Lebanon to India and Central Asia. They are the majority in Iran (90-95%), Azerbaijan (85%), and Iraq (65%) and are the main community within the Muslim population in Lebanon (27% of the total Lebanese population). Over 70% of the population next to the Gulf is Shi'a although it is prevalent in countries - except Iran and recently Iraq, with Sunni political leadership where it often has a secondary status, being often subject to repression and discrimination. Thus, in Saudi Arabia, the Shi'a make up about 10-15% of the population but they are right in the al-Hasa oil province; in Kuwait they are in a percentage of 25-30%, in Qatar of 20%. However, Bahrain is the one with a particular situation, with 75% of the

¹ G Fuller, & F Rend Rahim, *The Arab Shi'a: The Forgotten Muslims*, St. Martin's Press, New York, 1999.

population being Shi'a, predominantly rural, under Sunni, town power. Significant Shi'a minorities are also encountered in Pakistan (20%), Afghanistan (19%), and India².

What essentially defines Iraqi territories, for centuries, is the complexity of their community structure and the multiple identities built at the level of the population where sectarian, tribal, ethnic, regional, and even neighborhood affiliations mix - in urban environments. In general, the situation in contemporary Iraq, in terms of ethnicity, is as follows: most of the population is Arabic (75% - 80%) then follows the Kurdish community (15% - 20%) and the remaining approximately 5% consists from other minorities: Turkmens, Iranians, Circassians, Armenians, etc. Regarding the religious configuration, it is characterized by a predominance of the Shi'a community (60% - 65%) although the Sunnis (32% - 37%) were, from the Ottoman era until 2003, those who controlled the political and administrative Iraqi territory. Finally, there is a small percentage of Christian population (3%), represented by a multitude of pre-and post-Chalcedonian churches³.

Iraqi Shi'a is thus a category, sociological, religious, cultural and ideological, which interferes, through its multiple instances and representatives (the population as such, clerical leaders, politicians, communities, political parties, movements) as an active agent in the field of Iraqi political and public life or at the level of international interactions. The case of Iraqi Shi'a illustrates, in a very visible way and with a national and regional impact, the dynamics of the processes of identity social, political, ideological transformation of a community in the Middle East, defined religiously, but which tries to appropriate and to accommodate to the new mutations produced by the emergence of national states and of the need to rethink its own status in relation to new standards of modernity.

2. Building of modern Iraq and the impossible national supra-community project

There is a complex process of nation-building of Iraq, between 1914 and 1958, under British influence, unwanted but persistent, which failed to build a state consistent with European models and endowed with political representativeness and power management which is not dependent on the particular interests of different Iraqi communities⁴. The formation of contemporary Iraq results from the overlapping of European colonial interests with the emergence of Arab nationalism which both, in the early 20th century, project their own representations on the fate of the Arab provinces of the Ottoman Empire⁵. But the new state will encounter a number of difficulties in building a statist coherence and functionality on an extremely heterogeneous and anarchic social background. The community structure of Iraqi society was shared in many ways, based on religious (Sunni,

² S Mervin (coord.), *Les mondes chiïtes et l'Iran*, Karthala, 2007, pp. 457-464.

³ CIA – *The World Factbook 2011 – Iraq*, <https://www.cia.gov/library/publications/the-world-factbook/geos/iz.html>

⁴ P Sluglett, *Britain in Iraq. Contriving King and Country*, I.B.Tauris, 2007.

⁵ E Kedourie, *England and the Middle East. The Destruction of the Ottoman Empire 1914-1921*, Westview Press, 1987.

Shi'a, Christian, Hebrew), ethnic (Arabs, Kurds, Persians, Turkmens) criteria and especially characterized by the existence of many rural populations attached to tribal identities and behavior.

Occupying Mesopotamia in 1914, against the background of the war with the Ottoman Empire, British authorities had to reflect on the most pragmatic and beneficial formula to integrate all this ensemble with large entropy, made up of social-identity groups not only self-referential, but especially with a long history of rivalry and tensions, in a functional statist structure⁶. The option chosen took into account not the possible interests of the Iraqi population but rather the British desire to build here a state to represent the interests of London and whose elite be dependent on the British authority. In implementing this model, the solutions were relatively limited: British strategists who now set out the political and institutional destiny of the new state had to select from the groups and persons with authority and experience not challenging, at least in fact, the legitimacy of the British mandate and London's claims of being the tutelary agent that manages the construction of the new Iraqi state.

British preference, which will be finally determined at the conference in Cairo, in 1921, went, on the one hand, toward the person of al-Faysal, son of Sheriff Hussein of Mecca; from the need to ensure the fastest resuming of state functionality and the implementation of new institutions, the British authorities in Iraq shall use much of the old frameworks and elites from the Ottoman period. As these were in the majority of Sunni origin, as al-Faysal himself, and his entourage recruited from members of former Arab nationalist movements, were also Sunni, it results that the first Iraqi political structures that are implemented by the British gain a strong religious character⁷. Installed in power, they will be tempted to become permanent, including in an Iraqi political system in principle based on parliament elections and on governments representing the expression of national scale political forces. Thus, Iraqi national and state building shall perpetuate a sectarian dimension (and, to some extent, also Arabic, as the official identity reference will always be that of being Arabic, excluding Kurdish claims as to the recognition of a dual nationality character in the state), resulting not so much in a deliberate strategy but is an objective result of the perpetuation of solidarity networks already present in the field of statist institutions, since the beginning of the state, which recruits especially from among those who share the same religious, tribal, regional etc. identity. This way, the Iraqi Shi'a community, which represents over 60% of the population, saw, since the beginning of the British mandate, its capacities and options to participate in political life and in state institutions much reduced.

The British mandate installed in Iraq a modern type political and social system, but the background against which it was called to act remained largely tributary to its own tradition and especially to some mentalities still insufficiently prepared to work quickly in such a new structure. The failure of a coherent and stable statist

⁶ RS Simon, & EH Tejjirian (eds.), *The Creation of Iraq, 1914-1921*, Columbia University Press, 2004.

⁷ Tj Paris, *Britain, the Hashemites and Arab Rule, 1920-1925: The Sherifian Solution*, Franck Cass, 2003.

construction in Iraq is due, to a large extent, to the persistence of a local vision about what it means to have power and to use it. The exclusion from important decision-making positions of Shi'a actors starts from the very formation of the state; even if during the monarchy period there will be a certain Shi'a political participation, it is well below the share represented by Shi'a population in Iraqi society⁸. To a large extent, this elite present in power is made up of large landowners or of different tribal leaders, whose loyalty is captured by the assigning of political or economic functions or the granting of different privileges, by the Hashemite monarchs or the governments in power. In fact, these regimes are now trying to cover up the obvious sectarian character of the state, based on the promotion of Sunni elements, disseminating a series of Arabic ideologies, in order to create an abstract generic identity to mitigate the religious slip within the society. But the concept of an egalitarian society, specific to Western political culture, based on the category of citizenship and of universal rights, has little applicability in a tradition where *asabiyya* (fidelity to the proximal circle of solidarity the individual is participating in and in relation to which he constructs his specific identity) prevails and the relationships within the community are placed especially in terms of dominance / submission and of exclusive possession of power. The persistence with which the Iraqi political elites have promoted a system that privileged the Sunni produced a religious fracture within Iraqi society and forced the two communities to think of their relationships in terms of competition and rivalry for power. The position of the Shi'a at the beginning of the Iraqi state was weakened also by the fact that they did not have a tradition of political participation or elite in this sense. The traditional elite of the community, the clergy of the holy cities (Najaf, Karbala, Samarra), assumed religious, but not political leadership and even the Shi'a anti-British jihad in 1920 was being led in the name of religious principles of interpretation of the Iraqi territory. Shi'a political leaders emerged during the monarchy had little popular representation and their community identity was much subdued in favor of their personal interests or of those of their own clients⁹.

The Iraqi Shi'a community is not a homogeneous block but it experiences, in resonance with the specificity of the area, a series of doctrinal, family, tribal, economic, political attitude fragmentations. Until the mid-twentieth century, Iraqi Shi'ism was represented by three main structures: the clergy class, who inhabited mostly the theological academies in the sacred centers; a community and economic elite, consisting of groups of sheikhs (tribal leaders) and the class of traders and large land-owners, part of which revolved quite closely around the sacred centers whose interests they promoted and whose financial support they provided, through religious taxes and donations, and the bulk of the Shi'a population, established mainly in rural areas, and dealing with agriculture¹⁰. Obviously, forced most of the times to exist within Sunni political entities, Shi'ism was obliged, in order to survive, to moderate their political ambitions and focus more on the cultural and doctrinal

⁸ E Kedourie, 'Anti-Shi'ism in Iraq under the Monarchy', *Middle Eastern Studies*, no. 24, 1988, pp. 249-253.

⁹ P-J Luizard, *La formation de l'Irak contemporain: le rôle politique des ulémas chiïtes à la fin de la domination ottomane et au moment de la construction de l'Etat irakien*, Ed. de la CNRS, 2002.

¹⁰ Y Nakash, *The Shi'is of Iraq*, Princeton University Press, New Jersey, 1994

preserving of their themes. It is also the case of Iraqi Shi'ism in the long history within the Ottoman Empire. Although the southern Shi'a regions, particularly the holy cities, have enjoyed relative freedom during the Ottoman rule, this resulted from the fact that the theological elite from here were not involved in various political ambitions. Najaf and Karbala were defined primarily as the main theological centers and sacred territories toward which the entire Shi'a space converged. The theological academies there were characterized as centers par excellence of an „Shi'a international”, maintaining an intense cultural, educational, economic, human exchange, with the other Shi'a regions (Iran first of all, Lebanon, the Gulf area, Azerbaijan, Pakistan, India, Central Asia etc), establish a genuine rule of the great ayatollahs of Iraqi Atabat (Najaf, Karbala, Kadhimiyya, Samarra) and Hawza (theological academies) representing a decisive influence on the whole Shi'a space¹¹.

This conferred a distinct identity to these cities, unproblematic within an Ottoman Empire itself cosmopolitan, but which will face, from the moment of formation of independent, the pressures of a political environment had become the assuming of a national identity with Arabic referential. The suspicions permanently surrounding the „Iraqi” loyalty of the Shi'a originates precisely in the new Arab nationalist ideology underpinning the new state, circulated mainly by Sunni elements seizing the power, and for which the „foreign” character of Shi'a religious elites now becomes an argument to exclude their possible participation in power. However, the nationalist dimension of some ayatollahs becomes apparent when the new Iraqi state is established in 1920, when a part of the mujtahids (the Shi'a clerics) from the holy cities shall initiate the anti-British revolt and shall spread modernist political concepts, in Islamic grid, but which validate the classical notions of national independence, democracy, etc.¹² Ever since 1924, together with the proclamation of the Law on Citizenship, continuing with the ba'hist discriminatory policies, the reality that much of the high clergy consisted mainly of Iranians motivated restricting projects of Shi'a traditional institutions that are considered as having an „anti-national” or even subversive character. This sliding occurs even within the clergy itself, where, the classical „internationalist” trend is accompanied by the emergence of a growing sense of Iraqi or Arab identity¹³.

The power relations within the clerical class depend essentially on theological prestige, the main factor influencing the Shi'a community. The Shi'a system is based on the idea of a full fidelity of the believer to the teachings (religious, behavioral, legal and even political) promoted by one of the great ayatollahs, which it takes as a „source” (marja' - pl. maraji'). Marja', by virtue of its outstanding qualities and of its theological prestige, is conceived as the only one able to make correct decisions, in accordance with the teachings of the Islam and of the Imams, towards the various

¹¹ M Litvak, *The Shi'i Ulama of Najaf and Karbala, 1791-1904*, Harvard University Press, Cambridge - Massachusetts, 1991.

¹² A Vinogradov, 'The 1920 Revolt in Iraq Reconsidered: The Role of Tribes in National Politics', *International Journal of Middle East Studies*, vol.3, no.2, 1972, pp. 123-139.

¹³ P-J Luizard, 'Le mandat britannique et la nouvelle citoyenneté irakienne dans les années 1920', in P-J. Luizard (coord.), *Le choc colonial et l'Islam*, La Découverte, 2006, pp. 406-407.

issues concerning the life of the believer. It makes the great clerics get hold of an immense power, either symbolic or explicit, over the community, and therefore the marja'iya institution was seen by most modern Iraqi leaders as a permanent threat to their desire to fully seize the entire field of Iraqi community events¹⁴.

As a result, one of the recurring crises crossing the contemporary history of Iraq is that of the relationships between the political powers and the Shi'a aspirations in relation to ratio of their representation in decision-making. The Ottoman Empire was a political structure based on the ancient oriental governance model of some communities identified primarily from a religious and not a national point of view. The concepts of nation and nationalism are emerging in the East only from the second half of the nineteenth century, together with the increase of the European political and cultural influence and of that of their own national emancipation movements in Europe. But the formation of Iraq, as well as of the other new Arab states in the Middle East, was more like a colonial act and less the actual expression of a local Iraqi nationalism. Besides the Sunni nationalist elites, recruited partially from among Iraqi officers from the former Ottoman army (and grouped in several secret movements, that will then direct their loyalty to the new Hashemite sovereign of Iraq, al-Faysal), the other coherent manifestation of Iraqi national consciousness was represented precisely by the opposition of the Shi'a clerical circles, whose anti-British revolt had been led on behalf of the independence of a yet unstructured Iraqi space as a new state identity but inferred as such. The formation of the Iraqi state thus forced the Shi'a community to enter the logic of a national identity and to rethink its status in terms of the relations that it is now required maintaining with the other communities. What is called "the Iraqi problem" is owed precisely to the failure to create a sense of cohesion between the three major ethno-religious communities that are now included in the skeleton of the Iraqi state (the Shi'a, the Sunni, the Kurds) and to actually transcend the segregations within the society¹⁵.

3. The republican Iraq and the Shi'a militancy

The 1958 military coup d'Etat in Iraq, which leads to the fall of the Hashemite monarchy and to the proclamation of the republic is part of the regional wave of challenges to the old colonial political order, to the persistency of some regimes that were considered as excessively dependant on the Western powers and especially lacking in popular authority. The new mobilizing myth of the fifth and sixth decades is that of the Arab nationalism, predominantly resuscitated in a political and militant dimension, ideologically enveloping the doctrine themes that were developed by the classic theorists in the Inter-Wars period, with a regenerating calling both over the State and the individual consciences.

As a consequence, Iraq's inclusion in the same revolutionary process was inevitable. The lack of legitimacy and popular support of the monarchy facilitates

¹⁴ LS Walbridge (ed.), *The Most Learned of the Shi'a. The Institution of the Marja' Taqlid*, Oxford University Press, 2001

¹⁵ P-J Luizard, *La question irakienne*, Fayard, Paris, 2004.

the 1958 revolution, made by a group of nationalist military men lead by general Abd al-Karim Qasim and supported by the Nasserian, Communist, and Ba'th forces. The proclamation of the republic draws Iraq out of the block of the western allied states and leaves the impression that it will join the Pan-Arab union project started between Syria and Egypt. In reality, the personal rivalry between Nasser and Qasim, doubled by Iraq's own ambition of regional leadership and the apprehension of letting itself being drawn in an ambiguous structure, in Egypt's wake, lead to the failure of the union projects, even though they are regularly resuscitated at the official discourse level¹⁶.

The toppling of the old monarchy order at the moment of the 1958 revolution, the support which the, at that time, Shi'a dominated Iraqi Communist Party offers to the new republic within its first two years, adopting some reforms and social programs that brought benefits firstly to the underprivileged Shi'a environments, offered the illusion that finally, the members of the Shi'a community can accede to govern and that the interests of the Shi'a will be taken into account¹⁷. The Iraqi revolution process lead, however, like in other Arab countries, to the emergence of a new political actor, the Army, from within which new leaders will now be recruited. As the Officer Corps was almost entirely made out of Sunni officers, the rapports of force within Iraqi society remain unbalanced in favour of the Sunni minority from within the ranks of which management and administration leaders are promoted, often on account of solidarity networks of a regional, tribal, family etc. nature¹⁸. The failure of president Qasim's socialism of constructing an Iraqi society on the principles of equality is also based on the opposition which the Sunni structures manifest towards the idea of a Shi'a political emancipation, which would have led to the forfeit of an important part of the owned privileges. This is the moment in which the Shi'a Islamist movement appears (al-Da'wa, Munazzamat al-'Amal al-Islami), which aims at both preserving the Shi'a values in the face of modernity and the new secular ideologies and an effective political action program, pursuing the installation of a government in conformity with the principles of Islam¹⁹. As with all the Islamic movements of the Muslim world, the Iraqi Shi'a Islam sets off with a spatial projection at a transnational scale and realises a lecture of the reality within and using the theological conceptual apparatus. Ideologues like ayatollah Muhammad Baqir Al-Sadr are interested by the rebirth of the Islamic principles and of the construction of a utopian Muslim society governed by the Shari'a²⁰. Only once with the installation of the authoritarianism of the two Arif presidents (Abd as-Salam Arif: 1963-1966, Abdul Rahman Arif: 1966-1968), the al-Da'wa Party starts to „nationalize”

¹⁶ M Farouk-Sluglett, & P Sluglett, *Iraq since 1958. From Revolution to Dictatorship*, I. B. Tauris, 2001, pp. 99-106.

¹⁷ P-J Luizard, 'Les chiïtes d'Irak: une majorité dominée à la recherche de son destin', *Peuples méditerranéens*, no. 40, 1987.

¹⁸ S Zubaida, 'Community, Class and Minorities in Iraqi Politics', in Robert A. Fernea, & William Roger Louis, *The Iraqi Revolution of 1958. The Old Social Classes Revisited*, I.B. Tauris, 1991, pp. 197-210.

¹⁹ JN Wiley, *The Islamic Movement of Iraqi Shi'as*, Lynne Rienner Publishers, 1992.

²⁰ Ch Mallat, 'Religious Militancy in Contemporary Iraq: Muhammad Baqer al-Sadr and the Sunni-Shia Paradigm', *Third World Quarterly*, no. 10, 1988, pp. 699-729.

its discourse and strategies of action, gradually linking the general problem of Shi'a resurrection to the one of the emancipation of the Iraqi Shi'a community.

The sixth decade is structurally marked by multiple rivalries within the ensemble of the Arabic countries, which made Malcolm Kerr utilize the term „Arab Cold War” to define the regional political context²¹. The tensions are both ideological (the nationalist reference vs. the traditional, Islamic one), political (republican systems vs. conservatory monarchies) or options regarding the blocks of the Cold War. The republican regimes are close to, within different gradations, to the USSR and the communist countries, with which they entertain rising collaborations at both an economical and military level. The fragmentation is however transferred, including within the republican group, where the traditional rivalries within states and the hegemonic ambitions of each of them (Egypt, Syria, Iraq) is doubled with the breakage of the Arab nationalist movement in the two great poles, Nasserism and Ba'thism, the last one fracturing in its turn in the two „regional” commandments, the Syrian and Iraqi ones, between which a tenacious rivalry will take place. Finally, these multiple schisms are as well projected at the level of the internal stability of the states, polarizing the different groups that ideologically originate in the different factions that are confronted within the Arab nationalist movement but in fact, being often mobilized by the temptation of obtaining an exclusive power control.

Iraq is thusly traversed by a ferocious rivalry between the nationalist group centred around Qasim, to which the support of the important communist movement is added and the Ba'th group, that manages to attract a part of the former military partners of the Zaim (President), led by Arif brothers. The new 1963 revolution puts a new regime in place in which the elites are military men as well as civilians but which retain the same selection preferences from the ranks of the solidarity networks originated in different Sunni regions. Once more, the political life is marked by authoritarianism and a rising security control, especially on the basis of the rapid rupture between the Arif group, which draws near Egypt, and the Ba'th, drawn out from power and obligated once more to minimise its expectancies²². This is the period in which, like in the case of its Syrian branch, in the Ba'th Party there are a series of cleansings and changes of the old elites that that take place, in their great part Shi'a ones. The rivalries between different factions of the party, oftentimes ferocious, end through the definitive ascension of the „Tikriti” clan, led by Ahmed Hassan al-Bakr and his nephew, Saddam Hussein.

From the moment in which the Ba'th party reaches leadership, in 1968, any Shi'a political ambition of participating in power in the name of the community's interests is excluded. Although it claims to be founded on a Pan-Arabian doctrine, the Ba'th represents an avatar of applying tribalism in policy and of the persistency of a patrimonial vision over the State institution²³. After 1968, the Ba'th is centred

²¹ M Kerr, *The Arab Cold War: Gamal Abd al-Nasir and His Rivals, 1958-1970*, Oxford University Press, 1971.

²² T Alaa, *Irak. Aux origines du régime militaire*, L'Harmattan, 1989, pp. 257-270.

²³ M Farouk-Sluglett, & P Sluglett, 'Iraqi Ba'thism: Nationalism, Socialism and National Socialism', in CARDI (Committee Against Repression and for Democratic Rights in Iraq), *Saddam's Iraq*:

around a nuclei formed by members united by the solidarity conferred by the common past within the party, family links and the affiliation to the same tribal area and Sunni identity²⁴. Learning from the past lessons of the Iraqi history and especially of the recent republic, they are convinced that the only efficient modality of keeping the power is on one side, the winning over the membership of as many of the population as it is possible and on the other on the elimination of any possible competitor. This is what will describe the Ba'th politics, especially in the seventh decade. Lecturing the social Iraqi landscape in this exclusivist perspective of power, the Ba'th leaders see the religious and Shi'a community institutions as an opponent to their absolute hegemony.

There are five major themes of conflict: 1) the first one is political, based on blocking any political project of the Shi'a community; a partial participation is permitted at the most, within the limits imposed by the Ba'th power and one that has a formal, non-decisional nature; 2) the economical conflict, between the secular tendency of Bagdad and the Shi'a commercial classes. After the agrarian reform of 1959, which disintegrated the class of agricultural owners, the nationalizations of 1964, 1970, 1977 affected the Shi'a commercial and industrial elites, leading to the disappearance of the middle class, which, in part, will be deported to Iran and will convert itself towards intellectual activities or will take up the exile path; 3) the cultural rupture between the Ba'th discourse, which puts accent on national identity or on the Arab character and the values of the Shi'a leaders, which are religious by excellence; more so, the clerical institutions are largely restricted, seen as a rival in winning the total fidelity of the population; 4) the problem of the public rights of the Shi'a population, which is often discriminated and even subjected to reprisals on account of their confession (the massive deportation of Shi'as, under the accusation that they are „Iranian” subjects, not Iraqi); 5) the policy of secularization, that not only affects the social influence of the Shi'a religious discourse but has destroyed the control system that the clergy benefited from in administering its rapports with the faithful (justice, education, collecting of religious taxes, the disappearance of the medium Shi'a class that assured the financial sustenance of the Hawza programmes etc.)

The restrictive Ba'th policies towards the traditional instances of the Shi'a community leaves only a single organized actor inclined to a contesting reaction, the Islamist movement. Since the '60s, al-Da'wa party spread its influence especially among the urban population, workers and intellectuals. In the seventh decade, the Islamist opposition will stand behind several protest movements, on the occasion of the great popular mobilisations of the Shi'a pilgrimage rituals. Their violent repression and that of the Islamic groups announces the installation of a totalitarian system that does not hesitate to turn to mass repressions in order to defend its privileges. The rapports between the clerical institutions, devotes and militants and the Ba'th power now become radically antagonistic. For Hawza, the

Revolution or Reaction?, Zed Books, 1990, pp. 96-105.

²⁴ A Baram, 'The Ruling Political Elite in Bathi Iraq, 1968-1986: The Changing Features of a Collective Profile', *International Journal of Middle East Studies*, vol. 21, no. 4, 1989, pp. 447-493.

problem is posed in terms of survival and of at least retaining the institution as such and in no way assuming political ambitions: it is the traditional line of the great marajī', like ayatollah Muhsin al-Hakim or al-Kho'i²⁵.

The success of the Iranian Revolution offers yet again the illusion of the possibility to seize power through the mobilization of the masses but such a scenario fails²⁶. Ayatollah Muhammad Baqir al-Sadr, the leader of the Iraqi Shi'a resistance is executed, the Islamist movement is yet again subjected to reprisals and, in front of the appeals to destabilization of the country addressed by Khomeyni to the Iraqi Shi'a population, Iraq decides starting a war with Iran²⁷. The Iran-Iraq conflict differentially affected the destiny of the Iraqi Shi'as. Those that remained in the country will choose to rather assume the Iraqi identity than the confessional one and will show great patriotism, even if the aversion toward the Ba'th Party remained unchanged. This also represented a success of the intense Iraqi propagandistic efforts that pools all the possible resources in favour of enticing the fidelity of the population towards the country's territory, means through which the Ba'th power maintains its position. On the other hand, the war allowed a accumulated mobilization of the exiled Shi'a opposition groups, that largely move their headquarters and resources in Iran, participating alongside in the war effort, in hope of a possible regime change in Iraq and seizure of power. The Supreme Council of the Islamic Revolution in Iraq (SCIRI), al-Da'wa, The Organization of Islamic Action (Munazzamat al-'Amal al-Islami) and other militant movements develop an entire political, cultural, military and doctrinaire infrastructure, a prelude to the hoped of, future exercise of governance after the Ba'th regime would fall²⁸.

For Iran, however, the Shi'a opposition is more of an instrument of its Iraqi policies, and the declarations of independence and nationalism displayed by some Iraqi militants are not always to the Teheran leaders' liking. Furthermore, the end of the war, Khomeyni's death, adopting a strategy that discards the principle of exporting the revolution in the favour of national interests makes the Iranian support of the Shi'a opposition fall²⁹. Except SCIRI, a great part of the groups will move their headquarters in other capitals, mostly in Europe, where the freedom of speech and the rising number of Iraqi refugees permits a much more efficient propagandistic and recruiting activity³⁰.

²⁵ B Ofra, 'Shi'ism and Politics in Ba'thi Iraq', *Middle Eastern Studies*, vol. 21, no. 1, January, 1985, pp. 1-14.

²⁶ B Amatzia, 'The Impact of Khomeyni's Revolution on the Radical Shi'i Movement of Iraq', in David Menashri (ed.), *The Iranian Revolution and the Muslim World*, Westview Press, 1990, pp. 130-151.

²⁷ C Tripp, 'The Iran-Iraq War and the Iraqi State', in Derek Hopwood, Habib Ishow, & Thomas Koszinowski (eds.), *Iraq: Power and Society*, St. Anthony's College, Oxford, Ithaca Press, 1993, pp. 91-116.

²⁸ J Faleh, *The Shi'ite Movement in Iraq*, Saqi Books, London, 2003.

²⁹ B Amatzia, 'From Radicalism to Radical Pragmatism: the Shi'ite Fundamentalist Opposition Movements of Iraq', in James Piscatori, *Islamic Fundamentalisms and the Gulf Crisis*, The University of Chicago Press, 1991, pp. 28-51.

³⁰ B Amatzia, 'The Radical Shi'ite Opposition Movements in Iraq', in Emmanuel Sivan, Menachem Friedman (eds.), *Religions Radicalism and Politics in the Middle East*, State University of New-York Press, 1990, pp. 95-126.

The invasion of Kuwait and the Gulf war reopens a new stage in Iraq's history and that of the Shi'a mobilisation. Firstly, the Kuwaiti crisis permitted the United States' to become the main external influence over the Middle Eastern, especially in the zone of the Persian Gulf, and in assuming the management of the Palestinian problem. Iraq and Iran are subjected to a policy of containment which aims at limiting their autonomous regional actions against the interests of the United States. Iraq is the most affected one, in the measure in which the international embargo is added to the destruction caused by the war. For the power in Bagdad, the problem is not regional supremacy anymore, like in the previous years but it's very survival³¹.

The international restrictions, in fact, only strengthened Saddam's authoritarian policy and he is now open to any strategy in order to conserve his power. He demonstrated this through the violent repression of the Shi'a and Kurdish revolts in March 1991, which probably represented the most powerful internal threat to the Ba'th regime since its instalment³². In order to compensate for the lack of institutional authority and that of the Party in the Shi'a southern zones, Saddam reverts to a new strategy of winning the fidelity of some clients, that would serve as agents within the Shi'a communities and the Iraqi population in general. This is the case of the tribal leaders, who are bestowed upon a series of privileges, having been awarded the duty of maintaining local order in the name of the state³³. This „re-tribalisation” of Iraq is accompanied by promoting an Islamic discourse and policies in a Sunni manner, Wahhabi even, the regime's last ideological resource towards the winning of the attachment of an exhausted Iraqi population. This does not mean that all of this was accompanied by a liberalisation of the attitudes towards the Shi'a elite, and the Shi'a community's cultural guidelines: Hawza continues to be restricted and a last great visible opponent from within the clergy, ayatollah Muhammad Sadiq al-Sadr is executed in 1999.

4. The Shi'a political revival in post-Saddam Iraq

The fall of Saddam's regime, following the military campaign proposed and coordinated by the United States, together with some symbolic allies leaves room, for the second time in Iraq's history, to a nation-building process, imagined by the American neo-conservatory ideologues but who's application is extremely difficult in an Iraq destroyed by conflicts, embargo, the emergence of a generalized violence that blocks for several years any coherent attempt of implementing a functional order at the institutional and service levels³⁴. It is one of history's ironies that, if in 1920 the British chose to rely on the Sunni elites, thusly setting the

³¹ B Amatzia, *Building Toward Crisis: Saddam Husayn's Strategy for Survival*, The Washington Institute for Near East Policy, 1998.

³² J Faleh, 'La répression du soulèvement chiite de 1991', in Kutschera Chris, *Le livre noir de Saddam Hussein*, Oh! Editions, 2005.

³³ B Amatzia, 'Neo-tribalism in Iraq: Saddam Hussein tribal's policies 1991-1996', *International Journal of Middle-East Studies*, no. 29, 1997, pp. 1-31.

³⁴ T Dodge, 'The ideological roots of failure: the application of kinetic neo-liberalism to Iraq', *International Affairs*, vol. 86, no. 6, 2010, pp. 1269-1286.

foundation of a communalisation of power, in 2003, the American troops brought with them the old exiled Shi'a and Kurd opponents, installed in the new public positions, also in accordance with a logic that takes in account the premises of demographic partitions of the ethnic and confessional communities (muhasasa).

Once again, the destiny of the new Iraq will succumb in front of an incapacity to imagine a political formulae that would make subsidiary the particular identities of the groups that make up the Iraqi society. On the contrary, post-Saddam Iraq has known the most violent instrumentation of the sectarian differences that paroxysmal reflected a current which already traverses the Muslim world for some decades after the Iranian Revolution, that of the elevated geopolitical tensions between Sunni and Shi'a communities. The Islamization of the identity references at the scale of the whole Muslim space is thusly reflected through this elevated reification of the social corps defined through the affiliation to a particular confessional Islamic group. Thusly, the recent modernity did not bring a reinforcement of the attachment toward the state and the national identity; on the contrary, in the Muslim societies one can observe an ever more clear distancing towards the state officials (which the states provoke by their transformation in oppression systems and privileged distribution of resources) and a rising attachment of the masses towards sub-national or supra-national references.

The first months of post-Saddam Iraq are characterized, on the one hand, by the willingness of the Shi'a, Kurdish and Sunni parties (all returned from exile) to become involved in the political process although it unfolded under the control of a Coalition Provisional Authority (CPA). On the other hand, a bitter and often violent competition emerges between groups and parties which want to secure various leadership positions for their members in the local administration. It is the moment when, transferring to Iraq the logistics and human resources they had in their former countries of residence, Shi'ites movements from exile begin to establish their own militias, whose role is often to win over new areas of influence and to control and administer the territories held under the authority of various parties. Except for the classical institution of *marja'iyya*, which has prudently kept a pious altitude and avoided direct political involvement, the main Shi'a players, who come to forefront in the very first days after Saddam's fall, have at the same time a political and a religious target for their actions and discourses.

It is especially the case of Supreme Council of the Islamic Revolution of Iraq (SCIRI) – later (after May 11, 2007) to be known as Supreme Islamic Iraqi Council (SIIC). Established in Iran in 1982, the Council remains throughout the following period the main Shi'a resistance movement in exile, although a certain closeness towards Iranian leaders and especially the fact that the al-Hakim family comes to hold important leadership positions gradually leads to an estrangement of some allied Shi'a groups. During its Iranian period, SCIRI defines itself primarily as a mass movement, focused on the charismatic personality of ayatollah Mohammad Baqir al-Hakim, who takes advantage of the vast resources and international influence of his family in order to promote his image as a possible future leader of an Islamic

regime in a freed Iraq. However, returning to Najaf and wishing to become a member of *marja'iyya*, Baqir al-Hakim makes efforts to change his previously pro-Iranian image and his discourse takes on increasingly nationalistic tones with a focus on the need for an independent Iraq. His assassination, in August 2003, deprived SCIRI of its key ideological figure. The new leader, Abdel Aziz al-Hakim, has neither the religious authority nor the charisma and prestige of his brother but during the following years the party still remains the main Shi'a political force, its influence being strengthened by the fact that al-Sistani is acknowledged as *marja'* of the movement³⁵. Also, the military wing of the party – the Badr brigades – unofficially offer security and military support to Hawza at the difficult times of Sadrist contestation.

The situation is similar for the Sadrist movement, which originates in the activism of ayatollah Mohammad Sadiq al-Sadr (Sadr II, murdered in 1999) who was himself a member of another important Shi'a clerical dynasty that gave several major political and religious Iraqi leaders. Three important elements define Sadiq al-Sadr's program, which will last after 2003. First, Sadristism displays the characteristics of a classic Islamist movement, which is especially clear in the manner in which conservative patterns of behavior are encouraged while, at the same time, traditional tribal social norms and values are allowed, in addition to Shari'a. Second, Sadristism shares a nationalistic and Iraq-centered vision, which marks a breach with the pan-Shi'a tradition usually embraced by the historical Shi'a parties. Moreover, as he argues in favor of an all-Arab *marja'iyya*, Sadr II denies the legitimacy of the high clergy in Najaf and Karbala, most of whom are non-Iraqi and whose relative political passivity is explained as a result of their being foreigners with a weak sense of belonging to the Iraqi nation. Third, Sadiq al-Sadr is one of the main initiators of a phenomenon which becomes very important in post-Saddam Iraq, namely the emergence of a messianic feeling referring to the imminent arrival of the hidden Imam and the establishment of a Mahdist state. Although it claims a religious dimension, the Sadrist movement has mostly a social and political character.

As he did not have the religious authority necessary to emerge as a leader of the Shi'a community according to traditional canonical norms, Muqtada al-Sadr, the leader of the Sadrist movement after 2003, chooses the alternative of a militant and populist Shi'a movement, focused on mass actions and militia that target the Americans as well as Iraqi leaders, both religious (*Hawza*) and political (those returned from exile). During the first years of his leadership, Muqtada takes advantage of the human resources and territories under his control (*Sadr-City*, the poor neighborhoods on the outskirts of the large Shi'a cities, the tribal areas in Maysan province) in an attempt to impose, often by force, his hegemony on the Iraqi Shi'a community³⁶. After a period when he takes a radical attitude against almost all Iraqi authorities (the new political elites, the international forces, the high clergy) –

³⁵ 'International Crisis Group, Shi'ite Politics in Iraq: The Role of the Supreme Council', *Crisis Group Middle East Report*, no. 70, 15 November 2007.

³⁶ P Harling, & HY Nasser, 'La mouvance sadriste: lutte de classes, millénarisme et fitna', in Sabrina Mervin (coord.), *Les mondes chiïtes et l'Iran*, Karthala, 2007, pp. 267-286.

which reaches a peak during the Sadrist resurgence in 2004 – Muqtada chooses to become involved in the political process. Thus, the Sadrist movement ends up by acquiring a triple dimension (like the Lebanese Hezbollah): mass movement (mostly put into action by a large network of minor clergy and secular militants), militia (Mahdi Army, which becomes the most important paramilitary force of any Iraqi party), and political body involved in governing the state³⁷.

The historical party al-Da'wa – the first Islamist Iraqi Shi'a movement emerged in the 1950s – has an infrastructure and a capacity for militant action that are both inferior to those of the two previous movements. Repeatedly fractured during the exile of its main leaders, the party has been represented since 2003 by two main branches: one which brings together the party members who spent their exile in London or some European countries, and the Iranian branch that is closer to the religious model promoted by Tehran leaders. The former branch, known as Da'wa islamiya, is led by secular members even if it largely remains faithful to the Islamist agenda upheld by its historical leaders³⁸. Although it has fewer human resources than SCIRI or the Sadrist movement, al-Da'wa islamiya has succeeded in effectively controlling Iraqi politics and, after 2005, has given the country two prime-ministers: Ibrahim al-Jafari and Nuri al-Maliki.

The first free Iraqi's elections, in January and then in December 2005, offer a clear image of the fragmentation of the Iraqi community along religious or ethnic lines. For each of the major political forces, the criterion for parties or movements to group together is not a similar ideology or common programs but, almost exclusively, the fact of belonging to one of the ethnic and/or confessional structures of Iraqi society. The elections clearly indicate that the most effective means of mobilizing the population is the reference to a shared religious or ethnic background. This ethnic and religious enclavisation of the major Iraqi communities has made almost impossible, for a while, the emergence of parties or program with nationwide support.

The elections in December 15, 2005 put an end to the process of establishing a legitimate Iraqi authority. The main novelty brought by these elections is the participation of the main Sunni parties, now persuaded that staying out of national politics was inefficient and would only allow the Shi'a and Kurdish communities to promote their program and interests³⁹. Since the beginning of his mandate, the new prime-minister Nuri al-Maliki has to deal with the disastrous economic

³⁷ International Crisis Group, 'Iraq's Muqtada al-Sadr: Spoiler or Stabiliser?', *Middle East Report*, no. 55, 11 July 2006.

³⁸ A-H al-Ruhaimi, 'The Da'wa Islamic Party: Origins, Actors and Ideology' in Faleh Abdul-Jabar (ed.), *Ayatollah, Sufis and Ideologues: State, Religion and Social Movements in Iraq*, Saqi Books, 2003; R Shanahan, 'The Islamic Da'wa Party: Past Development and Future Prospects', *Middle East Review of International Affairs*, Vol. 8, no. 2, 2004; Y Dai, 'Transformation of the Islamic Da'wa Party in Iraq: From the Revolutionary Period to the Diaspora Era', *Asian and African Area Studies*, vol. 7, no. 2, 2008, pp. 238-267.

³⁹ M Benraad, 'Irak: avancées et écueils d'une transition (2005 – 2006)', in Frédéric Charillon, & Bernard Rougier (coord.), *Afrique du Nord – Moyen Orient. Le Moyen-Orient en crise*, La Documentation française, Edition 2006-2007, pp. 95-119.

situation of the country as well as its lack of security. His main tasks are to restore state authority by dissolving all militias, to prevent the expansion of inter-sectarian violence and to attempt to offer a solution acceptable to all parties to the problem of federalization. The difficulties within the country are accompanied by immense pressure from the great international powers that have an interest in the Iraqi situation: the United States and Iran. After 2007 the arguments between various factions within the government tend to follow the logic of sectarian rivalry, as Sunni parties accuse Maliki of sacrificing the national interest to that of the Shi'a community. However, political fragmentation becomes increasingly obvious within the Shi'a movement itself, as group interests, conflicting strategic views on the future of Iraq, and personal rivalry among the leaders become more radical.

5. Nuri al-Maliki's second mandate: toward a new dictatorship?

What most of specialists and observers of the Iraqi scene observed, during the past years, is the updating of a specific pattern in the history of modern Iraq as well as in other countries in the region: the leader temptation to exercise an exclusive monopoly of power, creating around him a network of clients who are used to control the institutions and decision-making positions, and seeking ways to most effectively block any opposition that might affect the authority. It is here about Nuri al-Maliki, who had a totally unpredictable political trajectory, radically contradicting initial skepticism about its ability to manage multiple Iraqi crisis; he succeeded, in his first mandate, then, to a greater extent in the second, reconfirmed in 2011, to become the most influential political figure in the Iraqi arena and he also succeed the performance, not easy in a Iraq fractured by the civil war, widespread insecurity, destroyed infrastructure, exiled or displaced populations, continuous interference of foreign powers, to be recognized as a leader with national opening and to politically survive to huge external pressures⁴⁰.

But this relative pacification of the country was conditioned by his transformation into an authoritarian leader and a true doubling of official state institutions from the shadow, a structure of solidarity closely dependent on the person of al-Maliki, a new *asabiyya* so traditional in the political history of the Arab regimes – it is here shown, once again, the functional persistence of exercising the power mechanisms specific to the Arab world⁴¹. It is once again highlighted the effectiveness of conditionality exerted by specific political culture, even in an Iraq that, functionally applies a democratic syntax. On the other hand, it must be recognized that centralization of power by Nuri al-Maliki responded as well to a pragmatic necessity, as an effective solution to limit the authority's institutions dissolution and the fracture of political field, ensuring a consistent control center that should transcend sectarian or ethnic solidarities and by which to control the process of security recovery of the territory and the offensive against insurgent groups. Al-Maliki took the position in the most difficult moments of Iraq, marked

⁴⁰ JD Rayburn, 'Rise of the Maliki Regime', *Journal of International Security Affairs*, no. 22, 2012, pp. 55-61.

⁴¹ T Dodge, 'Iraq's Road Back to Dictatorship', *Survival: Global Politics and Strategy*, vol. 54, no. 3, June-July 2012, pp. 147-168.

by the explosion of sectarian violence and wide spreading climate of insecurity. He effectively assumes the lessons in modern Iraqi history, especially Saddam's model, realizing that the stability and pacification of a country with such a centrifuge tendency like Iraq can be achieved only using within certain limits, an attitude of strength, and controlling to a great extent the decision-making field.

Thus, the rise of al-Maliki firstly begins with seizure of control within his own party: in April 2007, he dismisses Ibrahim al-Jafari and makes himself appointed as the new Secretary General of al-Da'wa Party. Then he establishes a loyal group of officials, nicknamed al-Malikiyoun, distributed in most ministries and institutions, which are exclusively dependent of him. In the background of a turbulent and violent political life marked by instability and permanent temptation of Sunni or Sadrist parties to produce a fall of his government, al-Maliki will gradually develop a network of influence and patronage, controlled only by himself and his cabinet, where are trapped responsible persons, political leaders, military safeguards, but whose relationship with al-Maliki does not pass through the intermediation institutions belonging to him but directly, personally⁴². Later, al-Maliki will recruit members of his tribe, Banu Malik (Shi'ite tribe in the south of the country, around Basra) and his family, whom he will install in various key positions of responsibility. His son, Ahmed al-Maliki is named responsible for controlling all Iraqi security services and providing the protection of his father⁴³. Moreover, the role of security services is fundamental, not only because they are the instrument designated, together with Western Allied forces, to restore order, but mostly because their operation is parasite by sectarian, party, and tribal partisanships.

Since 2007, he dismisses most of the senior officers, appoints people close to him in the leadership of the army, police, paramilitary and intelligence units. In this way, he manages to partially limit the influence of his political rivals and unite an efficient structure used in offensives against Sunni and Sadrist insurgency and secure urban centers. He creates a unified command to coordinate military and security structures, which puts him in direct control of the office of Prime Minister⁴⁴. The next step was passing under its direct control the most important and effective post-Saddam Iraqi military forces. Iraqi Special Operations Forces (ISOF) was a creation of U.S. military and security services, trained and equipped by them, whose role is to serve as a local interface in the fight against insurgency and jihadist movements⁴⁵. In April 2007, they go from U.S. command under the authority of the Iraqi government; al-Maliki created a special department in order to

⁴² J Rayburn, 'The Emergence of the Maliki State in Iraq: The Undoing of Power-Sharing and the Reemergence of Izzat Ibrahim ad-Duri', on *Syria Comment*, the website of Josua Landis, Director of Center for Middle East Studies and Associate Professor, University of Oklahoma, <http://www.joshualandis.com/blog/?p=14320>.

⁴³ N Parker, 'The Iraq We Left Behind: Welcome to the World's Next Failed State', *Foreign Affairs*, vol. 91, no. 2, 2012, p. 100.

⁴⁴ BA Salmoni, 'Responsible Partnership: The Iraqi National Security Sector after 2011', *Washington Institute for Near East Policy: Policy Focus*, no. 112, May 2011, p. 14.

⁴⁵ International Crisis Group, 'Loose Ends: Iraq's Security Forces between US Drawdown and Withdrawal', *Middle East Report*, no. 99, 26 October 2010, p. 7.

coordinate ISOF, the Office of Counterterrorism. It is under his direct leadership, escaping from interference from Parliament and does not depend even from defense or even interior ministries. Consisting of over 4,000 people, Iraqi Special Operations Forces have become the most effective tool of personal control of al-Maliki, which some come to call, ironically, „Fedayeen al-Maliki”, compared to the praetorian guard that defended in the old regime Saddam’s person⁴⁶.

Finally, Iraqi intelligence services will come too under the influence of the prime minister. Iraqi National Intelligence Service (INIS) was created, in 2004, by the CIA, to replace the plethora of services for the Ba’thist period; it had been put, since the beginning, under the command of General Mohammed Abdullah al-Shahwani, Turkmen Sunni in close relationships with American services⁴⁷. INIS was meant to be a purely professional structure, trans-confessional and trans-ethnic, taken outside political rivalries and used as a tool serving the interests of both American and Iraqi official power⁴⁸. Since 2006, however, al-Maliki appointed as Minister of State for National Security Mr. Sharwan al-Waeli; between the two individuals and the institutions will be established an acute rivalry and hatred. Loyal to the prime minister, al-Waeli is suspected, in the same time, for too close relations with Iran. Finally, in 2008, al-Shahwani is forced to resign and INIS enters, at its turn, under the direct authority of al-Maliki⁴⁹.

After 2009, the prime minister’s ambitions to control the executive power more efficiently and his desire to escape the conditioning of his former Shi’ite allies lead to a fracture between al-Maliki and the other Shi’ite parties, in particular the Islamic Supreme Council of Iraq⁵⁰. Around his party, al-Da’wa, he builds a new political structure, the State of Law Coalition (al-Dawla al-Qanun), to which several Sunni groups rally, proposing a platform that claims to be trans-sectarian and a program focused on the concept of a unified, national Iraq. During this pre-election period, he takes advantage of his traditional rivals’ weakening. The death of the Islamic Supreme Council of Iraq’s leader, Abd al-Aziz al-Hakim, on 26 August 2009, led to a certain fragility of the party and the movement. Partly true to the traditional line that defines the parties with a substantial Shi’ite religious dimension, the succession will stay in the family, Ammar al-Hakim - son of Abd al-Aziz al-Hakim, being recognized as the new leader of the movement⁵¹. His appointment was contested by

⁴⁶ JS Yaphe, ‘Maliki’s maneuvering in Iraq’, *Foreign Policy*, June 6, 2012, http://mideast.foreignpolicy.com/posts/2012/06/06/has_the_iraq_experiment_failed

⁴⁷ Ch Wilcke, ‘A Hard Place: The United States and the Creation of a New Security Apparatus in Iraq’, *Civil Wars*, vol. 8, no. 2, 2006, pp. 124-142.

⁴⁸ G Bennett, *Iraq’s Security and Intelligence Structures: More Problems*, Defense Academy of the UK/Conflict Studies Research Centre, May 2006.

⁴⁹ G Munier, ‘Guerre des services secrets à Bagdad’, 8 novembre 2009, <http://irakiennes.blogspot.com/2009/11/guerre-des-services-secrets-bagdad.html>

⁵⁰ J Domergue, & M Cochrane, ‘Balancing Maliki. Shifting Coalitions in Iraqi Politics and the Rise of the Iraqi Parliament’, *Iraq Report*, no. 14, Institute for the Study of War, Washington, June 2009.

⁵¹ J Lecuyer, ‘al-Hakim, nouvel arbitre de la scène politique irakienne?’, *Moyen-Orient*, no. 5, Avril-Mai 2010, pp. 57-61.

a group of the old guard, who would have preferred one of them to take the lead and so it was perceived as a setback for the party which, in the absence of a charismatic leader with theological prestige, feels an increasingly stronger need to seek support within the religious authority of the grand ayatollahs, such as al-Sistani, or those in Iran⁵². It is the same case for the sadriste movement, where Muqtada's voluntary exile to Qom, with the purpose of perfecting his theological studies, left the movement without its charismatic leader and without a coherent political or militant action.

Weakened by al-Maliki's withdrawal and numerous internal fractures, especially between sadrists and followers of the al-Hakim clan, the Shi'ite parties in the former United Iraqi Alliance announced, on 24 August 2009, the formation of a new electoral list, the Iraqi National Alliance (al-Ittilaf al-Watani al-Iraqi). This is the result of pressure coming from Iran, concerned to perpetuate an effective political structure which could identify itself as Shi'ite⁵³, as well as of Ayatollah al-Sistani's concern over the attitude of Iraqi political elites. After 2005, he keeps growing apart from the new political class, accused of incompetence and attachment to personal interests⁵⁴.

At the parliamentary elections in March 2010, refusing to ally, in the electoral campaign, with the Iraqi National Alliance, State of Law loses important numbers of the Shi'ite votes. More importantly, however, al-Maliki has now to face a coalition which proposes, in its turn, a cross-sectarian platform, namely the al-Iraqiyya (Iraqi National Movement - al-Harakat al-Wataniya al-Iraqiyya), led by former Prime Minister Iyad Allawi. The latter's political resurgence after years of absence, was one of the major surprises of the new electoral process. He returns with a secularist, cross-sectarian message, based on the concept of a unified and democratic Iraq, showing opposition to the autocratic tendencies of Nuri al-Maliki⁵⁵. The formation of al-Iraqiyya is announced on January 16, 2009, bringing together the old party led by Iyad Allawi, the Iraqi National List, with many of the Sunni political leaders: Saleh al-Mutlaq, a Sunni Arab secularist, leader of the Iraqi Front for National Dialog, vice President Tariq al-Hashimi, former leader of the Iraqi Islamic Party etc.⁵⁶

During the elections in March 2010, the al-Iraqiyya bloc managed to convince and attract many more votes from the secular social groups, but especially from Sunnis, who had never perceived al-Maliki as a worthy politician. Relations between Sunni parties in the Iraqi Front for National Dialog and the Iraqi Prime Minister were tense and strained, with several coup attempts; one of the central themes of Sunni criticism was precisely al-Maliki's authoritarian inclinations and the highly

⁵² More information about the daily activity of the party on his website: <http://www.almejlis.org/eng/index.php>

⁵³ R Visser, 'After Sadr-Badr Compromise in Tehran, the Iraqi National Alliance (INA) Is Declared', 24 August 2009, <http://www.historiae.org/ina.asp>

⁵⁴ International Crisis Group, 'Iraq's Uncertain Future: Elections and Beyond', *Middle East Report*, no. 94, 25 February 2010.

⁵⁵ K Katzman, *Iraq: Politics, Elections, and Benchmarks*, Congressional Research Service, December 22, 2010; A Dawisha, 'Iraq: A Vote Against Sectarianism', *Journal of Democracy*, vol. 21, no. 3, 2010, pp. 26-40.

⁵⁶ International Crisis Group, 'Iraq's Secular Opposition: The Rise and Decline of Al-Iraqiya', *Middle East Report*, no. 127, 31 July 2012.

personal character of his decisions in domestic and foreign policy, often ignoring the parliament's or the government's opinions.

The election results were a huge surprise: al-Iraqiyya managed to rank first, with 24.7% of the votes and the largest number of members of Parliament (MP), 91. The electoral bloc of Prime Minister al-Maliki, al-Dawla al-Qanun, came only second, with 24.2% of the votes and with 89 MP. The next positions went to the Iraqi National Alliance (18.15% and 70 MP) and the Kurdistan Alliance (14.6% and 43 MP)⁵⁷. The fact that Iyad Allawi's coalition won the election was a shock to al-Maliki, who cannot conceive a result that removes him from power and his subsequent decisions showed his determination to do everything possible to preserve his position. As a consequence, it follows an anomalously long interval for such an unstable country as Iraq (249 days, compared to 156 days to form the government after the elections in December 2005), of fierce and endless negotiations for the new government, leading to the separation of two main fronts. The first believes that leaving al-Maliki in power would mean a further increase of his authoritarianism which could lead to a personal dictatorship, threatening to entirely annihilate the legitimacy of democratic governance that Iraq still strives to implement. The other bloc, even if not entirely composed of sympathizers of al-Maliki, are mainly concerned with the rise of the Sunni in case that al-Iraqiyya is recognized as the winner, which could in fact jeopardize the political, administrative and economic positions acquired by the forces that have held power since 2003 and their clientele.

The ambiguity of the electoral outcome did nothing more than to bring about, once more, the complicated negotiation process between the Iraqi political forces, together with the whole complex of pressures, influences exerted by external actors (Iran, Saudi Arabia, and United States). The elections of 2010 offered a meaningful picture of the United States' limited power in Iraq, when Washington representatives failed to provide a compromise political solution that could reconcile the parties disputing the legitimacy of building the new government⁵⁸.

Eventually, on 11 November 2010, an agreement is reached which allows the forming of a coalition government that brings together the State of Law, the Iraqi National Alliance and the Kurdish parties. Senior members of al-Iraqiyya move away from Iyad Allawi and receive important functions: Saleh al-Mutlaq is appointed Deputy Prime Minister and Osama al-Nujaifi becomes the Parliament's spokesman⁵⁹. The United States' inability to bring Allawi to power and especially the fact that the new al-Maliki government is the result of Iranian pressure and

⁵⁷ 'The 2010 Iraqi Parliamentary Elections – Interactive graphic', *The New York Times*, March 26, 2010, <http://www.nytimes.com/interactive/2010/03/11/world/middleeast/20100311-iraq-election.html>

⁵⁸ M Eisenstadt, *United States Policy Toward Iraq: Future Challenges*, Testimony before the House Committee on Foreign Affairs, Subcommittee on the Middle East and South Asia, June 23, 2011, <http://foreignaffairs.house.gov/112/eis062311.pdf>

⁵⁹ M Ottaway, & D Kaysi, 'Can Iraq's Political Agreement be Implemented?', *Carnegie Endowment for International Peace: Analysis of the 2010 Iraqi Parliamentary Elections*, November 15, 2010, <http://carnegieendowment.org/2010/11/15/can-iraq-s-political-agreement-be-implemented/2611>.

negotiations were widely seen as a visible sign of decreasing American influence over Iraq⁶⁰. Indeed, Tehran has persuaded the Shi'ite parties in the Iraqi National Alliance to provide support to al-Maliki, despite rupture between al-Da'wa and the Islamic Supreme Council of Iraq. Also, Tehran convinced Muqtada al-Sadr to become al-Maliki's ally again, putting to rest all memories of violent repression of the sadriste movement in Baghdad and Basra, as well as former political disputes between Parliament and the government⁶¹. Muqtada has conditioned his support on compliance with the withdrawal calendar of American troops from Iraq and al-Maliki's promise that he will not accept a new agreement to delay withdrawal.

Once again confirmed as prime minister, Nuri al-Maliki continues the same tendency to personal control and exclusive political power. Even now, he continues, pragmatically and efficiently, to exert his power on the army, police, security and intelligence services. In fact, Iraq is again becoming a militarized state, but whose strength is developed in order to ensure internal security rather than reject external aggression. The number of employees working in institutions connected to the Ministry of Interior is double compared to those who work for the Ministry of Defense, which clearly indicates that the fundamental concern of the regime is internal control and the ability to have the resources to dominate endogenous threats by force⁶². This centralization of power in the hands of al-Maliki has both positive and negative sides. It provides a relative political and social stability, after the dissolution of state authority and multiple internal conflicts. On the other hand, al-Maliki's authoritarian inclination and his tendency to seize full political control of all the important institutions give rise to frustration from other political or community forces. To continue to exclude them from sharing the power, resources, functions, benefits, may lead to deeper resentment from their part and even to resurgence of violence, still latent within the numerous social and community groups.

6. Conclusions

In the modern history of Iraq, the political elites used to be recruited mostly from among the Sunni minority although the official nationalist propaganda (during the Hashemite and especially the Ba'hist period) made efforts to disguise this aspect by referring to an ideology that highlighted national rather than religious identity. Previous decades, marked by violent repressions of traditional Shi'a institutions, and especially of their politicized or activist forms of manifestation,

⁶⁰ M Knights, 'The Effort to Unseat Maliki: Lessons for U. S. Policy', *Washington Institute for Near East Policy: Policywatch 1947*, June 5, 2012.

⁶¹ M Fayad, & S Jarous, 'Iran Pressuring Al-Sadr to Support Al-Maliki for Second Term', *al-Sbarq al-Ansat*, August 23, 2010, <http://www.asharq-e.com/news.asp?section=1&id=22065>

⁶² According to the quarterly report made in January 30th, 2012, by The Office of the Special Inspector General for Iraq Reconstruction (SIGIR), the agency that succeeded the dissolution, on 28 June 2004, of the Coalition Provisional Authority, the total number of employees in the Ministry of Defense is of 279,103, while the Interior Ministry has 649,800 employees: Special Inspector General for Iraq Reconstruction, *Quarterly Report and Semiannual Report to the United States Congress*, January 30, 2012, p. 68, <http://www.sigir.mil/publications/quarterlyreports/January2012.html>

had a deep impact on the Shi'as' sense of identity and led to the failure of Ba'athist regime's integrationist policies. At the same time, Iraqi Shi'a Islam was impacted by regional geopolitical changes, in particular the Iranian revolution, the revival of Lebanese Shi'ism, and the difficult handling of the dilemma during the Iraqi-Iranian war (i.e. whether loyalty should be shown towards the Iraqi state under threat or, on the contrary, towards the Shi'a identity shared with the Iranian enemy). A categorical breach followed the Shi'a Intifada (in the wake of the 1991 anti-Iraqi campaign), when violent reprisals and the rigid security control system of the Southern provinces deepened the gap between the Shi'a community (which became increasingly focused on its own cultural and social identity) and the power in Baghdad. During the 1990s, exiled Shi'a parties and organizations were actively involved in the project of enabling a unified front to determine a change of regime in Iraq.

The military offensive, which led to the fall of the Ba'ath power in 2003, was at first regarded as an opportunity to redress a historical injustice, i.e. the possibility for Shi'as to freely practice their religion, to preserve their values and especially to gain unrestricted access to political life according to their demographic representation. However, far from being homogeneous, the Iraqi Shi'a community has been traditionally fragmented along various lines with the consequence that group loyalties, conflicting ideological and political options, rivalry between leaders, and fights for influence and power constantly undermine the population's unity.

The new Iraq, post-Saddam, is more complex and dynamic than in any of its previous historical periods. After the period of a rising sectarianization in the political field, the leaders and the population have become, after 2008, more attached to the Iraqi identity, trying to once more reconstruct the national state, exiting the disastrous logic of the sectarian conflict that almost ended with dismantling the country. The fragility of the institutions, the profound political fracture, the unpredictability of the inter-communities relations as well as the defiance of the regional geopolitical environment, which itself suffers uncertain transformations and is characterized by a rising problem of the anti-Iranian attitudes and of exacerbating the Syrian crisis, all of these contribute to the coherent unpredictability of Iraq's destiny.

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