



THE RISE OF IDENTITY POLITICS IN IRAQ: INSTITUTIONAL CONSOLIDATION, SECTARIAN POLARIZATION, AND THE ISRAEL-IRAN CONFLICT

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Iraq's rich social composition includes various ethnic and religious groups. Arabs constitute the majority of the country's population, while other ethnic groups such as Kurds and Turkmens also represent significant portions. On the religious side,

there are diverse belief groups, particularly Shiite and Sunni Muslims, along with minorities including Christians, Yazidis, Shabaks, and others. Although this diversity contributes Iraq's cultural richness, it has also paved the way for ethnic and sectarian tensions through-

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out history, especially, after the overthrow of Saddam Hussein's Baath Regime in 2003.¹ Conflicts between identity groups have become one of the main threats to the stability and social cohesion of the country.

The post-2003 trend of the increasing influence of identity politics has significantly intensified in recent years. This trend has become an important factor deeply affecting the political and social structure of the country. First, in the post-2003 period, identity-based political structures have grown stronger and become institutionalized within the state mechanisms. This process has increased the political representation of ethnic and sectarian identities but has made the construction of a national identity more difficult. Second, the fact that the laws adopted in the Iraqi Parliament are organized to serve the interests of certain identity groups demonstrates the influence of identity politics on legislative processes. Third, rivalries and conflicts within identity groups indicate that identity politics has deepened not only between different ethnic and sectarian communities but also within the same identity group. Finally, the emerging crisis and tensions in the region act as a multiplier for identity-based tensions in Iraq.

This situation illustrates the rise of identity politics as a growing threat to the country's political stability.

INSTITUTIONALIZATION OF IDENTITY POLITICS

After 2003, Iraq entered a process of establishing a new political system with the support of the U.S.-led coalition forces. During this process, Iraq's governance structure was built on ethnic and sectarian grounds. The new constitution adopted a model based on federalism and power sharing among Kurds, Shiites, and Sunnis. However, rather than strengthening the construction of a national identity, this model institutionalized identity-based divisions.

In the post-2003 period, state mechanisms have come under the influence of certain ethnic and sectarian groups. For example, the prime minister's office was allocated to the Shiites, the parliamentary speakership to the Sunnis, and the presidency to the Kurds—thereby structuring power sharing based on identity. While this arrangement may seem to have increased the political representation of various identities, it has, in practice, contributed to deep divisions between sectarian and ethnic groups.

1 Hayder al-Khafaji, "The Role of Ethnicities, Religions and Sects in Iraq", *Bayan Center*, 27 February 2021.



Kurdish politician Fuad Hussein is the Iraqi Foreign Minister within the framework of the identity-based distribution of ministerial positions in Iraq. Iranian President Ebrahim Raisi (R) welcomes Iraqi Foreign Minister Fuad Hussein (L) in Tehran, Iran, Sept. 13, 2023. (Iranian Presidency via AA)

In this process, identity politics did not remain limited to the level of political representation; it also affected the relations between different components of society. Ethnic and sectarian identities have become the main factors shaping both political discourse and public policy. For example, even the distribution of services at the local level is often guided by identity-based interests. This situation has heightened perceptions of injustice among citizens and has made national integration more difficult.

In this historical process, identity politics has not only deepened social fragmentation but has also negatively affected the functioning of Iraq's governance mechanisms. Identity-based divisions have created a persistent crisis environment in government formation processes by making reconciliation difficult. This situation shows the long-term effects of the institutionalization of identities in Iraqi politics.

The strengthening of identity-based politics in Iraq in the post-2003 period has led ethnic and sectarian identities to become the cornerstone of the political structure. While this situation has increased the fairness of representation, it has also become the greatest obstacle to the construction of a unified national identity.

IDENTITY-BASED APPROACH IN LEGISLATIVE PROCESSES

In post-2003 Iraq, legislative processes have largely been shaped to protect the interests of specific ethnic and sectarian identities. Decisions made and laws enacted in parliament have often resulted from political bargaining between different groups. This situation clearly demonstrated that legislative processes have evolved within an identity-based structure.

The approval of the General Amnesty Law, the Civil Status Law and the Land Restitution



A view from the Iraqi Parliament during the session on electing the president in Baghdad, Iraq, Oct. 13, 2022. (Iraqi Parliament Press Office via AA)

Law during the same session of the Iraqi Parliament in 2025 exemplifies identity-based politics in legislative processes.² All three laws included regulations in favor of the interests of different identity groups. The General Amnesty Law specifically aimed to pardon members of sectarian groups who had been involved in conflicts, while the Civil Status Law provided a regulation in line with the norms of religious and sectarian identities. The Land Restitution Law, on the other hand, sought to regulate the property rights of ethnic groups, particularly aiming to secure the support of Turkmen and Kurdish communities.

The concurrent passage³ of these laws can be explained by the efforts of political leaders to satisfy various identity groups. However, this situation clearly shows how identity-based politics shape legislative processes and how group interests are prioritized over national interests. In addition to the content of the laws, the simultaneous approval of these laws⁴ also led to serious procedural debates. Opposition members of parliament (MPs) argued that these regulations were adopted in violation of legislative procedures and submitted a petition of objection⁵ to the office of the Parliament Speaker, which was rejected by the Iraqi top court.⁶

2 "Iraqi parliament passes controversial laws, critics say could allow child marriage and pardons embezzlement", *The New Arab*, 22 January 2025.

3 "Iraq's Controversial Laws Legislation: What We Know So Far", *Shafaq News*, 12 February 2025.

4 "Iraq's personal status law amendments to be enacted after supreme court dismisses lawsuit", *The National News*, 11 February 2025.

5 Iraq's Controversial Laws Legislation: What We Know so Far", *Shafaq News*, 12 February 2025.

6 "Top Iraqi court dismisses appeal against three controversial laws", *Rudaw*, 11 February 2025.

Such legislative processes show that political decision-making mechanisms in Iraq are shaped by identity-based bargaining. Legislation often favors a particular group while overlooking the interest of others. This situation not only increases social inequality but also weakens the possibilities for political reconciliation at the national level. The predominance of identity-based politics in Iraq's legislative processes contributes to a dysfunctional governance system and further deepens tensions among different segments of society.

DIVISIONS WITHIN IDENTITY GROUPS

Identity politics in Iraq not only shapes relations between different ethnic and sectarian groups but also deepens divisions within these groups. Although the Shiite, Sunni and Kurdish communities may appear homogeneous, they contain significant political, ideological and leadership-based conflicts. This situation reveals the widespread and multidimensional side of the identity politics. Intragroup divisions are often fueled by factors such as local interests, external influences and leadership strug-

gles. This further increases the fragmentation of Iraqi politics. The impact of these divisions both complicates government formation processes at the national political level and threatens stability by triggering social tensions.

The rivalry between Shiite groups is one of the most prominent examples of intra-group divisions in Iraq. Tensions between the Sadrist Movement, led by Muqtada al-Sadr, and the Iranian-backed Coordination Framework have created significant obstacles in government formation and have disrupted social peace. The clashes in the Green Zone in 2022 clearly demonstrated how these tensions spilled over into the streets and escalated into armed violence.⁷ The 2024 armed clashes between Saraya al-Salam and Asa'ib Ahl al-Haq in Basra⁸ further illustrate the extent of fragmentation within the Shiite identity and how these divisions have reached violent levels. Moreover, Iran's influence over the Shiite Coordination Framework fuel debates surrounding independence and foreign intervention within the Shiite identity, further deepening internal divisions.

The rivalry between Shiite groups is one of the most prominent examples of intra-group divisions in Iraq. Tensions between the Sadrist Movement, led by Muqtada al-Sadr, and the Iranian-backed Coordination Framework have created significant obstacles in government formation and have disrupted social peace.

7 "At least 10 killed in clashes in Baghdad's Green Zone after powerful cleric announces withdrawal from politics" *CNN World*, 30 August 2022.

8 "Iraqi Security at Risk: the conflict between Asa'ib Ahl al-Haq and Saraya Al-Salam"; *Shafaq News*, 22 February 2024.



Supporters of Asa'ib Ahl al-Haq Movement, Iranian-backed Shiite militia group gather at Green Zone during a demonstration in support with Iran and condemn Israeli attacks, Baghdad, Iraq, June 16, 2025.

Similar divisions are also evident among Sunni groups. In particular, the rivalry between the Takadum Coalition led by Mohammed al-Khalbusi, and other Sunni groups is shaped by local interests and foreign support. Al-Khalbusi's close relations with the U.S. and Gulf countries are criticized by some Sunni leaders, leading to a split within the broader Sunni identity. This division affects parliamentary dynamics following elections and further exacerbates issues of representation in Sunni-majority regions. Within the Kurdish political movement, the rivalry between the Kurdistan Democratic Party (KDP) and the Patriotic Union of Kurdistan (PUK) remains one of the major obstacles to the unity of the Kurdish regional administration.⁹ The economic and military conflicts of interest between these

two parties, based in Erbil and Sulaymaniyah, have contributed to a divided Kurdish identity. A clear example of this division is the separation of the Peshmerga forces between the two parties. The rise of the New Generation Movement in the recent elections¹⁰ has further amplified dissatisfaction among Kurdish youth toward traditional parties, introducing a new dynamic of division within the Kurdish identity.

These internal divisions within Shiite, Sunni and Kurdish groups demonstrate that identity politics in Iraq is a multi-layered issue. Intra-group tensions have not only led to problems of political representation but also pose a serious threat to social peace and national integration. These divisions underscore how identity-based politics undermines Iraq's political stability.

9 Feyzullah Tuna Aygün, "What is Left of Kurdish Unity in Iraq?", *London School of Economics Middle East Centre*, 30 March 2023.

10 "New Generation party not to join government after placing 3rd in elections in Iraq's KRG-held region, says leader", *Anadolu Agency*, 24 October 2024.

REGIONAL TENSIONS FURTHER DEEPEN THE GAP BETWEEN IDENTITIES

Regional conflicts in the Middle East increasingly shape domestic political landscapes across neighboring countries, and Iraq is no exception. With its fragile state institutions and identity-driven political system, Iraq is particularly vulnerable to external crises that intersect with internal divisions. When regional powers clash, Iraqi actors often recalibrate their positions not according to national interests, but along sectarian and ideological affiliations that mirror those of external patrons.

The open confrontation between Israel and Iran in June 2025 vividly illustrates this pattern. Israel's airstrikes on Iranian military and civilian targets, followed by Iran's retaliatory missile attacks, triggered a wide range of political responses within Iraq.¹¹ Iran-aligned Shiite militias swiftly condemned Israel's actions, portraying them as an existential threat to the Shiite community and calling for solidarity with Tehran. They

framed the conflict as part of a broader struggle between the so-called "resistance axis" and Western-backed aggression, thereby reinforcing their regional alignments and ideological commitments.¹²

In contrast, other influential Shiite actors such as the Sadrist Movement and the clerical establishment led by Ayatollah Sistani, urged de-escalation and they emphasized Iraqi sovereignty and cautioned against involving the country in regional wars.¹³ This divergence within the Shiite community signals a growing identity-based fragmentation between transnational Shiite solidarity and state-centered nationalism. It also reveals deeper ideological and generational shifts, especially among younger Shiites disillusioned with both Iran's influence and traditional party structures.

Sunni politicians, including Iraqi Parliament Speaker Mahmoud al-Mashadani, responded with calculated restraint, advocating a neutral position and urging all sides to reduce tensions.¹⁴ This pragmatic ap-

The Israel-Iran conflict demonstrates how regional tensions intensify identity politics in Iraq by activating dormant loyalties and sharpening ideological divides.

11 "Israel-Iran Tension: A New Breaking Point in the Middle East?", *ORSAM Report*, No:43, 15 June 2025.

12 Feyzullah Tuna Aygün, "İsrail'in İran'a Saldırısı Irak'taki İç Dinamikleri Nasıl Etkiliyor?", *ORSAM*, 22 June 2025.

13 Feyzullah Tuna Aygün, "İsrail'in İran'a Saldırısı Irak'taki İç Dinamikleri Nasıl Etkiliyor?", *ORSAM*, 22 June 2025.

14 "Speaker of Parliament Mashhadani, President Rashid discuss Israel-Iran tensions, warn of 'dangerous development'", *964Media*, 17 June 2025.



Supporters of Shiite cleric Moqtada al-Sadr took to the streets during a protest at Tahrir Square ahead of a parliament session in Baghdad, Iraq, Sept. 28, 2022.

proach, however, risks being perceived by Iran-affiliated groups as a lack of solidarity. Meanwhile, Kurdish parties displayed their own internal divisions, with differing levels of alignment with the U.S. and regional actors. These reactions illustrate that regional conflicts do not merely provoke inter-sectarian polarization but also deepen intra-group cleavages.¹⁵

The Israel-Iran conflict demonstrates how regional tensions intensify identity politics in Iraq by activating dormant loyalties and sharpening ideological divides. As Iraq moves toward pivotal national elections and continues to grapple with fragmented governance, such external crises are likely to further polarize its political landscape. Rather than serving as moments of national consolidation, regional shocks tend to reinforce existing identity-based rivalries, making long-term stability increasingly elusive.

IDENTITY POLITICS IS BECOMING MORE INFLUENTIAL

The rise of identity politics in Iraq has become one of the most important dynamics that have radically changed the political structure of the country and deepened social polarization. In the post-2003 period, the reconstruction of state mechanisms on ethnic and sectarian grounds led to the institutionalization of identity politics, which also enabled Iraq to be affected by the regional crisis and tensions. The arrangements made to protect the interests of certain groups in legislative processes and internal conflicts within identity groups show that this process has deepened not only in politics but also at the social level. At this point, identity politics has weakened Iraq's national identity building, has led to a deadlock in government formation processes and has made political instability permanent.

15 Sercan Çalışkan, "Savaş Gölgesinde İKBY: Riskler ve Siyasi Dönüşüm Dinamikleri", *ORSAM*, 22 June 2025.

If the impact of identity politics continues to increase in Iraq, political and social polarization will inevitably deepen. Under the current system, politics has turned into a field of competition between certain identity groups rather than a pursue of national interests. All state mechanisms—including parliament, government, and security institutions—are affected by these identity-based divisions. As identity politics rises, Iraq's political and social stability will become increasingly fragile. The

growing prominence of identity politics in Iraq represents one of the greatest threats to the country's political stability. The prioritization of sectarian and ethnic rivalries over national identity and a shared future raises the long-term risk of national disintegration. Unless Iraqi politics shifts away from identity-based approaches and works toward a common national vision, overcoming internal tensions and achieving a sustainable governance system will remain elusive.

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