Moats, Walls, and the Future of Iraqi National Identity

by Ismaeel Dawood

ABSTRACT

At a time when Iraqi politicians, supported by the US and other western governments, argue that only the walls and moats dividing Iraqis can guarantee security and that military solutions will eliminate Daesh, Iraqi citizens not only disagree but have proven there are alternatives. Iraqi protesters have made clear that walls and moats exist largely to sustain the sectarian system installed in 2003. They do not protect citizens. In fact, citizens can be safer together, regardless of their sect or ethnicity. What is needed in Iraq is an end to sectarianism and to restore Iraqi national identity and the rule of law. These demands cannot be delayed until Daesh and extremism are defeated; on the contrary, political reform and the restoration of a shared national identity are the best strategic means to confront Daesh and extremism in Iraq and the region.

keywords

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Introduction

Since the 2003 US invasion and the armed conflict that followed, Iraq has suffered great political and social instability. Thirteen years after the US-led invasion, the risk of the nation's partition or dissolution is more serious than at any time since the founding of the modern Iraqi state.

Today we find Iraqi citizens questioning: "Does our country have a future as a single nation state?" "Does an Iraqi national identity exist?" "Indeed, has one ever existed?" Iraqi politicians, living behind cement walls and having almost no contact with the people, are severely disconnected from those they are supposed to govern and serve. Growing limitations on and control of the movement of citizens within Iraqi cities and on the roads between cities are reshaping realities on the ground in ways that have begun to establish new boundaries and borders.

At the same time, a wave of national protest has gripped the Iraqi capital and spread throughout the nation. Since 2011, massive demonstrations have offered new hope that a united, nationalist movement of secularists and moderates will overthrow the current, sectarian regime and reinforce an Iraqi national identity. As in other countries in the region, Iraqi identity, above all its political aspects, is relatively new, having been born in response to British occupation and nurtured during the popular movements and uprisings of the 20th century. Today we may be witnessing another stage in a long process through which the Iraqi national identity continues to develop.

In order to help us think more critically about the possible future of the Iraqi nation, this paper examines and analyses the internal political and social dynamics in Iraq today, the root causes of the cultural and political conflicts among the principal religious and ethnic sects of Iraq, as well as the developments that have politically

* Ismaeel Dawood is a Policy officer at the Italian non-governmental organization Un Ponte Per… He holds a PhD in Human rights, politics and sustainability from the Scuola Superiore Sant'Anna, Pisa. Dawood is an Iraqi citizen and lives in Pisa since 2009.

united Iraqi citizens. It also considers the regional actors and geopolitical dynamics that often escalate Iraq's internal conflicts and foster greater instability.

1. Moats, trenches, checkpoints and walls are drawing new de facto borders inside Iraq

Once upon a time in human history, moats and walls played an important role protecting cities and their inhabitants. In effect, they defined the front lines of small political and social entities. The same was also true in Iraq. But since 2003, moats and walls have been resurrected to play a new role.

After its invasion of Iraq, the US army began erecting high cement walls to protect the military bases and administrative centres from which they exercised power as an occupying force. Thousands of such walls were built in major Iraqi cities. Indeed, the landscape of Baghdad, the capital, is today in great part a legacy of US wall-building. Though Iraqi political leaders have promised more than once, following the US withdrawal from Iraq in 2011, to remove these walls, their promises are never kept. Even when they do remove the walls from one street or neighbourhood, they soon place them in another. And when they remove them from inside a city, they quickly rebuild them outside the city. Checkpoints have a similar story with one distinction; unlike cement walls, checkpoints were all too common during the Saddam era. Today, checkpoints, especially those situated between cities, are reshaping the political landscape.
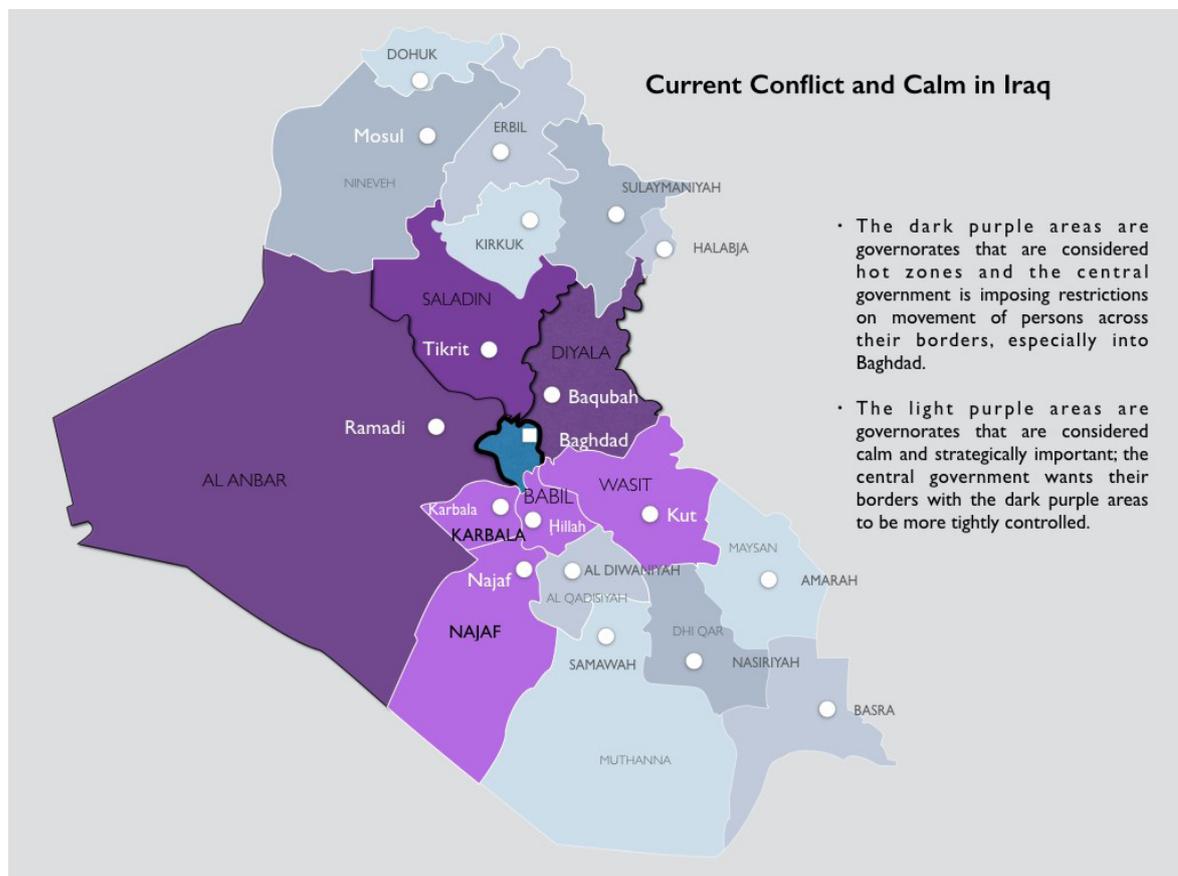
Under the rule of Saddam Hussein, checkpoints were used to block passage of those who were "politically wanted" and to control young Iraqis attempting to escape military service.[1] Consequently, Iraqis feared and grew to hate checkpoints. Today, Iraqis not only hate checkpoints, they view them as divisive and sectarian, since they are used to allow or deny people entry into a neighbourhood, a city, or even an entire province depending on where they live, their ethnic or religious identity, and their family or tribal name.

In February 2016, Iraqi officials launched a controversial plan to surround Baghdad with a huge wall and moat on the northern and northwestern approaches to the capital.[2] The idea was not new; it is reintroduced every time terrorist forces approach the capital. The proposal this time came with the justification that the security forces were planning to move the concrete walls that had stood inside a number of the city's neighbourhoods for years and reuse them to build the wall outside the city. Officials from the Ministry of the Interior claimed that, in addition

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[1] For example, suspected communists, followers of the Dawa or other outlawed political parties, anyone involved with the Kurdish resistance, and any political orientations that were considered "criminal" by the regime.

[2] Associated Press, "Iraq Builds Wall and Trench around Baghdad to Stop Militant Attacks", in *The Guardian*, 3 February 2016, https://gu.com/p/4gd6x/stw.
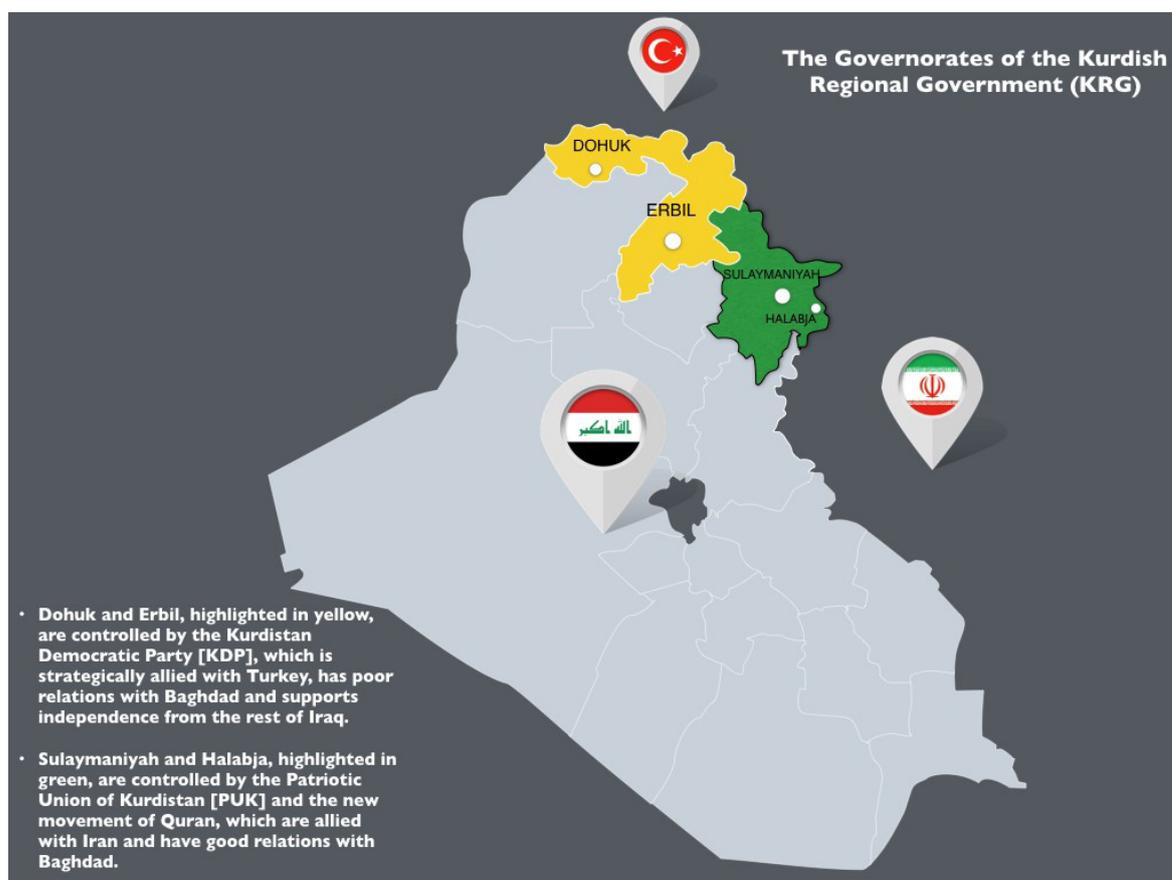
to improving the security of the capital, this would liberate its main streets by reducing the number of checkpoints and the traffic jams they frequently caused. The question was where to place the exterior wall and where to dig the moat. To be cut off from the city terrifies residents of the areas around Baghdad. Many Sunni politicians therefore opposed the plan, saying it was, in fact, an attempt to redraw the borders of the capital by adding or removing areas according to the local residents' loyalty to the government. The walls could produce a significant change in the demographics of Baghdad, since areas further from the centre are mostly populated by Sunni Arabs who are often accused of opposing the Shia government.

Kurdish authorities have been planning similar projects. Since late 2015, they have been digging a moat, really a huge trench, 400 kilometres long, 2.5 metres wide, and up to 3 metres deep, along the areas whose control is disputed between the Kurdish Regional Government (KRG) and Iraq's central government. The trench starts at the town of Sinjar in the governorate of Nineveh, in northern Iraq, an area currently under the military control of Kurdish Peshmerga of the Kurdistan Democratic Party (KDP) and smaller local militias. The trench will pass by Kirkuk and end up at Tuz Khormato, a city in the governorate of Saladin, in northeastern Iraq. The Peshmerga are supervising the construction.

Rasul Radi, a member of the Parliamentary Committee of Regions and Governorates, accused the Kurdish authorities of trying to exploit the current circumstances in order to achieve their goal of establishing a Kurdish state.[3] The central government has so far remained silent about the project. However, local Iraqi media and others have observed the presence of technical experts from coalition countries, who appear to be advising on the construction of the controversial project, including military defence strategists and engineers from the United States, Britain, France and Germany.[4]

The Governorates of the Kurdish Regional Government (KRG)

- Dohuk and Erbil, highlighted in yellow, are controlled by the Kurdistan Democratic Party [KDP], which is strategically allied with Turkey, has poor relations with Baghdad and supports independence from the rest of Iraq.

- Sulaymaniyah and Halabja, highlighted in green, are controlled by the Patriotic Union of Kurdistan [PUK] and the new movement of Quran, which are allied with Iran and have good relations with Baghdad.
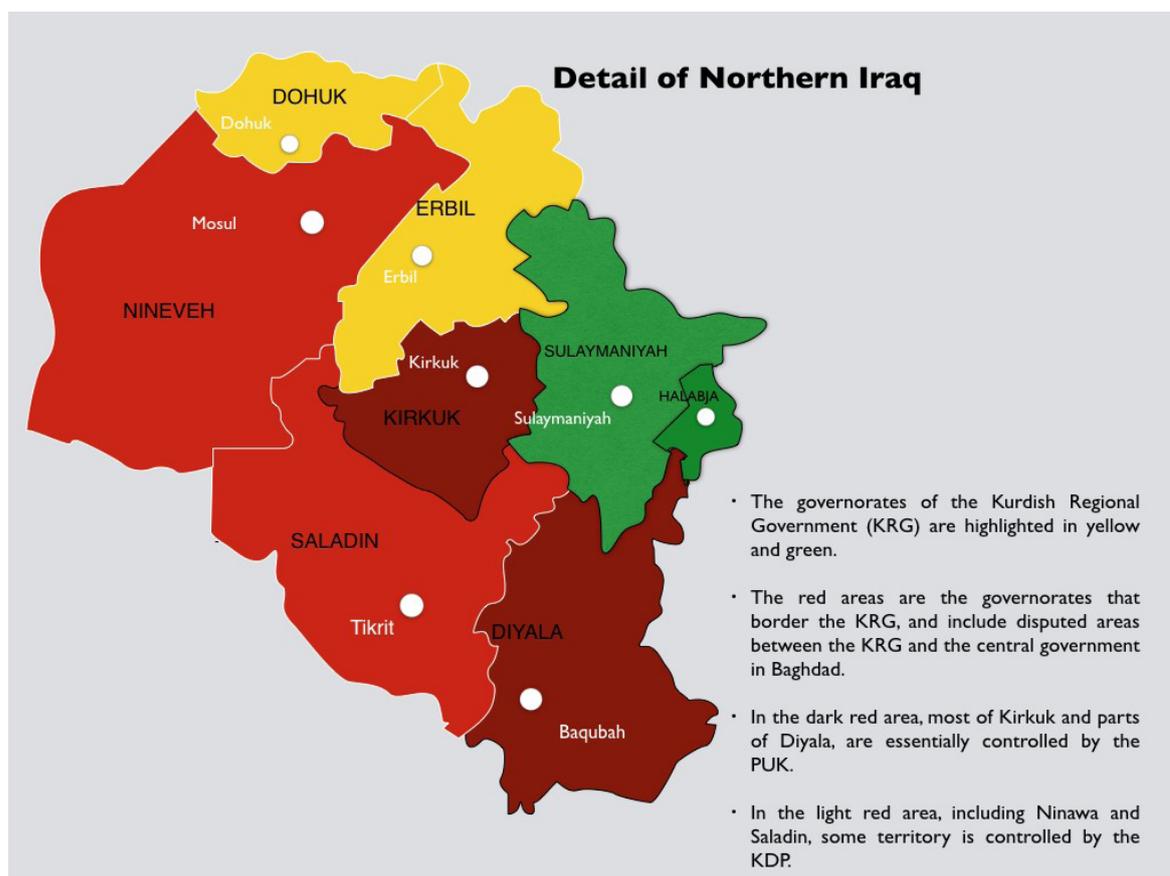
The idea of digging a huge moat or trench is not totally new. In June 2014, following the rise of Daesh (ISIS) and its occupation of Mosul and other cities in the governorates of Nineveh, Saladin, and Al-Anbar, including Ramadi, political dynamics inside Iraq dramatically shifted. Walls, moats, trenches and checkpoints all followed this change. Today, now that the Peshmerga control most of the

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[3] "al-Aqalim al-niyabiyya: Khandaq Kurdistan bidayat al-taqsim" (Parliamentary Committee: Moat, the beginning of the division of Kurdistan), in *Iraq News Network*, 11 January 2016, http://aliraqnews.com/?p=140675.

[4] "Bi-l-Suwar: Iqlim Kurdistan 'ala washq injàz nafaq bi-tul 400 kilumitran yumaththilu hudùd dawla al-gadida" (The Kurdistan region on the verge of completion of a moat of 400-kilometer represents the borders of their new state), in *Alghad Press*, 8 January 2016, http://www.alghadpedia.com/ar/News/449101.

disputed territories, the new Kurdistan moat may become the *de facto* border of the Kurdistan region. The moat unites, or at least harmonizes, the smaller moats of Erbil, Kirkuk and Dohuk, and extends them to just north of the city of Badrah, in the governorate of Wasit.

Detail of Northern Iraq

- The governorates of the Kurdish Regional Government (KRG) are highlighted in yellow and green.

- The red areas are the governorates that border the KRG, and include disputed areas between the KRG and the central government in Baghdad.

- In the dark red area, most of Kirkuk and parts of Diyala, are essentially controlled by the PUK.

- In the light red area, including Ninawa and Saladin, some territory is controlled by the KDP.

Mots, trenches, checkpoints and walls have increased the suffering of Iraqis in many ways. Iraqi citizens escaping from the war against Daesh in Anbar were prohibited, by official security forces, from crossing the small bridge of Bzebiz leading into Baghdad unless they had a guarantee from a Baghdadi citizen.[5] Others escaping from Mosul, Saladin and Diyala were prevented by the Kirkuk police and the Peshmerga from seeking refuge in Kirkuk. Similarly, citizens from Baghdad and other Iraqi governorates, who are not citizens of the Kurdish region, were not allowed to cross the border into Erbil, Sulaymaniyah or Dohuk, the three main governorates of the KRG. Baghdad, Kirkuk and the Kurdish governorates are all working to increase these restrictions on Iraqis who are "non-resident" in their jurisdiction.

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[5] UNHCR, *Thousands Fleeing Violence in Ramadi and Surrounds Struggle to Reach Safety*, 29 May 2015, http://www.unhcr.org/55685b376.html.

The situation is further aggravated by the fact that neither the central government nor the Kurdish regional institutions fully control the armed forces that are constructing and managing these barriers. For example, some soldiers in the KDP Peshmerga prevented the speaker of the Iraqi Kurdistan Parliament from entering Erbil, the capital of the region, and ordered him to return to Sulaymaniyah. Similar cases have occurred in Kirkuk, Diyala and elsewhere. Militants in the Peshmerga or the Popular Mobilization (mostly Shia militias) have denied entry of high-ranking central government officials to territories under their control.

With all these conflicts, divisions and barriers, it is increasingly difficult to view Iraq as a unified land and people. The question of national identity deserves more thorough examination, which I turn to in the following section. In considering this question, readers should keep in mind that Iraqis largely oppose internal divisions; they have protested against barriers in many locations, many times. We will see below how the protesters in the non-violent *Intifada* of April 2016 overran the cement walls surrounding the Green Zone in Baghdad in an act that sent a powerful, symbolic message: "we are uniting Iraq once again."

2. Iraqi national identity: Does it exist?

While readers may expect a simple answer of "Yes" or "No" concerning the existence of an Iraqi national identity, when it comes to a complex society such as Iraq, the question requires historical perspective and analysis.

In examining the region that today encompasses the three cities of Mosul, Baghdad and Basra – which used to be called *wilayat* – we see that for centuries the territory has shared a common history. This was Mesopotamia, the "cradle of civilization" – birthplace of agriculture and writing. Iraq entered its darkest age when Baghdad fell to Hulagu's Mongol army in 1258. Agriculture was decimated and urban life declined. When the region became part of the Ottoman Empire in the 16th century, it was very much a continuation of this "Dark Age." During the Ottoman occupation, which lasted for more than 400 years, the Ottomans controlled the region's strategic cities, using them as pathways for the army and commerce. Iraq thus became a battlefield for the wars the Ottomans fought against their main rival, the Safavids.

It is very important to remember that the Iraq that existed prior to the First World War was not an independent state but occupied territory. Baghdad was the heart of this territory and its governor, *al-wali*, used to be known as the Minister of Iraq (in Arabic, *Wazir al-'Iraq*). The Ottomans used this terminology in their official communications for centuries.[6] During this period, Iraqi communities and their inhabitants were largely engaged in social and political activity that was highly

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[6] See Rashid Khayyun, *Mubah wa al-lamubah. Fusul min al-turath al-Islami* (The Permitted and the Non-Permitted. Chapters in Islamic Heritage), Cambridge, Dar Mahjar, 2005 (Mundus Arabicus 7).

localized.

2.1 The spirit of localism and Bedouin values

Important scholars of Iraq such as the historian Hanna Batatu and the celebrated sociologist Ali al-Wardi explain that, until the end of the 19th century, Iraqis were not a unified people. However, the divisions among Iraqis were not on the basis of religion or ethnicity, as one might expect. Both scholars agree that the key division was between the cities and the tribal countryside,[7] which existed as almost two separate worlds.[8] In the cities the principal values were religious; among the tribes these values were secular and ethical.[9] Furthermore, within both "worlds" – the cities and the tribal areas – there were more local realities: groups belonging to different faiths, or sects, or social classes, or of different ethnic or tribal origins, lived in separate and almost closed quarters known as *mahallahs*.[10]

The dominant culture of Iraqi society, until the beginning of the 20th century, whether one was urban or tribal, was Bedouin. Bedouin values included belief in generosity (*karam*), solidarity with other members of the mahallah or tribe (*nakhwa*), and bravery in protecting your family, *mahallah* and tribe (*shaja'a*). Loyalty to one's tribe or quarters meant standing together against any enemy or external threat from another tribe or *mahallah*. An Arabic expression, "*Unsur akhaka dhaliman aw madhluman*," puts it this way: "Support your brother regardless of whether his cause is just or unjust."[11] These values greet violence as the glorious solution to conflict (in Arabic, *il hak bel seef we il ages irid shehud*). This emphasis on local realities provided security and mechanisms to resolve social and economic disputes within the community. Whenever government authority and the rule of law (if it existed) grew weak, local identity grew more important. At the same time, the tribal countryside prevailed over the riverain cities. This tendency to fall back upon the values and the solidarity of the tribe was central to the story of modern Iraq, and it is still latent in Iraqi society today.[12]

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[7] Although the terms "tribal" and "tribe" can be controversial, what this paper is referring to is a concept very much linked to the social and political history of Iraqi society. So it should be seen as a term dealing with Iraq in particular and not the general concept linked to this word.

[8] Hanna Batatu, *The Old Social Classes and the Revolutionary Movements of Iraq. A Study of Iraq's Old Landed and Commercial Classes and of Its Communists, Ba'thists, and Free Officers*, Princeton, Princeton University Press, 1978, p. 13.

[9] Ibid.

[10] Ibid., p. 18.

[11] Ali al-Wardi, *Lamahat ijtima'iyah min tarikh al-'Iraq al-hadith* (Social Aspects of Iraqi Modern History), Vol. 5, Pt. 2, Baghdad, Matbaʿat al-Adib al-Baghdadiyah, 1978, p. 5.

[12] Hanna Batatu, *The Old Social Classes and the Revolutionary Movements of Iraq*, cit., p. 24.

2.2 The rise of national identity in response to external threat

While the values and form of governance of a modern state first appeared in the Middle East in Egypt, with Napoleon's invasion,[13] Iraqis had to wait until the First World War and the British invasion of their lands.[14] Iraqis joined together to resist the British in an opposition movement that reached a climax with the armed uprising of 1920.[15] Alliances forged to oppose the British built a solidarity that extended far beyond the tribe or *mahalla* uniting most Iraqi communities. For the first time in the centuries of Iraqi history, Sunni and Shia, urban and tribal citizens, all had a common cause.[16] This is the moment when we can talk about the manifestation of a modern national identity in Iraq. In fact, the 1920 revolution is the one event in Iraqi history that every Iraqi, regardless of his or her religion or ethnicity, would agree was *the* just and positive Iraqi revolution.

With the establishment of the Iraq state in 1921 – as a liberal and secular state – the development of an Iraqi national identity accelerated, prevailing over local identities although never totally cancelling or replacing them: what accumulates over hundreds of years cannot be overturned in only a few years.

Iraqis found themselves involved in creating a new nation that quickly achieved independence – in 1932 – a process that took much more time in the case of Egypt or India.[17] On the one hand Iraqis feel proud of this fast transformation, on the other hand, since societies need time to accomplish real transformation, a kind of in-cohesiveness, or "cultural lag" as Salim al-Wardi called it, has characterized modern Iraqi society to the present day.[18]

One example of this is the role of *'ashira* and its competition with state institutions. While the older Bedouin tribes (*qabila*), who tended to reject any government, have almost disappeared from Iraqi society, their modern successor, the *'ashira*, has undergone significant evolution.

Unlike its predecessor, and in contrast to their earlier stance, the *'ashira* no longer opposes the government. In fact, it is now trying to find its own space inside existing governmental institutions. If given the opportunity, state officials,

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[13] Even if it's open for debate, when and how long this campaign lasted.

[14] See Ali al-Wardi, *Lamahat ijtima'iyah min tarikh al-'Iraq al-hadith*, cit., p. 14.

[15] Hanna Batatu, *The Old Social Classes and the Revolutionary Movements of Iraq*, cit., p. 22.

[16] Ibid., p. 23.

[17] Salim al-Wardi, *Dhau 'ala wiladat al-mujtama' al-Iraqi al-mu'asir* (Light on the Birth of Iraqi Society), Baghdad, al-Sabah al-thaqafi, 2009, p. 42.

[18] In his 2009 book, Salim al-Wardi explains that Ali al-Wardi used this term in Arabic, taken from the term "cultural lag" used by American sociologist William Fielding Ogburn. He argues that the most important difference between the old tribe (*qabila*) and the modern one (*'ashira*), is that while the first was a pre-state social institution, almost in war against the state, the modern tribe is involved and tries to achieve its benefits through the state intuitions. See Salim al-Wardi, *Dhau 'ala wiladat al-mujtama' al-Iraqi al-mu'asir*, cit., p. 39 and 55.

including ministers, will often hire, prioritize and provide services to persons of their own *'ashira*. When the government is strong, *'ashira* reduces its influence and allows the rule of law to prevail, which is exactly what happened in the 1960s and 1970s. But when the government is weak, which since 1990 has been the case, the *'ashira* quickly adapts, assuming a larger social role and becoming superior to the government and the rule of law. In times of difficulty (widespread murders or killings, disputes over water or land, problems related to marriage and divorce, or other kinds of social dispute), a majority of Iraqis, including educated persons, politicians and others, appeal to their *'ashira* and not to the government or other political or social institutions. This is because one's *'ashira* is the best guarantee of a person's safety and stability. Recognizing its ability to adapt and therefore its important role, Salim al-Wardi described the *'ashira* as the most powerful social "institution" in Iraq today.[19] It is significant that, as further elaborated below, both Saddam Hussein and the Islamic parties acknowledged this fact, and both used *'ashira* to gain and maintain power.

Iraq was established as a secular state. At the same time, for historical reasons – including the role that Iraqi army officers played in the Ottoman period and the establishment of the monarchy – the modern Iraqi political state was initially dominated by Arab Sunni. This does not mean that there was discrimination against other ethnicities or religions. Many facts demonstrate this; here I offer one. Some 23 prime ministers have governed Iraq between 1921and 1958 and their ethnic backgrounds were varied: 12 Arab Sunni, 4 Arab Shia, 4 Kurdish Sunni, 2 Christians, and 1 Turkman Sunni.[20] In this period there was no sectarian requirement for an Iraqi to hold an official position. The best example may be Sassoon Eskell (1860-1932) an Iraqi Jew who was the first Minister of Finance, father of the Iraqi parliament and the Iraqi dinar, and until today a person widely respected by all Iraqis.[21]

The tree of Iraqi national identity continued to grow after 1958 into the late 1970s, but not without challenges. These were linked to the development of the Iraqi political system and its political parties. Significant damage to the tree came with the expulsion of Jews from Iraq following the surge of nationalism during and after the Second World War. Unfortunately, this was a harbinger of worse things to come: under Ba'ath party rule, priority was given to support for the party's ideology as a measure of national identity. Many Iraqis were deprived of citizenship for political reasons. Iraqi intellectual Salim al-Wardi has called this "the period of the arbitrary trimming of the tree of the Iraqi nationality."[22]

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[19] Ibid.

[20] Hanna Batatu, *The Old Social Classes and the Revolutionary Movements of Iraq*, cit., p.180-184.

[21] *Al Mada* newspaper issued a complete profile about him in 2011 and many other newspapers still mention him as an Iraqi icon.

[22] Salim al-Wardi, "The Arbitrary Trimming of the Tree of the Iraqi Nationality" (in Arabic), in *al-Nahda*, No. 12 (3 August 2003).

The 1970s and 1980s saw a clear separation of the processes of developing state structures, which was continuing, and the cultivation of Iraqi national identity, which was almost stagnant. With the end of war with Iran, the invasion of Kuwait, and the economic sanctions that followed in the 1990s, consolidation of the state under Saddam Hussein began to undermine the development of national identity. Saddam committed grave human rights violations and used social divisions to maintain his regime, including the Islamization of society, reinforcing the role of *'ashira*, the isolation of principal Kurdish cities and prioritizing the so-called "white governorates" of Anbar, Mosul, Saladin, Diyala and Kirkuk – all implemented to guarantee control of the Ba'ath party. Although today's Shia and Sunni Islamic parties claim that they have inherited social power in Iraq, in reality this is not true. What they have managed to maintain, since 2003, are state institutions, and today the people have lost confidence in those institutions.

2.3 External factors: The "New Middle East" and regional discord

Following Saddam's removal from power, the Bush administration restructured Iraq along sectarian and ethnic divisions, through the Governing Council and later governments. The model the US imposed on Iraq, after the 2003 occupation, was one of "ethnic majority" in which ethnicity, religion and sect became the basis for political representation. As a result, Iraqi elections were preceded by alliances that were largely sectarian: a Shia coalition, a Sunni coalition, a Kurdish coalition. Elections results closely conformed to the demographic census that was conducted every four years.

The Bush Administration's assumption was that power in Iraqi society, after years of war and sanctions, was largely local and conservative. Alliances with religious, sectarian and ethnic forces were necessary for the US administration to be able to claim that the changes it was instituting would be popular and therefore could be described as "democratic change." Next, this same logic was applied to the entire region as part of a strategy for reorganizing the greater Middle East.[23]

After creating the "ethnic majority" political system, the US and its allies launched a process of "state-building" in Iraq. It focused on building institutions, while neglecting national identity and any process to preserve it. Under the new system, state institutions, from ministries to small directorates, were distributed among sectarian parties; positions were parcelled out to Sunni, Shia, and Kurds, who then used their posts to benefit their sect or ethnic group. In the end, none of these new institutions was able to represent or benefit all Iraqis, and therefore, they meant nothing. That is why Daesh, with only hundreds of fighters and a few dozen pickup trucks, could occupy one third of Iraq and defeat thousands of Iraqi troops with

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[23] This was discussed in greater depth in: Ismaeel Dawood, *Civil Society, Civil Forces and the Crisis of Democracy in Iraq*, Paper prepared for the Iraqi Civil Society Solidarity Initiative (ICSSI) conference in Oslo, 16 December 2014, http://www.iraqicivilsociety.org/archives/3811.

sophisticated weapons.

Iraq is a multi-ethnic, multi-religious nation, but the fact is that ethnicity and religion were never independent social or political realities before 2003, as those who now want to split up Iraq argue. Would it ever be acceptable to say that the tragic conflicts between blacks and whites in the US mean that the government should erect walls between one race and another? Would anyone seriously propose to arm different racial groups as a means to protect them from each other? This is clearly unacceptable and nothing similar should be accepted in Iraq. However, walls and the militarization of ethnic and sectarian groups is an ongoing process in Iraq, supported by sectarian parties and by regional players including Iran and the US. The assumption that Iraq should be divided along ethnic, religious and sectarian lines and that doing so will allow these communities to live in peace, is not a solution but the cause of many of the problems Iraq faces today. Divisions have directly caused instability. The sectarian regime that is the result of this policy of division and the "ethnic majority" system has led to devastating problems in Iraq and throughout the whole region beginning in 2003 and worsening over the years.

On the ground in Iraq, a second generation of Al-Qaeda, led by Abu Musab al-Zarqawi, saw the potential of exploiting new sectarian identities to gain supporters within marginalized Sunni communities that had been disempowered by the rules of the "ethnic majority" system.[24] The groundwork for full-blown, ethnic conflict had been laid. Starting in 2004, many attacks against Shia were carried out; the bombing of al-Askari mosque in the city of Samara on 22 February 2006 and the civil war that followed remain symbols of that period.

Tremendous changes were also taking place outside Iraq. People's will to change their terrible political, social and economic situation came together through the vast new power of social media. The fruit was the Arab Spring, beginning in Tunisia and spreading to Libya, Egypt, Syria, Yemen – and, though never receiving the same attention in the West – Iraq. These revolutions faced many challenges, however. In my opinion, the main obstacle was the issue of religious hegemony over identities in the region that was first instituted by the US in Iraq. The "New Middle East" project,[25] by emphasizing religious and ethnic identities, had

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[24] Although Zarqawi did not get approval from Al-Qaeda leaders in Afghanistan to adopt a sectarian approach, because it would lead to Muslims killing Muslims, Zarqawi decided, nonetheless, to continue with his strategy based on promoting long-term, sectarian conflict. This was a main cause of disagreement between Zarqawi and Al-Qaeda leaders. See Hassan Abu Hanieh and Mohammad Abu Rumman, *The "Islamic State" Organization. The Sunni Crisis and the Struggle of Global Jihadism*, Amman, Friedrich-Ebert-Stiftung, 2015, p. 45-53, http://library.fes.de/pdf-files/bueros/amman/11458.pdf.

[25] Since 2006, the term "New Middle East" started to be used and promoted by the US administration. Former US Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice, in answer to a journalist's question in 2006, just before she visited the Middle East during an escalation of tensions between Israel and Hezbollah, said "What we're seeing here, in a sense, is the growing – the birth pangs of a new Middle East and whatever we do we have to be certain that we're pushing forward to the new Middle East not going back to the old one." She was clearly linking the change in Iraq, after 2003,

overthrown "old" nation-state identities, thereby creating a great power vacuum without providing clear alternatives. Religious hegemony over identities provoked clashes among regional powers that had long-term interests in the supremacy of one or another sect or ethnic group. Not knowing what the future of the region will bring, each regional power – Iran, Turkey, Saudi Arabia – became involved in defending its political project as a vision of how the "New Middle East" should operate. While before 2003 the question was how will Iraq be after Saddam, or Syria after Assad, now we are asking will these countries exist in the New Middle East? While national and regional politicians failed to offer an answer, answers came from the people "in the squares."

3. The Tahrir Square uprising of 2011, the Iraqi intifada of 2016, and Iraqi national identity

Some political and social events have represented true milestones in the development of Iraqi national identity. This paper argues that the popular protests that first erupted during the Days of Rage, on 25 February 2011 shortly after US troops left Iraq,[26] and broke out again in 2013, 2015 and 2016, are certainly such milestones. Sit-ins and demonstrations began in Baghdad's Tahrir Square and swept across Iraq from north to south (including Kurdish cities), demanding basic services and political reforms. They were the largest *national* and popular protests since 2003. After the rise of Daesh in 2014, the protests continued to break out, showing that they were not merely instances of calling upon the government to make good on specific demands but were part of a nationwide, social and political process developing widespread opposition to the corrupt, sectarian regime installed after the US invasion.

Generally, Iraqi politicians, including Kurds, now criticize the protesters and their demands, arguing that Iraq is at war against Daesh and that the protests create instability that threatens the ability of the Iraqi army and the Peshmerga to defeat these extremists. Major regional players – the US, Iran and the UN – make the same argument. Iraqi protesters, however, see ending corruption and sectarianism as the best, indeed the only, way to both defeat Daesh and prevent another wave of extremism from growing in its place. No event better illuminates this theme of the protests than the Iraqi *Intifada* of 29 April 2016, when Iraqi citizens took power in Baghdad for two days.

Throughout the spring of 2016, popular protests reached extraordinary levels as hundreds of thousands of Iraqis filled Baghdad's Tahrir Square, demanding "an end to sectarianism" and the establishment of a technocratic government. On the

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to wider change in the region. See US Department of State, *Special Briefing on Travel to the Middle East and Europe*, 21 July 2006, https://2001-2009.state.gov/secretary/rm/2006/69331.htm.

[26] For more information about the Days of Rage, see civil society statement: *Days of Rage: A Crucial Time for Iraqi Civil Society*, 7 April 2011, http://www.iraqicivilsociety.org/archives/5781.

29th of April, thousands of protesters surrounded the Green Zone, the location of all key Iraqi political institutions (Parliament, the Council of Ministries, the homes of the President and other politicians, foreign embassies, including those of the US and other western countries). They accused Iraqi politicians of ignoring their demands. At a decisive moment, the protesters began removing, with their bare hands, the cements walls that had surrounded the Green Zone since 2003. While politicians fled Baghdad and hid, Iraqi citizens helped each other to scale the walls and enter the Green Zone. Everyone was smiling, shaking hands, and exchanging hugs with the policemen and Peshmerga Special Forces who had been protecting the Green Zone for years. At that moment, as the walls were falling, Iraqis looked happier and Baghdad appeared safer.

Baghdad, 29 April 2016: Peacefully and in collaboration with security forces, thousands of Iraqi protestors entered the Green Zone.

Upon entering the Iraqi Parliament building, protesters called on everyone to protect the public offices and keep the protests "*salmiya*" or non-violent. No one was killed or wounded; no embassies were attacked. Politicians who were captured by the protesters were all safely released. Most of the protestors who entered the Green Zone were followers of Muqtada al-Sadr; however, at the same time, there were men and women from different backgrounds – secularists, Sunni, Christians and others. They were all simply Iraqis united against sectarian divisions and demanding political reform.[27] At night, protesters opened the grand festival square

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[27] See Iraqi Civil Society Solidarity Initiative (ICSSI), *The Iraqi Intifada, a Weekend of Popular*

(claimed to be so dangerous that it has been closed since 2003) where Saddam Hussein used to give speeches during his military campaigns. The protesters repaired the sound system and turned the stage into a platform for announcing their demands. Then they agreed to withdraw and give Prime Minister Haider al-Abadi one final opportunity to implement the reforms he had promised. In a huge social and political shift, at a time when politicians were pursuing military solutions and saying that only walls and moats that divided Iraqis could provide security, Iraqi citizens not only disagreed but proved that they were safer together as a diverse group of Iraqis.

Although months after this event Iraq's political regime is unchanged, this non-violent movement made it possible to immediately implement the most significant political changes since 2003. Several examples can be cited. In August 2016, Parliament endorsed five new ministers for Oil, Transport, Higher Education, Works and Housing, and Water Resources; two of them were included in the "White Envelope list," a list of technocratic ministers that was proposed by committees involved with the protestors.[28] One year before, on 9 August 2015, also as a direct result of the protests, Abadi adopted a set of measures including: (1) abolishing the positions of two deputies of prime minister and two deputies of president: four largely symbolic positions that had been divided between Shia, Sunni and Kurdish politicians and maintained in line with sectarian quotas; (2) reducing the Cabinet from 33 to 22 ministers, by abolishing some ministries and merging others; (3) reducing the number of bodyguards and other "benefits" for all officials in the government, including retired officials; (4) promising to actively charge and prosecute corrupt officials, starting with the "big heads."[29] The changes have not yet ended. Additional new, technocratic ministers for positions including the Ministers of Interior and Defence are expected to be appointed soon. In implementing these changes, Abadi expressed his commitment to the protestors to challenge sectarian quotas by reviewing all top-level positions and official government bodies, and seeing that they were filled with professionally-qualified individuals.

3.1 The political discourse of Tahrir Square

During my time in Tunis 2011, immediately after the fall of the Ben Ali regime, I was impressed by the Tunisian revolution and its production of national slogans expressing social and political demands. While Iraqis, who are famous for their poetry and the important role it has played in their culture and political life, did not produce any popular slogans following the fall of Saddam in 2003. This clearly

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Nonviolent Uprising [sic], 2 May 2016, http://www.iraqicivilsociety.org/archives/5382.

[28] For more information, see Ismaeel Dawood and Terry Kay Rockefeller, *Popular Protests Escalate in Iraq as Installation of "White Envelope Government" Stalls*, 30 April 2016, http://www.iraqicivilsociety.org/archives/5352.

[29] For more information, see Luay Al Khatteeb, "Abadi's Momentous Gambit against Political Corruption in Iraq", in *The Huffington Post*, 9 August 2015, http://m.huffpost.com/us/entry/7963304.

expresses one of the differences between ending a dictatorship by popular will and revolution and ending by foreign occupation. Since 2011, however, Iraqis are once again producing popular, national slogans summarizing the political discourse of the Tahrir protests. These merit close examination for what they reveal about Iraqi national identity.

Thousands in Baghdad and other cities throughout Iraq chanted "*Batel batel, batel!*" The word *batel*, which means "false," is repeated in a poem that lists a number of political behaviours and characterizes them as false. This is how the protesters judge terrorism, sectarianism, oppression, and human and civil rights violations – all false. Another slogan, "*il-ma izur il-Salman umreh kasare*," inviting everyone to participate in the protests, uses a famous old Baghdadi saying that means "If you don't visit Salman (a touristic place in Baghdad) your life will have no meaning!"

Another one of particular importance, a very popular slogan, "*Bismil din bagunah al-haramiyya*" ("In the name of religion thieves have stolen us!") can be considered the icon of the 2015-2016 protests. It captures in forceful and critical terms how Islamic politicians are thieves, using religion to conceal their theft. Rapidly, this slogan became widely used by ordinary people all over Iraq. Islamic parties and their religious backers moved to oppose its use and somehow managed to spread fear of mentioning it in public, which limited its further diffusion. During protests, al-Sadr's followers carried only Iraqi flags, never their leader's photo; they repeated slogans such as "Long live Iraq" and the well-known chant "*Ikhwan Sunna wa Shi'a, hadha al watan ma nbi'ah*" ("Sunni and Shia are brothers, neither will sell their home [Iraq]!").

3.2 Madaniyya vs. secular

One particular term, *madaniyya*, has dominated the political discourse of Tahrir Square and so merits deeper analysis of its origin and meaning. We have seen already how the modern Iraqi state was established on a liberal and secular basis. Nevertheless, with the US installation of the Governing Council and the government that followed, Islamist ideology became the basis for political parties to govern, despite the ways in which Islam has more often been a force of division than of integration in Iraq history. The result was not only a total failure to manage the country, but also a dangerous dismantling of the social fabric of Iraq that threatens its very existence. So protesters are calling for the restoration of a secular state as an alternative to sectarian government. However, there is sensitivity concerning the term "secular," since it is linked in many ordinary people's minds to western ideas. Islamists, for their part, argue that it is inherently opposed to religion. Iraqi activists therefore use the term "*dawla madaniyya*" and the English translation "civil state." The term is widely used, not only in Iraq but in many Arab countries following the Arab Spring.[30]

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[30] Some leftists and secularists began to domesticize the term "secular" in the Arab language into

Islamic parties deny that sectarianism and corruption are their creations. Moreover, they all claim that they actually oppose sectarianism and corruption. But their actions do not support their claims. Nouri al-Maliki made this quite clear when he organized an *'ashira* gathering in his city of origin, Babil, and began accusing the protesters of organizing a revolution against "Islamic identity" and the "Islamic project" that he and his Dawa party have built in Iraq since 2003.[31] In fact, what he referred to as the "Islamic project" is exactly what Iraqis want to overthrow, since it is the sectarian system that has produced a failed state and threatens national identity. Maliki and other Islamist leaders who defend the so-called "Islamic identity" cannot explain why Iraqi society is so divided and conflict-ridden since 2003. Why has this identity and this project failed to unite people? Why are there now walls and moats everywhere?

Generally, when politicians are faced with evidence of their corruption and sectarianism they approach the *'ashira* leaders for support, exactly as Maliki did. This further confirms that the "Islamic project" has no significant social support. That is why the only place that Islamist politicians can market their ideas and find protection is their *'ashira*.[32]

Nevertheless, the voices of *madaniyyin*, those who demand *dawla madaniyya* (a civil state), are spreading from Tahrir Square and have started to be heard more widely throughout Iraqi society. The idea has also found support among some religious leaders. Beginning in 2015, Muqtada al-Sadr and his Sadrist movement began to change their opinion concerning *madaniyyin* in Iraq. Al-Sadr issued a *fatwa* allowing his followers to ally with the *madaniyyin* in demonstrations. Since then, the number of protesters has significantly increased. Subsequently, al-Sadr attended a number of important meetings with secular leaders; photographs of these meetings were widely reproduced on social media. He also, for the first time, included a number of secular intellectuals on his committee to propose a list of independent, technocratic ministers. These technocrats were all included in his negotiations with Prime Minister Abadi for reform, as part of what became known

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the term madaniyya independently from the term secular and its developments in the western culture. One interesting manifestation is that in Wikipedia you may find definition of the term "dawla madaniyya" (https://ar.wikipedia.org/wiki/دولة_مدنية) – but only in Arabic, there are no other languages linked to that definition. Another example is a study published by the Doha Institute: Ahmed Bouachrine Ansari, "Mafhum ad-daula al-madaniyya fi'l-fikr al-'arabi wa'l-islami. Diràsa muqarana li-ba'd al-nusùs al-ta'sisiyya" (The Concept of Civil State in the Western and Islamic Thought. A Comparative Study of Some Foundational Texts), in *Doha Institute Studies*, April 2014, http://www.dohainstitute.org/release/e6fb943b-c3c8-45be-84fc-a4349067e1d6.

[31] "Nuri al-Maliki: al-islah fi-l-'Iràq mu'amara... dhidd min?" (Nouri al-Maliki: Reform in Iraq... A Plot Against Who?), in *Arabi21*, 9 April 2016, http://arabi21.com/story/900640; Ali Mamouri, "Will secular parties gain upper hand in Iraq?", in *Al-Monitor*, 2 May 2016, http://almon.co/2nfl.

[32] There are some examples on this. See, for example, Mustafa Habib, "Baghdad Politicians Seek Protection from Corruption Charges with Their Tribes", in *Niqash*, 17 August 2016, http://www.niqash.org/en/articles/politics/5335.

as the proposal for the "White Envelope Government."[33] Several of the proposed candidates are now ministers.

Conclusions

This paper calls for a complex understanding of how the state-building process – initiated in Iraq in 2003 by the occupying US forces – undermined the country's historic national identity. It presents the current national protests to "end sectarianism" as a demand for the political and social transformations needed to directly address the root causes of instability and corruption, the rise of Daesh and extremism, and the failure to provide basic services. All parties interested in the stability and well-being of Iraq and the greater Middle East region should be following these non-violent protests closely and devising and developing ways to support the protesters and advance their demands.

This is supported by arguments developed in this paper that fundamentally reject the widely discussed and accepted proposals to promote stability in Iraq. One proposal is that Iraq should be divided on ethnic, religious and sectarian bases so that these communities can live in peace. In reality this is not a solution since division is actually the cause of instability. Indeed, we see clearly how sectarian regimes have caused fatal problems in Iraq and throughout the whole region for more than 13 years. A second proposal is that, because the popular protests in Iraq create social and political disorder that distracts Iraq and the international community from fighting Daesh, the protests should be postponed or suppressed.

Instead, this paper argues that the protests represent the best remaining hope for an Iraqi national identity that will unify the country. While this may be viewed as a radical, or perhaps romantic, opinion, clear evidence supports this conclusion.

Firstly, the current protests are national protests. They include Iraqis from many backgrounds; people participate regardless of religion, sect, ethnicity or gender. They provide a precious opportunity for Iraqis to share common cause against corrupt politicians from Shia, Sunni, Kurdish and Islamic political parties.

Secondly, the protests have facilitated the emergence of tens, maybe hundreds, of new, non-ethnic, non-religious Iraqi social movements, such as "I am Iraqi I read," "Peace Day," *Shabab al-Rafidayn* (Youth of Mesopotamia), the Iraqi Social Forum, and others. These are mainly organizations and networks of youth, led by youths who ignore sect and ethnicity and meet to discuss national issues. Their goal is to mobilize thousands of young people to create a new Iraq without discrimination. These organizations and networks offer real hope that a new generation of leaders

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[33] For more information on this and its relation to the protest, see Ismaeel Dawood and Terry Kay Rockefeller, *Popular Protests Escalate in Iraq as Installation of "White Envelope Government" Stalls*, cit.

will emerge in Iraq whose vision is national and not limited to only their religion, sect, or ethnicity.

Thirdly, these protests manifest once again the secular values of Iraqi society. Iraqis use the culturally important term *madaniyya* to describe their strong wish for and commitment to a "civil state", *dawla madaniyya*, in Iraq.

Fourthly, in these protests, for the first time, Iraqis have agreed to use only non-violent means. This is a vitally important strategic choice for how to undertake social and political transformation. Leaders of the protests have all expressed their commitment to non-violence as the only means of change. We should remember that this choice was made, despite the repression of the protests by the Maliki government and despite the sacrifices of the protesters, some of whom were tortured or killed. This marks a vitally important shift, since Iraqi history has been overwhelmingly characterized by violence, conflict and military coups as the means to political change.

Support can take many forms. Most importantly, people, especially those focused on the Mediterranean world, need to become better informed about the protests in Iraq and the values, vision and goals of the protesters. We need to encourage the Iraqi people to develop and share their ideas for how non-violence can transform their society.

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