Redefining a Nation: The Conflict of Identity and Federalism in Iraq

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Abstract

The debate on federalism in Iraq is interrelated with the identity conflict which has dominated Iraqi politics since the regime change in 2003. Federalism was proposed and became constitutional in 2005 as a way to face the inherent crisis in modern Iraq resulting from the lack of a political system through which power could be distributed and the peculiarities of different ethno-sectarian communities could be included. However, federalism has not been clearly defined and there are several concerns about its form, structure and limits. The question whether this federalism will be ethno-sectarian or administrative is very crucial today, and is strongly connected to identity politics and to the conflicting concepts regarding the definition of Iraqi nationalism and identity. This article attempts to locate the debate concerning federalism within that broader debate and to analyse, albeit briefly, the socio-political and ideological implications.

Key-words:

Iraq, federalism, conflict of identity, nation

1. Preliminary Remarks

National identity is one of the most significant issues in Iraq today. Although it comprises salient ideological and cognitive dimensions, it is mainly related to the state formation process and to institutional build-up. This can be felt in the debate that accompanied the last parliamentary election, as had been the case with the previous one.

One could say that Iraqi politics since 2003 have been a story of identity conflict. Whether or not the various Iraqi communities will be able to produce a national narrative which will be sufficiently inclusive is one of the main questions about Iraq's future. Related to this ideological conflict, there are also constitutional disputes about the type of political system and, particularly, the form of federalism more likely to be accepted by the majority of Iraqis. While the constitution approved in the 2005 referendum clearly stated that Iraq is a federal state, the definition of this federalism is still subject to different interpretations. Therefore, it is valid to argue that defining Iraq's federalism will help in redefining Iraqi nationalism. This is mainly a power conflict, as Breuilly describes the formation of nationalism (1993). "Nationalism is, above and beyond all else, about politics and politics is about power. Power, in the modern world, is principally about control of the state. The central task is to relate nationalism to the objectives of obtaining and using state power" (ibid:1).

2. The geopolitics of conflict

The conflict in Iraq is not simply a conflict among social groups with different heritages and reciprocal complaints, but rather an emblematic example of the complexity of identity politics in this part of the world. The different ethno-sectarian groups in Iraq handled the American toppling of Saddam's regime with different degrees of relief or rejection and often with mixed feelings. Hidden divisions and hatreds have been released after long years of silence in what the Iraqi author Kanan Makiya called 'the republic of fear'. But there were no quick and effective solutions

available to help deal with them. Under the former regimes, ethno-sectarian groups were practically divided into advantaged and disadvantaged groups. Therefore, they had different narratives about the past, a different understanding of the present and different perspectives about the future. The new 'democratic' political system is not yet based on a real "national" narrative that is appealing to the different sub-national identities. The term "National" has not had a consent-based meaning in Iraq because of rooted suspicions, but also because of the different connotations related to the word "nation" (*Umma*) in the Islamic-Arab tradition. While linguistically it means any collectivity, its modern use has rendered it a synonym for cross-national affiliations (e.g. Pan-Arabism and Pan-Islamism).

The concept of 'Nation' has always been a controversial issue in Iraq, but also one inherent in the foundations on which 'modern Iraq' was established. Due to the lack of 'consensus' regarding this 'nation', in a society that consists of three main socio-cultural groups – Kurds, Arab Sunnis and Arab Shi'ates, in addition to several ethnic, religious and linguistic minorities (e.g. Turkmen, Christians, Sabists, Yazidizts, and Shabaks) – identity issues have become an element of almost all prevailing ideologies and political choices. In no less than 40 years of the rule of the Baath party with its Pan-Arab ideology, the idea of an 'Iraqi nation' has been formally denied. Iraq has been ideologically rendered a 'phase' within a continuous 'struggle' to establish the Arab nation. The narrative of Arab unity has been socialized and transmitted to the new generations, thereby alienating the non-Arab Iraqis, but also the non-Sunni Arabs. The Shi'ate version of history was seen as less Arabic and more compromising with non-Arab communities (*Shoubiya*) (*For further analysis see, Davis 2005*). The official predominance of the Arab nation narrative reflected the political hegemony of Sunni Arabs in modern Iraq. This paradoxical official denial of 'Iraq's existence' as a natural 'nation' and, at the same time, the practical handling of its 'existence' as an established state, cannot be detached from the nature of the identity conflict in the 'Arab world' and from the geo-political and geo-cultural realities of Iraq's surroundings. Located at the center of three historical 'cultural spheres', (Arab, Turkish, and Persian), Iraq has been rendered a field in which these powers clash. Iraq has been either an ally for one against

the other (e.g. Iraq's Arab-backed war against Iran), or an open field of their conflict (to a certain extent, the current situation in Iraq).

The regime change in Iraq was a step towards reconstructing the socio-political and geo-political status quo in the region. It has unleashed an intense power conflict which has been accompanied, and even intensified, by ideological confrontation and its focus on the question of identity in Iraq. The Arab Sunni hegemony has been challenged by this shift in an unprecedented way, thereby leading to an open regional conflict in which Iraq's future national identity was the main target. The power vacuum resulting from the collapse of Saddam's regime and the traditional structure of the Iraqi state motivated the regional powers to get directly involved in its unresolved dilemmas of nation building. This has been reflected in the last electoral competition in which some political coalitions were supported, even funded, by Iran and Saudi Arabia. The identity conflict was also revealed by the rise of marginalized identities and their struggles for self-realization and self-promotion against the dominating narratives of identity. National, religious and ethnic minorities are being made more aggressive in their demands for social, political and cultural rights.

Today this regional conflict can be felt in the way that Iraqi politics are managed. Some Shi'a groups are sponsored and funded by Iranians, and some Sunni groups are sponsored and funded by Saudi Arabia. To a large extent, as recent political tension between Iraq and Syria demonstrated, the clash of regional interests became more prominent before the last election and on the verge of American withdrawal. This is a political conflict about influence and hegemony which strive to affect the future definition of Iraq. As long as the identity of the 'new Iraq' – hence its political system – are internally challenged and politically uncertain, it is unlikely that the regional powers will stop their interventions. This goes beyond the simple agenda of resisting 'democracy' by regional authoritarian regimes. It is more about deciding what political meaning and attitude Iraq is going to adopt on the regional map. And if the country is unable to survive these challenges, regional powers intend to fill the vacuum and establish spheres of influence. That is why some analysts clearly argued that the solution in Iraq must be a 'regional solution' (Allawi 2007). Moreover, this kind of negotiation became even more probable after the last election in which the Iraqi Sunnis

actively took part. It was a step towards recognizing the new political system and gaining leverage in Iraqi politics after a long time of hesitation and neglect. It is still to be seen whether the new political landscape will be contained within a power-sharing compromise and each party – internal or external – will accept its share of power, or whether there will be an unsatisfied actor who will be ready to go beyond verbal opposition and to resort to violence. It is a process that will involve both regional powers and Iraqi parties.

3. Defining Federalism

McGary and O'leary (2007) presented an important analysis of the content of identity politics in post-war Iraq, describing the constitutional conflict that takes place between the 'integrationists', who seek a single all-embracing public identity through integration, and the 'consociationists', who try to accommodate multiple public identities through constitutional and institutional arrangements and guarantees. The Sunni groups in Iraq are nostalgic about the strong centralized government which controlled the oil revenue and in which the Sunni tribes dominated the main bodies. By appealing to pan-Arab and anti-Iranian sentiments, they implicitly seek to a form a 'national' identity through a concept of nation which compensates their numerical weakness (20% of the population). They aspire to maintain a special status as an extension of the Arab-Sunni majority in the Muslim world. As demonstrated by the results of the constitutional referendum, the Arab Sunnis are skeptical about federalism. They think that it is basically aimed at impoverishing and marginalizing them, given that the oil fields are located in the Shi'a and Kurdish areas. This attitude is also supported, if not dominated, by the prevailing idea that 'federalism' means partition, an implicit betrayal of the 'imagined Iraqi community'. However, with more Sunni groups participating in the political process and adopting a more realistic approach, there is a measure of acceptance of federalism in the Arab and the Kurdish regions. A similar perspective has been adopted by the Al-Iraqiya coalition which is led by Shi'a secular Ayad Allawi, and consists mainly of Sunni pan-Arabist groups, a formula sponsored by the Arab Sunni countries and secured 91 out of 325 seats in the coming parliament.

However, the destiny of Kirkuk, the multiethnic city which comprises 15% of Iraqi oil and which Kurds seek to annex to their region, will determine the Sunni attitude towards the Kurdish region. Kirkuk is part of what are now called 'the disputed areas', which are mainly the areas where Kurdish communities meet or mix with Sunni and Turkmen communities. Some Sunni parties, mainly the Al-Nujaifi group in Mosul, built their political career on the strong rejection of Kurdish 'territorial ambitions'. It is still to be seen how the Kurds will react to this attitude in the future, while pressing to implement a constitutional article allowing a referendum to decide Kirkuk's status. It is also important to see how the Sunni pan-Arabists will accommodate their attitude with their ambitions to have more power in Baghdad, which might require siding with Kurds in order to diminish the Shi'at weight.

The Shi'ates, although they are harmonious in their public support for federalism, are increasingly divided into two camps. The first is led by the Iran-backed Supreme Islamic Council – SIC – which prefers, even though non-explicitly, an ethno-sectarian federal system where a Shi'ate region will be more autonomous and the centre will be less dominant. Such a view is strongly governed by the old fears of Sunni control over the centre and the consequent marginalization of Shi'ates. Accordingly, the best guarantee for the future of the Shi'ates is establishing an autonomous region for them. However, this attitude has been faced with suspicion among other Shi'ate groups, especially Muqtada Alsadr's movement which considered it an attempt by the SIC to dominate Shi'ate politics. Recently, with the decline of the SIC's influence after its weak performance in the provincial and parliamentary elections, this issue is no longer at the top of the Shi'ate political agenda. The current Prime Minister, Nuri Al-Maliki, successfully led a new coalition which supports a political system that gives more power to the central government in order to control resources and security. The positive results achieved by Al-Maliki in the provincial and parliamentary elections, which made his coalition the strongest Shi'ate group, promoted his attitude and put the other Shi'ate groups in a defensive position.

This was a non-favorable development for Kurds who are considered, understandably, the main supporters of federalism. Based on rooted memories of actual war with the central governments, they made it clear that their voluntarist Iraqiness is

conditional to the maintenance of a federal system. However, the model of federalism they have obliged to in the last years was one reason why federalism became less attractive to others. Many Iraqis argue that the state of Iraq has no control whatsoever over the Kurdish territory. The government of Kurdistan controls the security, resources, and even the foreign policy of its own region. It disputed with the central government the jurisdiction on natural resources and the issue of 'disputed areas'. While many think that challenging these gains in Kurdistan is unexpected in the foreseen future, the conflict regarding Kirkuk will be one of the main challenges in redefining the political system and, hence, the concept of nation in Iraq.

4. Re-constructing the National Narrative

Iraqi identity politics reflect a power conflict and represent the challenges of state rebuilding where the central identity is less prominent than that of the periphery. However, it is not only about creating a new narrative, but also about managing that power conflict. Failure to have a sufficient share of resources and power will lead the disadvantaged groups to adopt a kind of identification that is confrontational and, sometimes, violent. To some extent, this was the case with Shii'as and Kurds in pre-2003 Iraq, and Sunnis in post-2003 Iraq. However, this cannot be detached from self-created narratives about 'our' position within the whole. Using the logic of the ethnic security dilemma, Steven David argued that hostility is generated if in-group members fear the intentions of the out-group. The emotional fervor generated by in-group fears turns stereotypes into antipathies (Schuessler 2003). In a country that depends on oil revenue for its survival, the central government traditionally ended up strongly marginalizing the provinces and attacking their cultural characteristics. The central government controls apparatuses of 'legitimate' violence, as well as the institutions of socialization like public schools and the mass media. In other words, it can communicate a national narrative that reflects the interests of the governing elite. Therefore, federalism is not only about institutional arrangements and regional borders, but also about the ways in which resources are shared and distributed. On the other hand, as is the case with all oil- producing countries, it is difficult to ignore the tendency of the 'national government' to strengthen its grip and construct the 'national

identity'. The main challenge is to accommodate both inclinations: sharing and uniting. Therefore, it is important to find a middle ground on which a new definition of unity must be based. This unity must be inclusive, sensitive to diversity, and non hegemonic.

With the different perspectives about what Iraq is, the main challenge is to create a widely acceptable definition of 'nation'. Failure to do so will leave Iraq with two choices: the return to a dictatorship legitimized by an enforced and exclusive national narrative, or partition. Geo-political and geo-cultural factors may impede such a 'consensus' because of the influence exerted by external powers. However, these very effects may produce an opposite pressure if they conclude that the existence of Iraq itself is important to avoid a consuming and endless conflict. Iraq can be the buffer zone among competitors and its existence might be the only acceptable solution. Furthermore, the rising of ethno-sectarian identities does not abolish the fact that the majority of the people are tending to identify themselves as Iraqi citizens rather than prioritizing their ethno-sectarian identity. The Kurds might be the only exception because of the peculiarities of their 'issue' and history. However, this argument needs to be re-examined and elaborated.

Iraq's story since April 2003 is mainly about the deconstruction of the already shaky pillars of the 'nation'. Therefore the most important element of nation building is to revive or produce a national narrative which is stronger than ever, and which can be accepted by the nation's components. Nation building is a process of institutional, socio-political and ideological dimensions, and no viable state can be found without a credible, but also sociable and appealing, narrative. The questions are: how credible is it? And how effectively can it be communicated? Credibility here is less about the 'truthfulness' of this narrative and more about its reliability (*Smith 1999*). The reconstruction of national identity is the main challenge towards re-inventing a viable Iraqi nation. Many experiences of nation building have emanated from internal conflicts and the hegemony of one narrative. There were always some elements of compulsivity and manipulation in imposing or communicating the nation's narrative. This process will be influenced by the development of power conflict. While the process of nation building will be profoundly determined by the ability to strengthen the new institutions and promote the state's structures, the inclusiveness of the national narrative will strongly determine the future of Iraq. The last election was an important step, but not the last one, in demonstrating whether the 'new Iraq' will be any different from the old one.

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