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The Role of Non-State Actors in Post-Conflict State-Building: A Study of the Intra-Shia Power Struggle among the Popular Mobilization Units in Iraq

By

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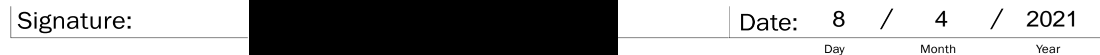

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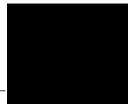
Signature: 

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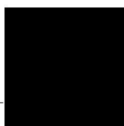
Signature: 

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The Role of Non-State Actors in Post-Conflict State-Building: A Study of the Intra-Shia Power Struggle among the Popular Mobilization Units in Iraq

Aya al Shabandar

ABSTRACT

Efforts to understand Middle Eastern conflict by many analysts have adopted a largely primordial approach, based on the notion that sectarian tensions are ancient and unchangeable. Through this lens, conflict in countries like Lebanon and Iraq are assessed by some as being further expressions of centuries-old religious tensions. Yet this theoretical framework fails to explain intra-sectarian conflicts. Nor can a strictly instrumentalist approach help explain the puzzle of conflict and competition among same-sect actors. Consequently, this thesis takes up this puzzle by examining ongoing intra-Shia conflict in Iraq among various factions of the Popular Mobilization Units (PMUs). In so doing, the thesis questions the value of adopting primordialism as the most adequate framework to explain conflict in the Middle East. Instead, the thesis explores alternative, non-essentialist questions: Does this competition have ideological, sectarian undertones, or is it motivated by local and regional political dynamics and struggles? In so doing, the thesis applies a Bourdieusian framework to explain the puzzle of conflict among Iraq's PMUs, situating this conflict within the competition over a nation's political field.

Keywords: PMUs, Iraq, Sectarianism, Political Field, Bourdieu.

Table of Contents

Introduction **1**
1.1 Introduction 1
1.2 Historical Background 1
1.3 The Intra-Shia Battle 4
1.4 Research Rationale And Objectives 5
1.5 Research Questions 7
1.6 Methodology 8
1.7 Map Of The Thesis 9

Sectarianism In The Middle East: Theoretical Frameworks **10**
2.1 Introduction 10
2.2 Primordialism 10
2.3 Instrumentalism 13
2.4 Bourdieu And Structural Constructivism 16
2.5 Conclusion 19

Profiling Iraq's Popular Mobilization Units (Pmus) **20**
3.1 Introduction 20
3.2 Profiling The Pmus 20
3.3 Diverging Loyalties And Competing Visions 27
3.4 Conclusion 38

Filling The Void: The Pmus' Struggle Over The Iraqi Political Field **39**
4.1 Introduction 39
4.2 Sectarianism In Iraq: A Historical Perspective 40
4.3 Struggle Over Iraq's Political Field 44
4.4 Conclusion 62
5.1 Summary Of Findings 63
5.2 Theoretical Implications 65
5.3 Recommendations For Future Research 66

References **67**

Chapter One

Introduction

1.1 Introduction

Boiling sectarian tensions in the Middle East are not a new phenomenon. In fact, populations in this region are known to be culturally and religiously diverse, and this diversity often stretches back centuries. For long, efforts to understand the intricacies of Middle Eastern conflict by scholars and analysts alike have adopted a largely primordial approach, based on the notion that sectarian identities are ancient and unchangeable. Through this lens, conflict in countries like Lebanon and Iraq are assessed by some as being further expressions of centuries-old religious conflict that could be traced back to the early days of Islam (Valbjorn, 2018). This thesis seeks to examine the ongoing intra-Shia conflict in Iraq by attempting to solve the puzzle of tensions that exist among various factions of the Popular Mobilization Units (PMUs), questioning the value of adopting primordialism as the most adequate framework to explain these tensions. Instead, the instrumentalization of sectarianism will be studied through the application of Bourdieuan theory of competition over a nation's political field.

1.2 Historical Background

The Middle East has for many decades been a turbulent region where complex geopolitics have consistently affected countries' propensity for stability, peace and prosperity. Much like other countries, such as Lebanon and Syria, Iraq hosts a

religiously diverse population, comprising, for the most part, Muslims (95%) who are divided into two main sects: Sunnis and Shia. Prior to the US invasion of Iraq in 2003, the power balance was tilted in favor of the Sunni minority, estimated to make up approximately 35% of the whole population ("Iraq Population 2020", 2020). In fact, in the era of former late Iraqi President Saddam Hussein, the ruler had even disseminated the false belief that Sunnis were the real majority, in part to justify the disproportionally significant shares of political power that Sunnis enjoyed at that time (Beauchamp, 2015).

1.2.1 War on Iraq

The war on Iraq was launched on March 19, 2003, instigated by a strike that targeted a location where the President and close affiliates were thought to be meeting. The main justification for this invasion was the allegation that Iraq was in defiance of 17 Security Council resolutions that required the country to declare and obliterate any weapons of mass destruction (WMD) in its possession. Delays in such interference, it was argued, would not only undermine U.S. credibility but would also be a threat to national security. While there was no shortage of skepticism about the WMD allegation, a military conflict nevertheless ensued, and Iraqi conventional forces were quickly subdued. By April 14 of the same year, all major Iraqi population centers had fallen under U.S. control (Copson, 2003).

On the surface, the intention was to overthrow a dictator and build a sustainable democracy in the heart of the Arab world. However, the consequences of the war raised the prospect of a fragmented country that would be difficult to rebuild: "The country has been ravaged by war, and transformed into an almost contiguous conflict zone from north to south, and east to west, as rival militant groups, foreign powers and political parties vie for power at the expense of the Iraqi people" (Abdul Razaq, 2018: para. 2).

1.2.2 The Rise of ISIS

Historically, Ba'athist Iraq regarded extremist group Al-Qaeda to be an existential threat, and thus hunted it down relentlessly, preventing radical Sunni groups from expanding their power in the region. However, following the invasion of Iraq, the power vacuum left by the overthrow of Saddam, as well as the mismanagement of the Coalition Provisional Authority, resulted in an internal conflict where sectarian sensitivities played a tremendous role in fueling the fight. At the same time, coalition forces were faced with a lengthy insurgency backed by both Iran and al-Qaeda in Iraq (Beauchamp. 2015). Exploiting the chaotic state of affairs, Al-Qaeda fueled its own growth by exploiting the Bush Administration's rhetoric, equating the "war on terror" with a form of crusade. This enabled it to successfully rally both existing and new supporters, taking advantage of the power vacuum created by the invasion; almost overnight, extremist Sunni figure Abu Musab al-Zarqawi became one of the most powerful warlords in the region (Abdul Razaq, 2018). Meanwhile, the power sharing arrangement that was created after the invasion ended up empowering the Shia majority at the expense of the Sunni minority (Beauchamp. 2015), thereby exacerbating Sunni-Shia tensions.

A few years later, the Syrian uprising further destabilized the region, pouring fuel on an already big fire. A proxy war ensued, where both regional and Western powers participated, thereby laying the ground for the rise of the "Islamic State," most popularly known as ISIS (Gardner, 2016). In the summer of 2014, ISIS dealt a big blow to Iraq, as they invaded the country and managed to take control of key cities like Mosul. The jihadists were so powerful at that point in time that they were able to force out the Iraqi military and declare themselves the champions of a new state, with all the prestige and ownership rights that came with this move (Malsin, 2015). Following the humiliating

defeat of the weak Iraqi army in 2014 at the hands of the increasingly powerful Islamic State, popular unrest in the country ensued. Amid the people's fear of uncertainty and violence, a religious call to arms was made by prominent Shia cleric Ayatollah Sayyid Ali Sistani, imploring the people to rise against the ISIS invasion and join the country's security services: "Thousands of people strode with the confidence of their Mesopotamian ancestors, reclaiming the liberty they so desperately longed for. The embracing of their freedom was loud, vivacious, and symbolic. The years of Saddam oppression were over – their eyes heavy with determination, mouths uttering words of might and resilience. This was the moment when the idea of *al-Hashed al-Shaabi*, the Shia dominated Popular Mobilization Units (PMU) was born" (Abbas, 2017, p. 1).

1.3 The Intra-Shia Battle

While made up predominantly of Shia members, the PMU is heterogeneous, in the sense that it comprises more than 40 different units, with some estimates going up as high as 72 militias. Moreover, despite the Iraqi government's commitment to enlist 30,000 Sunnis into the PMU, no such step materialized. In part, it was because the Iraqi government was hesitant to involve Sunnis in a fight against ISIS. Also, a conviction that the country would be more secure with Sunnis serving in the security service was absent (El-Dessouki, 2017). Evidently, the lack of Sunni representation in what is considered to be the most powerful paramilitary group in Iraq would have implications in the political and economic spheres. In fact, the growing influence of Shia-dominated PMU factions made them a *de facto* military force whose activities spilled not just into politics but also into various sectors of the economy: "On the street level, manifestations

include levying taxes at checkpoints, especially on roads to and from areas taken from ISIS. The revenue and damage are significant. In just one town… militias were generating an estimated $300,000 a day from illegal taxation" (AlNidawi, 2019, para. 5). Yet, despite the sectarian homogeneity that characterized the PMU, evidence mounted that different factions within the group were vying for more influence.

On one hand, the Iranian-backed militias were involved in a regional power play, orchestrated and sponsored by Iran, which resembles the movement led by Khomeini and his followers after the revolution of 1979, whereby they established the IRGC to position themselves in power and eliminate political foes (El-Dessouki, 2017). On the other hand, some Shia factions within and outside of the PMU are loyal to cleric and political kingmaker Muqtada al-Sadr, whose nationalist agenda is perceived to be at odds with Iran's otherwise unchallenged influence in Iraq. Signs of an internal political battle are thus apparent; nevertheless, some pundits argue that the balance is still tipped in favor of Iran. One observer notes that "Apart from the fact that he is not targeting Iran in particular, but has any type of external interference in Iraqi affairs in his sights, Sadr lacks the political strength, for now, to counter Iran's infiltration of Iraq's security institutions. Whatever governing coalition emerges following recent elections, and assuming Sadr's block will be a part of it, Sadr's power will be diluted by his governing partners" (Young, 2018: para. 8).

1.4 Research Rationale and Objectives

Primordial views on conflict in the Middle East have often been adopted to paint political tensions as being a perennial issue that is difficult to resolve owing to its deep-

seated roots in religious conflict that dates back many centuries. As such, it is presumed that without finding a solution to the inherent conflict born out of primordial identities, matters such as political reconciliation and state-building will consistently prove to be challenging. One of the most straight-forward examples outside the Iraqi context is the state of Lebanon. Comprising 18 sects, the nation has witnessed historical tensions along sectarian lines, even before the country earned its independence from the French in 1943.

Following a grueling 15-year civil war, warring factions negotiated an agreement that would end hostilities and adopt a consociational political system based on the notion that each sectarian group ought to be represented in politics to avoid marginalization, and by extension a revival of tensions. In a similar vein, and following the 2003 invasion of Iraq by the U.S., the country adopted a sectarian power-sharing system that aimed to set up political quotas for different sects, including Kurds, Sunnis and Shia; guarantees were also offered to other minorities (Cornish, 2019). In practice, however, these systems have yielded rampant corruption among the governing political elite and have not shown any substantial effectiveness in resolving political conflict among different factions, with Lebanon and Iraq both demonstrating the fragility of sectarian power-sharing and its vulnerability to exploitation for the personal interests of a select few (Dodge, 2020).

To study this dynamic, sectarianism is typically studied from the two diametrically opposed perspectives of primordialism and instrumentalism. The rigid framework that primordialists adopt, which assumes that certain ethnic or sectarian identities are unequivocal source of conflict, is often criticized by their instrumentalist counterparts as being too naïve and simplistic; however, pure instrumentalism has also

suffered its fair share of criticism, particularly its neglect of blind spots where sectarian identities are sometimes internalized and play an enabling or constraining role, depending on the overall circumstances (Valbjørn, 2018). Consequently, it is argued that the employment of sectarian identity as a unit of analysis has limited explanatory value, particularly in the context of conflicts pertaining to groups that belong to the same sect. Even when sectarian differences are weaponized for local or geopolitical reasons, the underlying social, economic and political factors merit the lion's share of analytical consideration.

Thus, the primary aim of this thesis is to use Pierre Bourdieu's structural constructivism (Bourdieu, 1991) as a means to dissect intra-Shia tensions in Iraq in such a way to solve this puzzle without committing to the pitfalls of primordialism and instrumentalism, but rather borrowing from each of these theoretical frameworks when most suitable to advance the research. In particular, this thesis aims to contribute to the literature by building upon the work of Toby Dodge on Iraq's political field, which itself dissects the conflict by viewing it through a Bourdieusian lens. Primary and secondary data sources are used to expand on Dodge's assessment, shedding further light on the ongoing intra-Shia struggle over the political field.

1.5 Research Questions

What explains the competition among the Shia PMUs in Iraq? Does this competition have ideological, sectarian undertones, or is it motivated by local and regional political dynamics? The importance of these questions lies in the implications that their answers have not just for state-building in Iraq, but also for the country's

relationship with the international community. Indeed, understanding the source of intra-Shia conflict would help in the resolution of this conflict through the adoption of more pertinent strategies that are context-sensitive.

1.6 Methodology

To solve the puzzle of intra-Shia struggle over power in Iraq, a qualitative research approach is adopted. In particular, a case study of the Iraqi PMUs is undertaken through the employment of qualitative content analysis (QCA). Various forms of recorded communication pertaining to the PMUs, including secondary observations and analyses of these factions' behavior, as well as primary sources such as interviews with PMU members and official statements made by them as well as Iraqi religious and political authorities, were examined. Moreover, Bourdieu's theory of domination and struggle over the political field is applied, thereby utilizing a structural constructivism as a conceptual tool in the analysis. Given the ongoing coronavirus pandemic, the researcher was unable to collect primary data on the ground by establishing physical contact with PMU members or representatives. Moreover, it was equally difficult, due to temporal and political constraints, to contact these figures through virtual means. Hence, the thesis relied more heavily on secondary sources. While this did not detract from the value of the research outcomes, it is nevertheless considered a noteworthy limitation that further research could tackle.

1.7 Map of the Thesis

The next chapter presents and discusses the two broad theoretical frameworks of primordialism and instrumentalism, followed by Bourdieu's theory on competition over the political field and its underlying structural constructivism framework. Key focuses of this chapter comprise Bourdieu's conceptualization of various types of capital that enable conflicting parties in a nation to compete over power, including symbolic, social, economic and coercive capital. In the third chapter, the case analysis of the PMUs is undertaken by profiling these units, starting with their initial formation. Then the brigades' convoluted power structures are assessed, stressing the path undertaken by these forces toward acquiring official legitimacy and their entry into politics.

Furthermore, the PMUs are dissected into two categories that allow for a more thorough understanding of the nature of their diverse allegiances and competing visions: Iran-affiliated PMUs on one hand, and PMUs loyal to Iraq on the other. The fourth chapter builds on the exhaustive information presented in the third chapter to solve the puzzle of intra-Shia conflict among the PMUs, employing Bourdieu's framework to evaluate how sectarianism was instrumentalized as a means of legitimizing and sustaining the system of *Muhasasa Ta'ifiya* while different factions simultaneously compete over their share of power in the political field. Both the systematic infiltration of Iran into this field, and attempts by Iraqi nationalists to cautiously push back against this influence are explored through the structural constructivism lens. Finally, the fifth chapter concludes the thesis by providing a summary of the findings, and discusses the research limitations and makes recommendations for future research endeavors.

Chapter Two

Sectarianism in the middle east: theoretical frameworks

2.1 Introduction

Much literature has covered sectarian conflict in the Middle East, utilizing an array of different theoretical frameworks as a means to explain what fuels this conflict, what its implications are, and how it may potentially be remedied. This chapter starts by reviewing scholarly work on two main relevant theories: Primordialism and instrumentalism. Subsequently, Bourdieu's structural constructivist perspective on sectarianism and politics is discussed, with an emphasis on competition over the political field, involving political, economic and social capital.

2.2 Primordialism

Among theoretical frameworks commonly used to explain conflict in the Middle East, primordialism is often used to frame such conflict as the outcome of "primordial" identities: in other words, the essential sectarian characteristics of individuals or groups that inherently contribute to a power struggle. The basis of primordial accounts is rooted in the supposition that generally, ethnicity, encompassing ethnic identity, solidarity and conflict are intrinsically entrenched in a group or population, and cannot be disconnected from human nature itself (Esman, 1994). Moreover, the primordialist school of thought implies that ethnicity may be used as a nationalistic tool to unite and/or direct

individuals based on shared identity, religion, sect, tradition, language and values that may constitute roadblocks in the face of a country's social transformation and evolution in the presence of ethnic minorities (Geertz, 1973). In fact, many Western politicians have expressed primordial rationales when attempting to understand conflict in the Middle East. For example, former British Foreign Office minister for Middle East Alistair Burt once expressed optimism about Libya precisely because it did not host a multitude of different ethnic identities that would otherwise be troublesome (Dalacoura, 2014).

Yet, the turmoil that ensued following the overthrow of Gaddafi did not validate Burt's rationale, which was based on the assumption that conflict in the Middle East is engendered by religious or sectarian heterogeneity, either between societies or within them (Dalacoura, 2014). However, in other cases, primordialism has seemingly provided a valid explanation as to why internal conflict endures, including the Lebanese case. In fact, it would appear that the ongoing tensions between rival sectarian parties during and after the country's infamous civil war are at least partially the result of primordial ties that cannot be easily broken. Geertz (1973) had also pointed out that one of the reasons why such ties were resilient was that groups often resorted to violence to maintain them. In the Lebanese case, this could correspond to adversarial sectarian affiliations, whereby each sectarian group has vied to protect itself, notably at the expense of building a strong nation-state.

That is not to say that the primordial school of thought is without its share of criticism. Discussing the Lebanese example, Petrikkos (2018) presents a historical account of the internal conflict that has ravaged the country, arguing that in many instances, sectarianism could not be perceived as simplistically encompassing

antagonistic religious characteristics that are rooted in the past and cannot be changed, but rather is fueled by identity politics. He suggests that primordial accounts fail to consider that a split in national identity could be at fault. Nevertheless, in the past decade, renewed turmoil in the Middle East has led to a resurgence of the primordialist perspective, particularly as Syria and Iraq have experienced massive destruction, Lebanon's instability has increased drastically, and violence in Libya continues to tear the country apart:

> Their [primordialists] line is that primordial loyalties were never overcome by modernization in the Middle East; and that they continue to undermine patriotic devotion to the nation-state and lead to violent conflict. Twenty or thirty years ago the primordial loyalties in question were deemed to be ethnic or tribal; nowadays, they are religious. The Sunni-Shia split is much in vogue. (Dalacoura, 2014: para. 4).

Yet, Dalacoura (2014) describes such analyses as being ahistorical: they assume simplistically that populations in the Middle East have remained unchanged across centuries of political history, trying but consistently failing to modernize. She argues instead that while religious/sectarian sensitivities have played a key role in the evolution of Middle Eastern societies and the conflicts that they have experienced, such conflicts cannot be attributed to heterogeneity alone: "Heterogeneity is not the reason why Lebanon has been wracked by civil war, for the same reasons that (ethnic) homogeneity has not prevented the failure of the Somali state over the past thirty years" (para. 8). A more nuanced account is provided by Makdissi (2000) who asserted that sectarianism is not a primordial characteristic but rather a process, one which politicians or sectarian entrepreneurs utilize to impose sectarian differences as indicators of modern political identity. Thus, Makdissi suggests that sectarianism is a political tool that is manipulated by opportunistic agents, as opposed to making populations and different groups within society inherently prone to conflict and divisions. In a similar vein, Hashemi (2019)

denounces American politicians, such as former President Obama, Senator Ted Cruz, and Senate Majority Leader Mitch McConnell, who claim that conflict in the Middle East is rooted in sectarian division that dates back millennia, as being the "height of hubris and ignorance".

2.3 Instrumentalism

Primordialism is typically diametrically opposed to the instrumentalist position, on which Dalacoura (2014) and Makdissi's (2000) aforementioned critique is based. Valbjørn (2018: 95) argues that instrumentalism is usually presented as adopting a top-down perspective. Communal identities are perceived as being flexible and fluid, often rendering them effective tools utilized by rational elite actors that compete for material interests, including political power and economic resources. Valbjørn contextualizes sectarian conflict within this theoretical framework, painting it as the product of political elites' struggle over control:

Instead of going back 1,400 years in history and focusing on religious issues, instrumentalists are presented as perceiving sectarianism as not only recent, modern and fluctuating but also being primarily about political contestation. It is an instrument for political elites using sectarian fear-mongering to garner vested patron client relationships, as a gateway to mass mobilization, to deflect popular attention to divide an opposition, or as powerful levers in regional rivalries (2018: 95).

Similarly, Hashemi and Postel's (2017) "sectarianisation thesis" falls in line with the instrumentalist school of thought; it suggests that, to counter the threat of declining legitimacy, ruling elites nurture sectarian animosity within society to maintain their control. Dodge (2018) suggests that this thesis is supported by empirical evidence, but that the argument that Middle Eastern ruling elites instrumentalize sectarianism to enhance their rule faces a few caveats. Firstly, it seemingly assumes that in the absence

of self-serving ruling elites, there would be no sectarian mobilization, and that differing religious/sectarian characteristics would not be politicized.

Yet, the thesis simultaneously presumes that the very reason that pushes elites to undertake this course of action is their declining legitimacy. Dodge thus points to a possible contradiction whereby ruling elites are given too much credit. Secondly, the thesis is reminiscent of reductive Marxist arguments pertaining to false consciousness, whereby it contrasts two groups of people like Marx contrasts the proletariat to the bourgeoisie: On one hand, there are the instrumental, rational, strategic and destructive elites in power; on the other, there is the gullible population that is oblivious to the fact that it is being manipulated. As such, individuals belonging to this population are assumed to be easily coaxed into engaging in life-threatening activity that serves the elites' interests at the expense of their own (Dodge, 2018). However, Stein (2011) suggests that instrumentalists do recognize the role that religion may play in violent conflict. They perceive this role to be the "opium of the warriors," in other words an instrument utilized by self-seeking elites to command support from the masses, particularly in the form of fighting.

To justify why elites would use religion during periods of conflict, instrumentalists draw on primordialist rationale. First, to organize and mobilize people to participate in conflict, it would be a lot more effective to do so through a unifying identity or mission, powerful enough to motivate the masses to partake in fighting and killing on a large scale (Stewart, 2009). Second, when elites frame conflicts as being related to religious values (as opposed to interests), they are likelier to persuade fighters of the moral justification for violence: "Religion may be used to dehumanize the enemy, exalt the virtues of martyrdom and self-sacrifice, and lead combatants to believe they are

fighting for a transcendental cause" (Stein, 2011: 23). Third, violent campaigns are likelier to succeed depending on the degree of support from broader segments of society, which in turn is contingent on the public justification employed for the use of violence. This is where religion as a tool also proves its utility. Fox (1999) purports that one of the main social functions of religion is its capacity to contribute to the legitimization of institutions and activities via its moral authority.

Hence, movements that appeal to religion are capable of aligning themselves with what is regarded as ethical in society, even when their objectives are unrelated to religion. Pape's (2003) treatise on the "art of martyrdom" illustrates this legitimizing role. The scholar suggests that while suicide terrorism usually solicits a negative reaction from host societies, organizations that utilize suicide bombings typically rationalize it by basing it on religious motivations that are in accordance with broader community's beliefs. This kind of framing also assists in acquiring valuable allies in the form of religious networks and institutions, both at the domestic and international levels.

Overall, while much literature points to instrumentalism as being less deterministic and simplistic than its primordialist counterpart, it nevertheless does have its own theoretical challenges. For one, it is tough to reconcile instrumentalism's emphasis on material factors with its acknowledgement of the role played by religious narratives that are often employed as a means for mass mobilization. Indeed, instrumentalists' rationale pertaining to the powerful function of religion is largely founded on primordialist accounts of the flammability of religious doctrine and identity. This suggests that instrumentalist arguments lack consistency. It could also be argued that the conceptualization of elites and their impetuses is too narrow in this exceedingly rationalist perspective.

2.4 Bourdieu and Structural Constructivism

While the primordial and instrumentalist perspectives may be perceived as diametrically opposed, it would be naïve to conduct an analysis of intra-Shia conflict in Iraq based on one of these theoretical frameworks, considering the level of complexity involved. Rather, both ideological and instrumental factors may be at play in the antagonistic dynamics that govern the struggle among different PMUs and their patrons. Here, Bourdieusian structural constructivist political theory may offer a more dynamic framework through which to assess intra-Shia conflict in the Iraqi case. Bourdieu draws primarily on the works of Max Weber and Karl Marx, but also Robert Michels and Emile Durkheim, to offer a rather disenchanted and arguably pessimistic perspective on the drivers behind political struggles. In essence, the author's theory builds on Marx's classist dimension to show that in any "political field" (which Bourdieu attempts to isolate from other fields), there are two classes: the dominant and the dominated. The following sections elucidate the notions of "domination" and "political field" in such a way as to provide a base for discussion in subsequent chapters.

2.4.1 Domination

Bourdieu (1984) suggests that one of the main tenets of any democratic regime is the right of citizens to formulate political opinions and express political judgments freely. Theoretically, all citizens ought to be equal in that regard, but the author posits that practically, the social ability of citizens to give political opinions and come up with political judgements faces the obstacle of unequal distribution. Bourdieu distinguishes among three modes of opinion generation. The first is founded on "class ethos", which allows individuals to produce opinions based on the logic and commonsense reasoning

process of everyday life. As for the second mode, it is based specifically on political principles, and thus inherently requires individuals to be knowledgeable politically. Finally, the third mode delegates the production of political opinions to an organization that provides a political line, like a political party or trade union. There are distinct nuances among all three modes of political opinion generation that are pertinent to the subsequent discussion of the power struggle in Iraq.

Critically, in the first mode of production, the relation between class and opinion is direct and unconscious, which Bourdieu finds to be troubling. After all, generating political opinions based on class consciousness alone is liable to bias via false recognitions. Conversely, in the second and third mode of political opinion production, the relation between social class and political opinion is mediated by reasoning that is motivated by either political consciousness or the delegation of power to an external party that is recognized as being politically conscious or savvy (Bourdieu, 1984). In essence, Bourdieu implies that the formulation of political opinions is a process that is heavily biased, whereby not all agents involved in political decision-making are capable of forming a critical and informed opinion. This makes politics inherently vulnerable to being a field where agents vie to dominate others by building a case for their legitimacy. However, for the dominator-dominated relationship to be viable, the dominated must play into it, willingly assuming a subordinate role. This is where Bourdieu's theory builds on the sociology of domination to assert that it is chiefly through symbolic violence that political actors strive to impose themselves as legitimate representatives: "Symbols make visible and make invisible. They reveal certain aspects of reality while hiding others… Symbolic violence is the basic mechanism by which domination is unconsciously reproduced by the dominated…. Reproduction of domination takes place

with the consent of those dominated" (Kauppi, 2015: 6). The process of domination occurs within what Bourdieu labels as the "political field".

2.4.2 The Political Field

Departing from Weber's work on social spheres, Bourdieu views the political field as being relational and structural. What this means is that the value of elements belonging to this field is determined by the nature of the relationship between these elements and others that operate within the same field. This is the basis on which Bourdieu develops his notion of domination. According to the author, fundamentally, agents acting within the political field strive to accumulate political capital, economic capital and social capital. Political capital is a type of symbolic capital according to which some agents succeed in persuading others of their credibility, cementing the belief and recognition that they would be good representatives and could be entrusted with having certain powers over other agents. In that regard, those who are capable of accumulating the highest amount of political capital will dominate, whereas those who accrue the least of this capital will be dominated (Kauppi, 2015). Moreover, economic capital comprises all kinds of material assets that may be directly and immediately converted into financial resources or institutionalized as property rights (Bourdieu, 1986).

As for social capital, Bourdieu conceptualizes as deriving from a person or institution's social position and status. It is accrued through obtaining actual or virtual resources through "more or less institutionalized relationships of mutual acquaintance and recognition" (Bourdieu & Wacquant, 1992: 119). Thus, in the political field, some agents compete with each other to accumulate these types of capital, vying to assume a position of domination vis-à-vis others. Framed as such, the intra-Shia struggle in Iraq

may be perceived to be a struggle among different PMUs over capital, regardless of sectarian ideology; however, as the accumulation and use of symbolic capital constitutes one of the primary means to achieve political and social status, the ideological dimension cannot be undermined. Chapter 4 will expand critically on this idea through a thorough analysis of the Iraqi political field and the role played by PMUs within this field.

2.5 Conclusion

In summary, a proper analysis of intra-Shia conflict in Iraq is premised on the selection of pertinent theoretical frameworks that help elucidate the motivations behind this struggle. The primordial and instrumentalist perspectives appear to be diametrically opposed, in so far as the former ascribes to sectarian conflict a primordial, ideological basis, whereas the latter frames it as being a tool used by the political elite to manipulate electoral constituents into keeping them in power. Each of these frameworks alone may be too simplistic to account for the complexity of intra Shia conflict in the Iraqi case, particularly when considering the relatively short history of sectarian politics in the country, as well as the influence of prominent Shia clerical figures on different groups of Iraqis. Consequently, this chapter reviewed a more targeted framework: Bourdieu's structural constructivist theory of politics. This framework conceives of the political field as being a space where agents compete over different kinds of capital, including political, economic and social capital, a process that ultimately engenders a relationship that binds the dominant and dominated.

Chapter Three

Profiling Iraq's popular mobilization units (PMUs)

3.1 Introduction

The Popular Mobilization Units (PMUs) in Iraq have garnered substantial attention in the last few years because of their influence over the Iraqi political field. While these forces were heavily involved in the fight against ISIS, they are nevertheless far from homogeneous when it comes to their political and ideological affiliations. This chapter first discusses how the PMUs were formed and legitimized in the eyes of the Iraqi state and its people. It then dissects the PMUs convoluted power structures. Subsequently, the diverging loyalties and competing visions of the PMUs are presented, with the two main categories being Iran-affiliated PMUs and PMUs loyal to Iraq.

3.2 Profiling the PMUs

3.2.1 Initial Formation and Legitimization

The formation and legitimization of the PMUs transpired gradually and continues to be mired in controversy. Whereas the 2005 Iraqi Constitution officially banned non-state militias, Shiite militias were systematically embraced by Iraqi governments. Prime Minister Nouri al-Maliki strived to legitimize these paramilitary groups; by his second term, he had already started offering support to seven PMU subgroups, enabling them to formally operate on Iraqi territory (Smith & Singer Emergy, 2019). Critically, the literature points to al-Maliki's noteworthy role in the promulgation of increasing sectarian governmental policies; one by-product of this tendency was the Prime

Minister's growing suspicion of the Iraqi Internal Security Forces (ISF). al-Maliki dealt with Shiite militias as a substitute to the country's official armed forces, thereby increasingly legitimizing the role that they played in Iraq and inviting the Iraqi population to accept them as an integral part of society. A catalyzing factor to this acceptance was the rise of ISIS, particularly as Mosul fell and the ISF became overwhelmed by the Islamic militants' aggressive campaigns.

Consequently, al-Maliki was quick to call upon non-state militias to come to the aid of the country in its fight against the terrorist organization. In June 2014, the Prime Minister made a televised address, where he indicated that he had formed a special crisis cell to oversee the volunteering mechanisms that would allow for citizens to receive arms, equipment and training to join fellow countrymen in their defense of the homeland ("Maliki Offers to Arm Citizens", 2014). In so doing, al-Maliki provided non-state militia with the ability to play a legitimate role under the umbrella of political and civic duty; such legitimization was then further compounded by religious calls to action, such as the fatwa launched by Grand Ayatollah Ali Al-Sistani on June 13, 2014, where he urged Iraqis to participate in the fight against ISIS; tens of thousands subsequently answered the call (Dziadosz and Salman, 2014). Following this development, al-Maliki officially formed the Hay 'at al-Hashed al-Shaabi, or Popular Mobilization Forces Committee (PMC) to unify and institutionalize non-state militias which he had already supported and relied on for years (Mansour, 2018). However, the Prime Minister established the PMUs without the approval of the Iraqi parliament, in clear violation of the 2005 Constitution, but specifically Article (9)(b).

3.2.2 Convoluted Power Structures

The PMUs are ideologically fragmented into three broad categories: Al-Hashed al-Wala'i, loyal to Ayatollah Ali Khamenei, Supreme Leader of Iran; Al-Hashed al-Raji'i, comprising brigades supportive of Shiite leader Grand Ayatollah Ali al-Sistani; and the units loyal to Muqtada al-Sadr, a popular Iraqi cleric. It must also be noted that certain units which represent the interests of minority groups, such as different sects, have also been integrated into the PMUs (Smith and Singer-Emergy, 2019); however, these groups are outside the scope of this thesis.

3.2.3 A Fragile Chain of Command

Formally, the PMUs' chain of command spans regular combatants and 'volunteers' and designated officers all the way up to the Chairman of the PMC, his two deputies and finally the Iraqi Prime Minister. However, this hierarchy often is not respected. In reality, Iraqi officials have many times voiced their worries that external influence over the paramilitary forces contributes to the disruption of the official chain of command (Hameed, 2016). In particular, an overwhelming consensus exists in the literature about the existence of potent Iranian influence over some PMUs. This influence is also apparently not limited in geographical scope, in the sense that PMUs backed by Iran do not necessarily have a function to act as proxies of the Iranian regime within Iraqi territory, but rather adopt a more transnational role that is linked to the "axis of resistance". As such, Iranian-backed brigades often disobey the commander in-chief's orders when spurred by Iranian authority. For example, these militias have many times refused to follow the orders of Prime Minister Haider al-Abadi (Malik, 2017). Evidently, this reluctance to follow orders except when in conformity with Tehran happens despite the brigades' members being Iraqi by nationality. Thus, much has been written about the

religious connection between these members and authorities in Iran to whom they have pledged allegiance: “Almost all Iranian-backed Iraqi militias openly admit that they follow the Iranian Supreme Leader and consider his religious instructions to have primacy over Iraqi state law” (Smith and Singer-Emergy, 2019: 180). However, some Iran-affiliated brigade leaders have adopted a different tune to justify their insubordination; in fact, for some commanders, it is more a subject of pride. One such leader described the PMUs as being a force that is “parallel to the Army,” as opposed to being an official part of it, adding that the paramilitary brigades are more powerful and thus will not submit to anyone (Majidyar, 2017).

In the summer of 2019, Prime Minister Abdul-Mahdi issued the Diwani Order which specified that all PMU members are required to serve under the command of the Iraqi Armed Forces, or else be disbanded. Nevertheless, this order has for the most part not been respected nor implemented; most of the command structures that were established in the period following ISIS' insurrection are still resilient (Szuba, 2019), with much of the literature (Smith & Singer-Emergy, 2019; Spyer, 2019) suggesting that Iran-affiliated brigades will likely not comply, moving forward.

3.2.4 Hybrid Sources of Support

The source of support is another important dimension to consider when attempting to profile the PMUs in Iraq. Tracking the sources of funding, equipment and training would help better understand the modus operandi of these forces. According to a report by Amnesty International on the matter, PMUs receive a wide range of ammunition and arms produced in over 16 countries, among which the United States and

Iran (“Iraq: Turning a Blind Eye”, 2017). Whereas the latter is concerned with supplying the core ISF units primarily, the latter offers substantial amounts of weapons and logistical assistance to its affiliated brigades via the IRGC (Gordon & Schmitt, 2014). Importantly, the literature suggests that some PMUs notoriously linked to Iran have also, in the past, acquired Western-manufactured arms. In fact, there exists photographic evidence that portrays some of these militias, like Kataib Hezbollah and Asaib Ahl al-Haq, utilizing US-made armored fighting vehicles alongside members of the ISF, including US High Mobility Multipurpose Wheeled Vehicle (Humvee) and US M113 armored personnel carriers ((“Iraq: Turning a Blind Eye”, 2017). However, U.S. Department of Defense (DOD) reports indicate that some American equipment intended for use by the Iraqi Army but somehow ended up in the hands of the PMUs, thereby denying any direct transfer of weaponry. In addition, recent evidence suggests a growing awareness of this phenomenon by private American arms companies. For instance, in 2018, military equipment manufacturer General Dynamics announced its withdrawal from Iraq after claiming that the Iraqi government violated a contract which specified that the equipment ought to be used exclusively by the Iraqi security forces (McDonald, 2018).

3.2.5 Legalization and Entry into Politics

In the first few years following their inception, the PMUs existed and operated in a legal grey area. Technically, these forces were illegal under the Constitution of Iraq but were nevertheless legitimized by virtue of political and religious support: The first came from the office of the Prime Minister, while the second was founded on the promulgations of the Shiite clerical establishment. However, in 2016 the PMUs moved from being unofficially legitimized to being legalized by the Iraqi parliament, an action

that received vehement support from the Shiite community. In effect, the passed law required the full integration of the PMUs into the Iraqi ISF (Smith and Singer-Emergy, 2019). In conjunction with the two orders issued by the Prime Minister, as well as Article 9 of the Iraqi Constitution, the legalization law seemingly yielded the desired results: By 2018, many of the PMUs were theoretically incorporated into the Iraqi security forces. This implied that members of the militias would be disallowed from engaging in politics. However, in practice, the legalization law's manifestations ran counter to its requirements.

In fact, in 2018, senior members of the PMUs ran for public office, receiving full support from their brigades (Ezzeddine et al., 2018). This led to a sweeping political win by two PMU-based coalitions, thereby effectively ushering the previously paramilitary forces into the political arena. After the polls closed, the two largest political coalitions – Saariun, led by Moqtada al-Sadr, and Fatah, led by Hadi al-Ameri – had come from Hashed al-Shaabi units. The Hashed al-Shaabi would go on to use this political power to protect their autonomy, and the new Prime Minister, Adil Abdul Mahdi, was chosen as a consensus candidate to appease the new PMU backed parliamentary coalitions. While these coalitions are rivals, they have recently agreed to work together on a parliamentary resolution demanding that the United States withdraw from Iraq (Smith & Singer-Emergy, 2019: 185).

Implicit in the legalization of the PMUs are important political and legal implications pertaining to the nature of these forces in relation to the Iraqi state. In theory, the legalization of the PMUs was meant to cement the Iraqi state's control over them, such that any foreign influences would be mitigated. However, this endeavor was largely unsuccessful. In late 2014, as ex-Prime Minister Nouri al-Maliki ceded his

position to elected Haider Abadi, a legal framework was devised by the Iraqi government in which the new Prime Minister would have complete authority over the PMUs (Sowell, 2015); however, under Abadi's Executive order 91, the PMUs were still inherently given autonomy by virtue of declaring them an "independent military body," despite being a part of the internal security forces and having to answer to the Prime Minister (Gulmohamad, 2020).

Three years later, Abadi would also issue a Diwani order meant to diminish the power of prominent Iran-affiliated militia leaders and officials through the appointment of a second deputy to the PMU commission chairman. Not only did his order fulfill the objective of weakening Iranian influence at the top levels of PMU authority, but it also codified the PMUs' rank structure and consolidated its status as being subordinate to Iraqi law that governs security forces (Noori, 2018). However, in practice, the legal incorporation efforts did not do much to radically alter the status quo. Rather, Iran-affiliated officials sustained their positions in the PMUs' chain of command.

Following the 2018 elections, an open rift appeared between the PMC leaders on one hand and Abadi on the other. A power struggle ensued, with no clear winner: While Abadi attempted to remove PMC Chairman Falih al-Fayyad from his role, it did not take long for the prominent PMU figure to cement his political career. In fact, Al-Fayyad was reinstated as chairman of the PMUs, as well as national security adviser to Prime Minister Adel Abdul-Mahdi. These developments occurred in spite of critical voices that called for the diminishment of external influence over Iraq, including that of Iran ("Iraqi Militiaman", 2018).

3.3 Diverging Loyalties and Competing Visions

Before studying the PMUs' relationship with the Iraqi state and other countries in depth, a general profile of these groups is warranted, particularly to situate each unit within corresponding local and geopolitical contexts. Reports published in 2016 indicate that there are approximately 140,000 men serving under the PMU leadership. Officially, the Iraqi government has recognized 110,000, for budgetary requirements (Hendawi, 2016). Each unit varies in size, ranging from a few hundred to tens of thousands of fighters each. Mansour and Jabar (2017) classify these groups on the basis of ideological foundations, including variables such as the validity of intervening in Syria, cooperating with the Iraqi government, integrating into the state apparatus and being in favor of Iranian influence in Iraq. In addition, the classification undertaken by the scholars considers whether the units express a motive to participate in the political process, as opposed to sustaining a paramilitary purpose/function. As such, three primary classificatory categories are proposed in this study: Pro-Sistani, pro-Sadr and pro-Khamenei.

3.3.1 Iran-affiliated PMUs

Iran's influence over Iraq grew substantially in the years following the US invasion of Iraq. This largely transpired through the aid and mentorship it had provided what would later emerge as the leadership of Shiite militias. In fact, many politicians and militia leaders were exiled for years in Tehran throughout the 1980s and 1990s. Much literature focuses on the emergence and strengthening of the PMUs following the rise of the Islamic State, and the role that Iranian support played in this development (O'Connor, 2015; Frantzmann, 2020). However, alliances between Shia factions in Iraq

and Iran predate the 2003 US military invasion. The Islamic revolution of 1979 brought to power a Shia government in Iran which proclaimed that one of its main foreign policy goals was to export its revolutionary model to other countries in the region (Felter and Fishman, 2008). In neighboring Iraq, this event unnerved Sunni ruler Saddam Hussein, who expressed concerns that the Iraqi Shia community would similarly rebel, rising up against the Baathist regime in Baghdad. Thus, tensions were heightened between the two countries, particularly after the Iraqi regime assassinated the highest Iraqi Shia cleric in September 1980, Ayatollah Baqir al-Sadr. The purpose was to diminish the chances of a Shia uprising that would uproot the Baathist political order established since 1968. As a result, Shia religious figures began to seek refuge in Iran, fearing that they would too be targeted by Saddam, most notably Ayatollah Muhammad Baqir el-Hakim (Felter and Fishman, 2008). It would not be long before the Iran-Iraq war erupted.

Looking for a reason to invade Iran, in the summer of 1980, Saddam renounced the 1975 Algiers Accords, which had specified a roadmap for the organization of the Shatt al-Arab waterway. The Iraqi ruler's justification was that Iran had violated the agreement since the time of the Shah (Takeyh, 2008). On September 7 of that year, the Iraqi regime accused Tehran of shelling Iraqi border towns that had been designated in the Algiers agreement as Iraqi. Consequently, Saddam decided to invade Iran, his intention being to insulate Iraq from the reverberations of the Iranian revolution by eradicating the nascent Shia government there before it becomes powerful enough to influence local Shia factions (Takeyh, 2008). What ensued was a long and calamitous war between the two countries that lasted 8 years, yielding hundreds of thousands of casualties on both sides in the process. This historical context is imperative to the understanding of Iran's relationship with Iraqi Shia factions, particularly when

considering Saddam’s hostility to the Shia community and consequently how this community was consistently marginalized during his rule.

After the Iranian revolution, the Islamic government in Iran was quick to exploit the discriminatory status quo. Both during and in the aftermath of the war with Iraq, it became a safe haven for the majority of Shia opposition figures and parties from Iraq. In particular, Tehran closely collaborated with multiple Shia groups and parties, most notably the Supreme Council for Islamic Revolution in Iraq (SCIRI). Not only did the Iranian regime assist this group with its organization and finances, but it also offered to help its military wing, the Badr Corps Militia. It also provided support to the Islamic Dawah Party, including the training of its military wing (Arif, 2019). Evidently, such foreign support for local Shia factions sustained elevated levels of tension between Iran and Iraq, particularly as these factions acted against the interests of Saddam. For one, the Badr Brigade not only joined the Iranian army and played an active part in the eight-year-long hostilities, it also conducted more targeted operations inside Iraq, such as attacks against Iraqi officials, particularly in the south of the country. Moreover, after the 1991 Gulf War, the SCIRI attempted a powerful uprising against the Iraqi regime, temporarily occupying the Iraqi port of Basra. In response, Saddam’s forces injured and killed thousands of Iraqis, going to the extent of firing indiscriminately into residential areas. Ultimately, the uprising ended in failure. SCIRI and its military wing withdrew to Iran, but still impressed the status of most powerful Shia opposition group to the Baathist regime (Kemp, 2005).

Following these developments, Iran sustained its influence over Iraqi opposition groups. In the toppling of Saddam in 2003 after the US invasion, the Iranian regime saw an opportunity to exploit this influence in politics, encouraging its allies to participate in

elections by forming a single list of candidates, thereby advising them not to split the Shia vote among different competing parties. In due course, Iran helped pro-Tehran Shia leaders in Iraq secure most parliamentary seats, in the process marginalizing the roles of other sectarian groups such as the Kurds and the Sunnis (Arif, 2019), plus those Shia actors opposed to Tehran heavy-handed approach in Iraq.

Iran already had one foot in Iraq after the 2003 invasion, particularly as the weight of governance tilted in favor of the Shia politicians, thereby creating a sectarian bond between the two countries. This allowed Iran to grow its influence further in the following years, increasingly filling a gap left behind by the Americans. Meanwhile, the Syrian uprising in 2011 quickly led to the militarization of the conflict, engendering the rise of ISIS. The borderless organization grew rapidly, spreading to Iraq, to such an extent that in 2014 it had already controlled one-third of Iraqi territory. As a result, Iraq's official armed forces collapsed, leading to cascading events that would further enhance Iran's influence in the fragile Iraqi state: "The weak performance of the Iraqi forces against ISIS led to many volunteer fighters joining paramilitary groups rather than the shattered military forces. These militia forces gathered under an umbrella organization called the Popular Mobilization Unis (PMU) after a fatwa, calling for people to fight ISIS, was declared by the Grand Ayatollah Ali Al-Sistani" (Arif, 2019: 347). Thus, the PMUs were developed under the overarching guidance and support of the Iranian regime, with the strongest influence coming from the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC), the paramilitary organization that was established during the Islamic Revolution of 1979. This influence was so powerful that some media outlets published reports claiming that out of 66 armed factions that make up the PMUs, 44 take

direct orders from Iran (Peterson, 2017). The following sections offer a synthesis of literature on the most prominent pro-Iranian PMUs.

3.3.1.1 Badr Organization

The Badr Organization of Reconstruction and Development, otherwise known as the Badr Brigade, is the Iranian regime's oldest proxy in Iraq. Established by Hadi al-Amiri in 1983, between 1983 and 2003 the organization's operations were conducted from its exile in Iran, targeting Saddam's rule. During this period, the Badr Organization obtained direct support from its Iranian patron in the form not just of funding but also training and advisory from the Iranian Revolutionary Guard Corps. During the hostilities between Iraq and Iran which lasted from 1980 until 1988, this organization chiefly comprised former Shia Iraqi soldiers and defectors from the Iraqi army. While Badr Brigade fighters were heavily defeated by the Iraqi army during their attempted uprising in 1991, they nevertheless regrouped and returned to Iraq following Saddam's fall in 2003 (Arif, 2019).

Despite this move to Iraqi soil, the group's ties to Iran did not suffer; rather, they were consolidated. Although the organization pledged to phase out its militancy and disarm, it nevertheless participated in armed battles against British coalition troops in southern Iraq. In 2007, the organization's founding entity, the SCIRI, renamed itself as the Islamic Supreme Council of Iraq (ISCI), attempting to distance itself from Iran. As a result, in 2012, the Badr Brigade opted to split from the ISCI to establish an independent military and political group. Thus, al-Amiri became the organization's leader. Prior to this separation, the Badr Organization adhered to an Islamist, Shia ideology, with one of its values/goals being to import the Iranian brand of Islamism into Iraq.

After the split, it strived for more substantial political influence, focused on expanding Shia power in Iraq and establishing an independent Shia province in the south of the country (Arif, 2019). While it attempted to paint itself as an Iraqi force, nevertheless its connection to Iran did not wane. For one, al-Amiri himself described the supreme leader of Iran Khamenei as being not only the leader of Iranians, but rather of the whole Islamic nation. Moreover, many of the organization's key constituents, particularly at the leadership level, maintained expansive ties with Tehran. For one, Abu Mustapha al Sheibani was determined by Iraqi intelligence in 2005 to be actively engaged in one of the most critical Improvised Explosive Device (IED) smuggling networks in Iraq from Iran (Birch, 2018). Furthermore, it was reported that in 2015, al-Amiri cooperated with the – late – head of the Iranian Revolutionary Guards Quds Force Soleimani to lead Iraqi troop offensives (Birch, 2018).

3.3.1.2 Kataib Hezbollah

Kataib Hezbollah (KH), otherwise known as the Hezbollah Brigades, was established by Abu Mahdi al-Muhandis, or Jamal Ja'far Muhammad Ali Al Ibrahim, in 2007. It joined together five different militant groups that were affiliated with Iran. Not to be confused with Hezbollah, the organization active politically and militarily in Lebanon, KH did nevertheless receive training and support from its Lebanese counterpart; not to mention reports of the IRGC being directly involved in its establishment. Under Muhandis, who was later assassinated by US forces alongside Iranian Quds Force commander General Qassim Soleimani on 3 January 2020, the group smuggled equipment and arms from Iran, and was designated as a terrorist organization by the U.S. in 2009 (Levitt and Smyth, 2015). When the PMUs were formed in 2014, KH played one of the most active roles in this state-sponsored umbrella group. In

addition to being the group's leader, Muhandis also had a dominant role in the organization of the PMUs, taking advantage of this status to expand the scope of PMU factions loyal to Iran by recruiting more fighters, and by extension turning the PMUs into a greater political force that has a substantial influence over the country's governance (Al-Nidawi, 2020).

Moreover, the link between KH and Iran is evidenced not just by the group's pledge of loyalty to Khamenei but also by its chain of command that answers directly to the IRGC; through KH, the IRGC has a strong say in the decisions taken by the Shura Council, the PMUs' unofficial decision-making body (Rose, Kassim and Martin, 2020). In addition, KH's military activity in Iraq points to a relationship of enmity with the U.S., Iran's rival in the region. Between 2007 and 2011, the organization dedicated most of its resources to lethally attacking U.S. coalition forces, using improvised rocket-assisted mortars and roadside bombs. Even after the withdrawal of U.S. troops in 2011, KH rejected calls to lay down its arms, citing the country's ongoing instability as a primary part of its rationale (AlNidawi, 2020). What is more, years after its battles with ISIS, KH doubled down on its targeting of U.S. forces, engaging in more serious and frequent attacks on key American assets such as the U.S. embassy in Baghdad. Between 2018 and 2020, reports suggested that Iran was smuggling short-range ballistic missiles to KH controlled areas in Iraq, raising tensions between Iran, the U.S. and Israel (Irish & Ahmed, 2020).

3.3.1.3 Asaib Ahl el-Haq

Another Iranian-funded Shia militant organization in Iraq is Asaib Ahl el-Haq (AAH), otherwise known as the Khazali Network. It was established in early 2006 by its leader Qais al-Khazali, former commander under Muqtada al-Sadr's Mahdi Army. Al-

Khazali decided to split from al-Sadr upon his recruitment by the Iranian Revolutionary Guard Corps. Since its creation, the AAH has depended substantially on financial resources, training and logistical support from Iran. In exchange, it has acted as the Iranian regime's proxy in Iraq, fulfilling its agenda and furthering its interests ("Mapping Militant Organizations", 2018). From 2006 to 2011, the organization asserted its involvement in more than 6,000 attacks on U.S troops, making it one of the most violent Iranian proxies. As a result, American forces endeavored to capture Khazali and other AAH militants in 2007, forcing a leadership reshuffle that al-Sadr tried to exploit to reconcile the group with the Mahdi Army. However, Khazaali's replacement Akram al-Kabi declined this request, and after Basra was seized by the Iraqi army in 2008, numerous AAH leaders and members fled to Iran. In exile, they continued to receive logistical support and training by the IRGC. Much like its Iranian-backed counterparts, the AAH adopted a new strategy following the receding role played by the US in 2011: "AAH reoriented itself towards politics, rebranding itself from anti-Western Islamist militia to an Iraqi nationalist political party. It shifted its goals from attacking U.S. troop installations to maintaining a Shiite-controlled Iraqi state, expanding Iranian influence in Iraq, eclipsing the Sadrists as the most influential Shiite group in Iraq, and providing social services to Iraq's Shiite population" (Mapping Militant Organizations", 2018). However, in a similar vein to other groups, the AAH refused to demilitarize, rejecting the Iraqi's government's request for them to surrender their weapons (Sam, 2015).

Moreover, while posing as a nationalist Iraqi group, the organization attempted persistently to raise support for its pro-Iran political agenda through campaigning. For instance, in 2012, its members aggressively distributed tens of thousands of posters of Khamenei nationwide, and were involved in the assassinations of Sadrist leaders, with

the aim of weakening al-Sadr and his movement (Heras, 2014). Despite this activity, the AAH still played an integral part in Iraqi politics. In May 2017, the Iraqi electoral commission gave its approval to the organization's newly established party, which replaced its predecessor, al-Sadiqoon (Majidyar, 2018). In early 2018, the party became part of a coalition called Fatah el Mubin, chiefly comprising PMU factions that had received Iran's backing. One of the coalition's goals was to expand Iranian influence in Iraq by pressuring US forces to withdraw from the country (Majidyar, 2018).

3.3.2 Iraqi-based PMUs

Since the PMUs' establishment was primarily contingent on the fight against ISIS, naturally Iraqi citizens of different sects joined in the fight, including many who were apolitical and who did not have any ties with Iran. Among Shia Iraqis, some groups remained loyal to local leaders like Grand Ayatollah Ali Al-Sistani and prominent cleric Muqtada al-Sadr.

3.3.2.1. Pro-Sistani PMUs

The single-most foundational moment leading up to the emergence of the PMUs was Sistani's fatwa to defend Shia holy Iraqi sites following the threat by ISIS, after the terrorist organization had managed to expand its conquests both in Syria and Iraq. Answering Sistani's calls, many Shia Iraqis organized into distinct groups that were each assigned a specific holy site. Their names corresponded to the names of these sites: Saraya al-Ataba al-Abbasiya, Saraya al-Ataba al-Alawiya, Saraya al-Ataba al-Hussainiya, and Liwa Ali al-Akbar. Unlike their Iranian-backed counterparts, pro Sistani PMUs were generally apolitical paramilitary groups that swore allegiance to Sistani, a local revered cleric. Since their inception, these groups not only pledged to obey Sistani and to protect Shia areas from harm, but they also expressed an unconditional

willingness to eventually lay down their arms or become integrated into the Iraqi army (Mansour and Jabar, 2017). In addition, the ISCI had also sword allegiance to Sistani in 2007, in an attempt to grow its popular support among Shia Iraqis loyal to their homeland above all. Consequently, ISCI leader Ammar al-Hakim established new PMUs, including Saraya Ashura, Saraya al-Aqida and Saraya al-Jihad (Mansour & Jabar, 2017). Moreover, the schism between Sistani-led PMUs on one hand, and Iranian-backed PMUs on the other, was exacerbated in 2020 after the former opted to withdraw from the PMUs altogether; a joint statement to that effect was issued on April 23 (Malik, 2020).

3.3.2.2 Pro-Sadr PMUs

Pro-Sadr PMU factions have also shown to be at odds with their Iranian-backed counterparts, particularly with regard to the relationship that they have developed with the Iraqi people. However, the differences between these PMUs and their Sistani-led counterparts are also pertinent to the discussion of intra-Shia rivalry. Much like Sistani, al-Sadr has also garnered tremendous respect among a wide range of especially marginalized Shia in Iraq. In fact, the two prominent figures managed to carve out a leadership and visionary position in Iraqi society by setting themselves apart from other politicians, warlords, tribal leaders, and opportunists who endeavored to exploit the situation for their own personal and financial gain. For one, Grand Ayatollah Ali Sistani constitutes the single-most authoritative leader in Iraq. Considered to be a very knowledgeable religious scholar and adhering to conservative (as opposed to radical) perspectives, Sistani is perceived to be a moderate figure who contributed to the mitigation of sectarian conflict and threats of civil war. As for the more junior al-Sadr, he rose to prominence in the aftermath of the American invasion, gaining popularity

through a more ambitious rhetoric and style of leadership: “Sadr lacks the educational pedigree of the ayatollahs who are considered ‘marjaiya’, or sources of emulation, and whose teachings are followed by millions worldwide. Still, Sadr inherited the millions of passionate followers of his father and uncle, both revered ayatollahs; and he also continued the family feud against Sistani, whom the Sadrs regarded as too timid” (Cambanis, 2018, para. 10). Indeed, unlike other military wings and political parties that arrived in Iraq in the aftermath of the U.S.-led invasion in 2003, Sadrists had already gained much legitimacy on the ground, remaining close to ordinary Iraqi citizens instead of catering to the elites in society.

Critically, al-Sadr’s relationship with Iran is more contentious than that of Sistani. In response to the U.S. invasion in 2003, al-Sadr established the Mahdi Army or Jayesh el Mahdi (JAM) to resist foreign aggressors. Naturally, this played into the interests of the regime in Tehran, which then invested in JAM heavily until 2010. Gradually, however, Sadrists distanced themselves from Iran, adopting a more independent stance; they claimed to be against all foreign influence in the country, both American and Iranian. In the summer of 2014, al-Sadr established the Peace Regiments (Saraya al-Salam). In essence, the organization constituted a rebranding of the JAM, keeping its predecessors’ social networks, expertise and many of its cadres semi-intact (Mansour and Jabar, 2017). According to leading Sadrists, the expansive potential of Saraya al-Salam, which they argue could reach more than 100,000 militants, is limited not by the number of Iraqi volunteers, but rather by a dearth in military and financial resources. They argue that unlike other factions, these limits are partially the result of being cut off from Iranian funding (Mansour and Jabar, 2017).

3.4 Conclusion

The PMUs in Iraq were formed and legitimized as being part of a crucial fighting force against ISIS militants. However, while different factions were mobilized seemingly for a shared goal in 2014, nevertheless their convoluted power structures reveal that they are at odds with one another over political affairs. In particular, PMUs' chain of command is not strictly Iraqi, but rather for many it connects back to Iranian political and military figures. In addition, the support that PMUs receive, be it financial, logistical or military, is diverse, including of American and Iranian origins. Two broad categories exist according to which PMUs may be classified. On one hand, the Iran-affiliated PMUs comprise primarily groups operating under the Badr Organization, Kataib Hezbollah and Asaib Ahl el Haq. As for PMUs loyal to Iraq, they include those which have pledged loyalty to revered Grand Ayatollah Ali Sistani, and those who follow the charismatic and more ambitious Muqtada al-Sadr. The next chapter explores the PMUs' struggle over Iraq's political field after 2003.

Chapter Four

Filling the void: the PMUs' struggle over the Iraqi political field

4.1 Introduction

A political void was left in the country after Saddam's defeat in the wake of the 2003 US invasion of Iraq. Theoretically, the end of the dictator's rule was going to be followed by the beginning of a democratic era in Iraqi politics. However, the decision to ban the long-ruling Baath Party, as well as to disband the military, left both a political and security vacuum. Thus, what followed was a series of unfortunate events, including civil war, sectarian conflict and a terrorist insurgency that gripped more than a third of the country. While some may claim direct correlations between sectarian flare-ups and the ongoing struggle among PMUs, the reality is far more complex. Not only is serious intra-Shia conflict that spills onto politics rare, but sectarian tensions in the Middle East have typically been heterogeneous in nature, involving two distinct sects: Rather than Sunnis and Shia experiencing inter-sect conflict, rather there have typically emerged some sensitives that pit the two sects against each other. To examine the intra-Shia struggle, this chapter begins with a historical overview of sectarianism in Iraq to determine the degree to which politics and sectarianism intertwine in the country. Subsequently, the Bourdieusian lens is employed to assess how different PMUs engaged in fierce competition over Iraq's political field, attempting to accrue economic, social and symbolic capital to support their political legitimacy.

4.2 Sectarianism in Iraq: A Historical Perspective

Some historical context is important to the understanding of the present sectarian system that governs Iraqi politics, particularly in the run-up to regime change post-2003. Visser (2008) describes the idea of the "soft partition" of Iraq along ethno-sectarian lines, most popular in US circles, as having a fundamental historical problem. In particular, the conception of the Iraqi state as being best split into three provinces (Sunni, Shiite, and Kurdish) is, according to Visser, inaccurate, given the dearth in historical sectarian patterns. For one, in the decades leading up to 1884, Iraq had adopted various administrative systems. At times, there was some fragmentation, at most involving four to five entities; however, other times the territorial unity was more akin to modern-day Iraq. Moreover, even in Ottoman times, administrative subunits were consistently non-ethnic and non-sectarian in character:

> Medieval Iraq and al-Jazira were mixed provinces – Shi'ite and Sunni, Jewish and Christian, Arab, Kurd and Turkmen. The same can be said of the entities created during Ottoman times. The holy cities of the Shi'ites were always in Baghdad's jurisdiction and had no administrative connection with Basra, whereas in the north, both Mosul and Shahrizor remained ethnically complex (Visser, 2008: 100).

Throughout the Islamic rule extending 1,300 years, at no point were there exclusively Sunni or Shia administrative entities (Visser, 2008). Evidently, some sectarian feuds did occur throughout Iraq history, involving mainly Sunnis and Shia, but these were limited in scope and did not translate into any intent or plan to partition the country on a sectarian basis. For instance, the Mazyadid emirate is considered to be the closest examples to a Shia state south of Baghdad. Yet, there were few instances of sectarian clashes between this emirate and other parts of Iraq. One such incident was the Basasiri revolt that was likely an attempt at expanding the power of the Cairo based Shia

Fatimid dynasty into Iraq. However, even in the presence of expansionist ambitions, an underlying Shia political ideology that advanced the notion of a separate Shia state was absent. In fact, there is evidence to suggest that the Mazyadids remained loyal to the government in Baghdad, and even in times of revolt they never suggested the idea of or strived for a breakaway state. Generally, conflict involving Iraqi territory has almost always been characterized as non-sectarian. Except for Kurdistan, which established a nationalist movement in the 20th century, there is no historical precedent for other imagined sectarian entities, including Sunnistan and Shiistan, which renders partition proposals and sectarian-based political solutions not merely sociologically and politically illiterate (Dodge, 2007), but also historically illiterate (Visser, 2008).

As for Iraq's recent history, it also shows few signs of the country being prone to the kind of tensions that justify a sectarian-based political solution. Prior to the US invasion of Iraq, the Baathist regime had attempted to dominate Iraq's political field, employing symbolic violence and coercive capital as tools to accomplish its goals. In particular, the regime recognized and tried to pool Iraq's linguistic, ethnic and religious diversity under the umbrella of Arab nationalism, focusing on "Mesopotamianism", which denotes the identification of nationhood on a geographical basis, involving territory that spans the Euphrates and Tigris. The underlying rationale and hope were to establish an ideational space where the Sunni and Shia Arabs, as well as the Kurdish population, would be persuaded to bond with the Baathist's conception of the nation (Baram, 1991). However, such attempts were weakened by various factors. First, Shia ulama (religious scholars) and political activists had traditionally employed different types of cultural, social and symbolic capital as part of their mobilization around principles of vision rooted mainly in Iraqi nationalism but also Arab nationalism, with

both the Baath Party and the Communist Party comprising a majority of Shia members (Dodge 2018). Thus, as early as the days of the British mandate, Shia religious figures were already politically active; however, the symbolic and cultural capital that they employed was centered on dislodging the British; it was not particularly concerned with carving out political gains for the Shia sect specifically. In reaction, the British repressed the nationalist groups, excluding many senior Shia ulama from the country. These developments foreshadowed the rise of Shia political Islam, an early manifestation of which was the formation of the Dawa Party.

In essence, the Dawa Party was concerned with the increasing power of the Iraqi Communist Party. It took it upon itself to openly criticize the growing influence of communism, which it perceived to be a threat to the Shia establishment's very survival. Importantly, Dodge (2018) argues that this reaction did not constitute an assertion of a specifically Shia identity contrasted with the identities of other sectarian communities. Rather, the target was clearly communism, particularly its atheist undertones. Critically, it was the Baathist endeavors to dominate the Iraqi political field that had a heavy impact on Shia political identity: by deploying symbolic violence and coercive capital, Saddam's regime pushed activists toward a conception of the political field that prioritized an exclusionary Shia identity. Meanwhile, another regional event further contributed to the schism between the Baathist regime and the Shia population: The Iranian revolution of 1979. As Dodge has suggested: "If the events of 1979-80 marked a major breach in relations between the Baathist state and the Shia population, the aftermath of Iraq's invasion of Kuwait made that breach public." An uprising later erupted in the south of the country on the morrow of the US led liberation of Kuwait from Iraqi occupation. "The fact that the regime lost temporary control of Shia majority

areas, the level of coercion and destruction deployed to regain control, the mobilization of an opposition force against the regime, and finally the involvement of the previously 'quietist' Grand Ayatollah al-Khoei, all combined to transform the political discourse used by those groups seeking to mobilize the opinion of Shia Iraqis" (Dodge, 2018, p. 34).

There can thus be little doubt that Shia mobilization peaked in the aftermath of ISIS' brutal invasion of Iraq. Drawing on Social Movement Theory (SMT), Isakhan (2020) assesses how key Shia figures and groups reacted to the violence inflicted by ISIS on Shia shrines and mosques. He argues that Shia authorities, mainly populist preachers, religious clergymen and militia leaders employed the ISIS threat to holy sites as a mobilization frame that relies on a "shrine protection narrative". This sectarian-based narrative enabled the recruitment of tens of thousands of Shia fighters, while imbuing the interventions in both Iraq and Syria with the required legitimacy in the eyes of the public. Isakhan also finds that the narrative provided justification for the establishment even of new militias who considered it within their mandate to protect Shia shrines. This, however, does not explain the intra-Shia conflict that ensued. In fact, it makes little sense for Shia groups to find themselves at odds with each other's interests based on sectarian differences; if anything, the joint calls to fight a common enemy based on the "shrine protection narrative" harnessed an atmosphere of sectarian synergy and cooperation. In fact, this cooperation was crucial in making the militias' campaign against ISIS militants successful.

4.3 Struggle over Iraq's Political Field

Dodge and Mansour (2020) argue that the ethno-religious consociational Iraqi system that was adopted in the wake of regime change in 2003 is inherently flawed, whereby it was based on the erroneous assumption that the country's political struggle is contingent on a harmonious balance of power among different ethnic and sectarian groups. They claim that a deeper understanding of Iraq's political scene uncovers a far more intricate dynamic. Framed in Bourdieu's (1991) conception of the state as a series of disaggregated fields where political agents compete over a population's subjugation and domination, the Iraqi political field is thus influenced heavily by politicians, religious figures, militia leaders and journalists. These agents compete not merely over who gets what share of power, but rather who enforces particular categories of practice, guiding society as to which identities are permitted and how it ought to be structured: "The players in the political field compete over different forms of capital whose possession delivers the ability to dominate. These include money and financial resources … the control and deployment of violence, coercive capital, but also social capital, the ability to organize and mobilize groups and symbolic capital" (Dodge & Mansour, 2020: 60).

4.3.1 Economic Capital

Based on Bourdieu's framework, Dodge (2019a) explores how the different forms of capital apply to the Iraqi case. The appropriation of economic capital, for one, is one of the most straight-forward to assess. After establishing the Iraq Governing Council and forming national unity governments in subsequent elections, seven dominant Iraqi political parties were endowed with complete dominance over state

institutions, thereby awarding them a plethora of financial resources. To exploit this kind of capital, they rapidly expanded the public sector payroll:

> Under the terms of the *Muhasasa Ta'ifiya*…party functionaries directly controlled the resources of their ministries for the duration of each government... The parties would issue a *Tazkiyya* or letter of recommendation to their followers. This would allow them to get jobs in the ministries they controlled. As a result, access to government employment… is only guaranteed by pledging allegiance to one of the political parties controlling the ministries and promoting *Muhasasa Ta'ifiya.* (Dodge, 2019a, p. 40).

Already, the centralization of control over the financial resources of government institutions in the hands of a few political leaders indicates that what Dodge refers to as the *Muhasasa Ta'ifiya* has less to do with the sharing of resources among different sectarian communities and more to do with sustaining a political order that serves a minority of corrupt political elite at the top of government. In fact, the sheer scale of the public payroll expansion constitutes a red flag, raising questions about the rationale behind it, particularly as the number of public sector employees increased to 7-9 million in 2016, up from around 850,000 in 2004 (Al-Mawlawi, 2018). Aside from the number of those employed being inflated compared to the posts needed to be filled in the public sector, there were also many documented scandals pertaining to lacking qualification on the part of employees. One such scandal involved the hiring of 9,000 candidates in governmental institutions who had fake college degrees, including at the Prime Minister's office (Bertelsmann Foundation, 2012). Dodge (2019a) also specifies another manifestation of economic capital exploitation, which is the siphoning of public funds. He cites research on financial corruption that estimates the associated losses to represent 25% of public funds, with much of the scholarly work on the subject pointing to motivations of personal enrichment by political elite from various sectarian backgrounds. Moreover, Dodge asserts that the more important dimension of this

corruption is tied to the perpetuation of the system: By controlling economic capital, the elite can finance their own budgets and spend resources where they feel would best serve their preservation. In particular, party bosses in Iraq, through the *Wikala* system, are endowed with the privilege of appointing individuals to top civil service positions; among other corruption avenues, this allows them to drain financial resources obtained from public sector contracts into the coffers of parties that make up the ruling elite.

The vast majority of the literature corroborates Dodge's findings, with evidence clearly pointing to corruption at levels unprecedented in the country's history, and comparatively higher than other countries. One report published by Transparency International pinpointed the different forms of corruption and their prevalence in Iraq. For one, bureaucratic corruption was determined to be widespread, with bribery at the forefront of fraudulent practices; in that respect, the three institutions most involved were found to be Customs, the Police and the Judiciary (Transparency International, 2011). Moreover, a survey conducted by the World Bank found that approximately two-thirds of medium-sized organizations alleged that they were expected to offer officials a "gift" in return for being awarded a governmental contract, with the bribery rate reaching colossal levels such as 100% in some provinces like Basra (World Bank, 2011). Evidently, this self-perpetuating system also has an international dimension. In fact, the corrupt elite have not merely tapped into public funds that are generated locally through taxation schemes, but have also exploited international donations and assistances, depriving their intended recipients from resources that would have otherwise helped the average Iraqi individual/family (Whyte, 2012). When seen through the lens of the competitive struggle over various forms of capital that allow for the domination of the Iraqi political field, the effects of such economic corruption take on broader meanings:

In effect, this kind of corruption not only lines the pockets of the elite, providing them with financial leverage that spills onto their capacity to increase their social capital, but also places obstacles in the way of reconstruction and state-building efforts following years of violence and devastation. As such, it weakens the average Iraqi individual by depriving him/her of the prosperity associated with potentially bountiful oil revenues, as well as other stabilizing elements such as food security and national sovereignty (Sawaan, 2012).

Such understanding of the power of economic capital allows for a better reading of the intra-Shia struggle in Iraq, particularly in the context of the PMUs' growing influence over Iraqi politics. Rather than being motivated by ideological divergences, PMUs loyal to Iraqi clerics and those affiliated with Iran compete with each other on the basis of economic motivation, itself directly correlated with political influence. For one, the paramilitary nature of these groups is conducive to their desire to seize more political power as a means to the end of financial gain. In fact, Iraq is no stranger to the tradition of political stakeholders having had, at any given time, ties to loyalist militias. Indeed, there are precedents to the PMU phenomenon in Iraq today. On various occasions, the Iraqi state elected to delegate authority to auxiliary Para institutional forces war (Al-Nidawi and Knights, 2018). During Saddam's rule, Kurdish and Arab paramilitary groups were delegated the task to fight both local political adversaries and foreign threats to the regime. For example, the civilian defense corps Jayesh Al-Quds (Jerusalem Army) received governmental support during the Gulf War and 2003 to fight against the American invasion of Iraq; in addition, the Jayesh al-Shaabi (People's Army) organization played a crucial part in the Iraq-Iran war (Al-Nidawi, Knights and Nance, 2014). Even ex-Prime Minister of Iraq Adil Abdul Mahdi made statements regarding the

similarities between the PMUs on one hand, and other politically-active paramilitary forces like the Kurdish Peshmerga on the other. In 2019, he stated:

> The Peshmerga came to existence in order to resist the oppression by the former regime. They were defending their territories not because the Iraqi state had called upon them to do so. It resembled more a sort of Fatwa from the people of Kurdistan… Peshmerga now constitutes an integral part of the Iraqi security institutions. In that sense, we can think of the Hashed in the context of the Peshmerga experience, demonstrating that under the control and banner of the state, one can still accommodate a certain degree of flexibility ("Reviving UN Mediation", 2018).

Yet, if these similarities indicate anything, it is that the PMUs' internal feuding is driven less by ideological differences and more by the corrupting side-effects of armed politics and the need to capture state resources. Much like the PMU leadership's claim of a moral high ground associated with their fight against ISIS, the Kurdistan Regional Government (KRG), one of the Peshmerga's patrons, had also maintained a high sense of revere for what were deemed heroic military initiatives that served to protect their region. However, despite the ethnic and cultural homogeneity of the group, its behavior over the years reveals patterns of division and lack of discipline, resembling a dysfunctional conglomerate of power-hungry elites. In fact, the organization has been involved in various illicit activity including coercion, extortion and racketeering (Staniland, 2017).

Similarly, profit-seeking behavior by the PMUs abounds, both officially and unofficially, taking advantage of a fragmented political scene where they are awarded enough flexibility to fulfill personal interests, based not on sectarian or ideological convictions, but rather their own personal gain and that of their respective patrons. For instance, in 2019, the PMUs obtained over $2 billion from the defense budget, despite remaining independent from any oversight or control by the Iraqi Defense Ministry. Constitutionally, these units are supposed to report to the office of the Prime Minister

directly. However, in practice, many PMUs receive orders from specific political parties and competing government officials (Atallah, 2019). Critically, the literature reveals that among all PMUs, with time, those affiliated or backed by Iran have garnered the most influence at the political and economic levels. For one, the Badr Organization's leader Hadi al-Amiri was assigned to head the Ministry of Transportation, leaving the ministry vulnerable to the group's whims, and by extension to the external influence of Iran (Atallah, 2019). More broadly, the Badr Organization, AAH, and KH PMUs managed to secure national prominence by initially relying significantly on economic capital provided by Iran (Dodge, 2020). However, throughout the years, they have also attempted to become more self-sustainable. One way of doing so has been to draw in more economic capital through the use of coercive capital, as discussed in the next section.

4.3.2 Coercive Capital

The second type of capital that Dodge (2019a) applies to the Iraqi case is coercive capital, denoting the violent resources needed and employed to enforce order within the political field. With the collapse of the Ba'athist regime following the US invasion in 2003, the Iraqi army was also disbanded. This entailed a gap in coercive capital that was exploited by various players in the struggle for domination. What ensued was an amalgam of different manifestations of this capital, including terrorist attacks, a mass campaign of terror targeted at Sunnis in particular, and other means of sectarian violence perpetrated both by state institutions and non-state militias. Ultimately, the *Muhasasa Ta'ifiya* was enforced by coercive capital, with one of the intended byproducts being the creation of docile sectarian subjects. Between 2004 and 2012, the US found the recentralization of coercive capital in the hands of their Iraqi

allies to be challenging; despite helping to build up a force of 940,000 security forces, a substantial proportion of these forces were vanquished by ISIS fighters in 2011-2014. This resulted in the further decentralization of coercive capital, particularly after the rapid formation of the Popular Mobilization Unites (PMUs). Shia men volunteered in droves to defend Baghdad in response to Sistani's call. "It was the coercive champions of the *Muhasasa Ta'ifiya's* principle vision, groups like *Asaib Ahl al Haq, Kataib Hezbollah,* and the Badr Organization, who now came to dominate the political field, arming and deploying these new recruits, and in the process, rapidly expanding their own coercive, social and symbolic capital." Consequently, as Dodge concludes, "coercive capital in Iraq's political field is held by both centralized state forces and decentralized militias, both using it as a means to defend and expand the *Muhasasa Ta'ifiya*'s principle vision" (Dodge, 2019: 41-42). The use of coercive capital by the decentralized PMUs manifested itself in many forms. One pertinent incident showcases not only Iranian-backed PMUs' flagrant use of coercive force to spread control over entire regions, but also indicates the absence of sectarian undertones with regard to their activities, thereby detracting from arguments made on primordial grounds. Indeed, the case of Jalawla, a town west of the Khanqah district, offers ample insight into the growing influence of PMUs affiliated with Iran.

In the post-2003 era, following the targeting of Turkmen and Kurdish ethnicity in Jalawla by ISIS terrorists, many fled the town to safety. After it was reclaimed in late 2014 via a collaboration between Badr Organization and Peshmerga militants, a deal was made between the two parties which stipulated that Kurdish forces would retain control over Jalawla. However, the PMUs would end up taking advantage of an emerging schism between a group of Arab Sunnis and the Kurdish population.

Incorporating Sunni Arabs into its ranks, the AAH effectively took control of the area, with primary accounts of public officials confirming the takeover: One government official stated that the AAH partnership with Sunni Arabs led to the endangerment and marginalization of the Kurdish population, claiming that the Federal army and police had little say in the matter. Gradually, the region would cede power to the Iranian PMUs: "On the administrative side, neither the governor of Diyala, nor the officials in Baghdad, have challenged the emerging power players in Jalawla. Some local administrative officials claim that this is because the governor and some on the provincial council are beholden to Iranian interests in the province. They simply cannot challenge the presence of groups like AAH" (Saleem et al., 2018, para. 18). Consequently, these PMUs were given free reign over the town, providing them with bountiful strategic resources. For example, the AAH collects money via the illegal taxation of trucks passing from the Kurdistan Region of Iraq (KRI) to the rest of the country, making more than $300,000 throughout checkpoints in Jalawla, as per the testimony of a local government figure. The funds would then be employed not only to further the economic capital of the PMUs to serve their quest for domination over the Iraqi political field, but also to expand their patronage networks (Saleem et al., 2018), thereby adding to their political capital. Henceforth, the role of the PMUs drastically evolved, in such a way that they adopted a multidimensional role in so far as competition in the Iraqi political field is concerned. Rather than being simplistically characterized as coercive forces per se, they also became enshrined as a sociopolitical force, and by association developed the means to accrue both social and economic capital, in the process carving out for themselves a potent legitimacy within the Iraqi society.

4.3.3 Symbolic and Social Capital

Among all forms of capital that are competed over by political agents as part of their thirst for domination of the political field, Bourdieu (1991) argues that symbolic capital, in particular, is the most potent resource that political agents compete for within a nation, as it helps to define and shape the norms and conventions according to which society is structured; in practice, control over symbolic capital implies control over a population's perceptions of how to view and interact with the world.

Dodge and Mansour (2020) apply this perspective to the case of Iraq, relating that the sectarian system imposed in the aftermath of the 2003 US invasion was, in fact, ideationally rooted in the conceptions of exiled opposition groups in the 1990s, as part of their efforts to prepare for regime change. These groups opted to augment their international legitimacy and to increase their social capital by uniting under the umbrella of one body, the Iraqi National Congress (INC). To do so, they conducted a "virtual census" according to which they awarded positions on the INC's committees and leadership council based on ethno-sectarian identities: At the time, it was observed that more than half of Iraq's population belonged to the Shia sect (55%), whereas Sunnis made up 22% and Kurds 19% (Nawar, 2003). As such, the exiled groups enforced a symbolic classification on the Iraqi society and political scene, laying the groundwork for the sectarianization of Iraqi politics in the post-Saddam era.

From ideation to practice, sectarianization proved to be successful in the first post-war elections; political coalitions organized along sectarian lines, with the United Iraqi Alliance (UIA) rallying Shia as the dominant political force. The results of the first elections in January 2005 showed that the symbolic capital of sectarianism had worked, as Shia and Sunnis were pit against each other, with much of the latter choosing to

boycott the elections altogether in protest. By the end of that year, sectarian divisions had become even more entrenched, as Sunnis *de facto* mobilized when they realized that not doing so according to sectarian affiliation would risk them becoming excluded from the political system, and by extension losing access to the associated capitals (Dodge and Mansour, 2020).

Dodge and Mansour's critical chronological analysis of the electoral developments in Iraqi post-2003 makes a solid case that rather than being a defining characteristic that accurately reflects the population's political representation and ambitions, sectarianism acted more as a tool that was employed by the ruling elite to carve out their political gains and maintain them. This is evident in the competitive dynamics of rival political entities during subsequent elections: In 2010, the symbolic capital of sectarianization witnessed began to erode, as Shia and Sunni-dominated coalitions were fractured and split into sub-coalitions. This provided the leader of the Iraqi National List (*Iraqiya)*, Iyad Allawi, with the opportunity to campaign on the basis of a critique of sectarianism. By joining politicians who hold a national profile and others with coherent regional organizations, in effect Allawi attempted to build and push forward opposing symbolic capital with secular and nationalistic undertones (Kenner, 2010). Dodge's adoption of Bourdieu's relational view regarding the political field of power is well-suited to the Iraqi case, seeing as it is highly complex and involves the enmeshment of individuals and the groups to which they belong within broad networks that mold their actions and their political consciousness. This is particularly important when considering the more simplistic frameworks that rely on a primordial viewpoint:

"Understanding the struggle over Iraq's political field as relational allows analysis to move away from modernist teleology but also a focus on primordial trans-historical continuities; each principle of vision, struggling to impose symbolic violence on the

field, is locked in an interactive and hence transformative struggle with its competitors" (Dodge, 2018, p. 29).

Furthermore, what makes Bourdieu's framework and Dodge's critical application of this framework in the Iraqi context all the more astute is the relatively nascent nature of the current Iraqi political system. In fact, at the time of writing, it has only been almost 18 years since the inception of the sectarian system in the country, making the deconstruction of its tenets more revealing with regard to the governing power dynamics and what influences them. In particular, Dodge (2019a) makes an excellent point pertaining to the malleable nature of Iraq's young political system relative to others such as its Lebanese counterpart, arguing that Iraq still has ways to go when it comes to political agents' subjugation of the population. Pertinently referring to Salloukh's (2019) work on state-building in the context of post-popular uprisings in the Arab world, Dodge remarks that multiple events that have occurred in Iraq in the past decade provide ample evidence that, unlike the Lebanese, the Iraqi population has not yet yielded to the disciplinary power of the political elite; it is a system in flux.

While the Lebanese and Iraqi political systems are fundamentally different, the comparison sheds a persuasive light on how sectarianism plays an auxiliary, or rather functional role – not a foundational one – in the evolution and entrenchment of political regimes. Whereas in Lebanon, sectarianism contributed to the institutionalization of political divisions as well as material domination and social reproduction (Salloukh et al., 2015), thus far in Iraq similar dynamics have not played out. This is not to say that they ever will, especially considering the unique history, sociodemographic and culture differences that characterize each country. Indeed, the fracturing of sectarianism in the Iraqi electoral scene could be perceived, from that angle, as a sign of faltering symbolic

violence due to its immaturity in the Iraqi context. However, regardless of its eventual success, endeavors to accrue symbolic and social capital, particularly by Iranian-affiliated PMUs, are notable. Prior to the enlistment of thousands of Shia fighters in the war against ISIS, some Shia militias had already developed into influential sociopolitical groups, owing to their roots in the religious and political activism of their overarching movements. Some historical context here would help to understand the extent of social capital that Iraqi militias enjoy today, in addition to their paramilitary might which is well-recognized both locally and internationally.

Thurber (2014) discusses the cases of two Iraqi militias: The Sadrists and the SCIRI. In 1957, the Dawa (*Hizb al-Da'wa al-Islamiyya)* party was founded by Shia religious leadership, with the objective of sponsoring a renewal of Shia religious practice as well as the enactment of Shia Islamic law. Sayyed Mumammed Baqir Al-Sadr, a prominent religious scholar and member of Dawa, assumed a leadership role based on social activism. He paid close attention to underprivileged Shia classes, recruiting religious scholars and instructors into poor neighborhoods and integrating lower-class young individuals into theological institutions. In doing so, he ensured them a similar socioeconomic status that they may have acquired if they had been awarded jobs in the public sector. However, Al-Sadr's efforts led to tensions between the Sadr and Hakim families, particularly as the clerical elite began to perceive him as a dangerous radical. This resulted in successful pressure by then-leading Shia cleric in Iraq, Muhsin al-Hakim, to push for al-Sadr's resignation from Dawa. Tensions between the two families would persist for decades, thereby shaping the contemporary adversity between the Sadrists and SCIRI movements.

When the Baathist regime cracked-down on Dawa started out of fear that a Shia revolution was impending, al-Sadr was executed for refusing to reconcile with the Iraqi government. Nevertheless, he had established the basis of a sociopolitical movement that his relatives would later revitalize. Meanwhile, other Iraqi Shia activists persecuted by Saddam's regime fled to neighboring Iran where Baqir al-Hakim (son of Muhsin al-Hakim) was aided in forming a new political movement, known at the Supreme Council for the Islamic Revolution in Iran (SCIRI) (Cole, 2003). The name was self-explanatory with regard to the movement's intentions, whereby its motive was to ignite another Islamic revolution mimicking the successful revolution in Iran. While it was an Iraqi movement on the surface, SCIRI was nevertheless heavily influenced and guided by the Iranian regime at various levels of its operations and organization, encompassing the Badr Brigade, its military wing. An alternative Shia movement, building on the work of Baqir al-Sadr, emerged following bouts of disenchantment with SCIRI after clashes with Saddam's forces. Its leader, a young cousin of Baqir by the name of Sadiq al-Sadr, managed to cultivate a strong support base among the underprivileged Shia classes, particularly among tribal migrants looking for work in Baghdad. He took it upon himself to expand the social services that his cousin had begun in the 1970s, establishing religious courts, food delivery to those in need, and medical services. Al-Sadr also delivering social messages through by using Friday prayers as a means of communication. However, despite the SCIRI's perceived shortcomings relating particularly in the 1991 intifada, both this movement and its al-Sadr counterpart gained significant legitimacy within the Iraqi society, based both on the religious stature of their leading families and their sociopolitical activities. Yet, they had different points of strengths: While the Sadrist movement was more popular with the Iraqi Shia population

thanks to the social services provided by both Baqir and Sadiq, SCIRI enjoyed a more intricate relationship with Iran as well as the clerical elites in Najaf.

This historical context proves extremely pertinent to the study of the struggle over symbolic capital in the Iraqi context, seeing as this kind of capital is essential to the legitimization of competing agents within the political field. In fact, the large-scale anti-government protests that erupted in 2019 in Iraq were driven largely by anti-Iran sentiments, within an overarching rejection of foreign influence as a whole, including American influence. On various occasions, protesters emphasized their denunciation of pro-Iran Shia parties, raising slogans in Arabic and Persian that expressed refusal of subordination to Iran (al-Hamid, 2019). The anger was striking on many levels. First, it came from predominantly Shia protesters; second, it materialized in outbreaks of violence targeted at Iranian symbols and institutions. In fact, common acts included burning posters of the late Qassim Soleimani and burning down Iranian consulates such as those in Basra and Najaf (al-Hamid, 2019). The reason why this sentiment is so meaningful is because it proves how symbolic capital can make or break the ambitions of political agents, especially when these agents are backed by foreign actors.

While anti-Iran sentiments were prevalent in the Lebanese mass protests of 2019, it was not as pronounced as that which materialized in Iraq, especially not within large sections of the Lebanese Shia community (Aarabi, 2019). Arguably, as an Iranian proxy, for decades Hezbollah spread its influence in the country, accruing symbolic and social capital through its dissemination of Iranian ideology and the provision of social services to its community members. Conversely, Iranian PMU proxies in Iraq did not have enough time to do the same. That is not to say, however, that they are not trying. In fact, through its affiliated PMUs, Iran has engaged in various soft power tactics that fit

Bourdieu's conception of the competition over symbolic and social capital. For one, the Iranian regime has invested in the establishment of educational organizations in Iraq and other Middle Eastern countries, such as the Islamic Azad University; it uses this platform to export its culture and philosophy throughout its regional sphere of influence.

In 2017, top foreign policy advisor to Supreme Leader Ali Khamenei, Ali Akbar Velayati, pushed forward plans to open new branches of the Azad University in Iraq and Lebanon, highlighting the virtue of pursuing higher education there as part of the "next generation of resistance" (Majidyar, 2018). Tehran has also utilized other methods of soft power to increase its symbolic capital in Iraq, including through the establishment of charitable and grassroots religious organization that combine together in a way to create patronage networks and encourage identity politics (Watkins, 2020).

More importantly, data collected by independent Iraqi polling company Al Mustakella for Research, spanning 2005 through 2019, revealed a crucial method employed by Iranian PMU proxies to accrue potent symbolic capital: Among the Shia community in Iraq, approval rating pertaining to Iran oscillated heavily depending on the population's perception of the threat of ISIS. In particular, when the threat was high, the approval rating mirrored it. In 2014-2015, Iran's approval reached 86%, but when the Islamic militants were defeated, it declined to 49% in early 2019 (Dagher, 2020). Watkins (2020) argues that Iran is cognizant of this dynamic, as evidenced by the continuous efforts of its media outlets to justify the intervention of Iranian-backed forces under the pretext of fighting off the Sunni militant extremists, as well as "Zionist-Crusader" American forces painted as unlawful invaders of Iraq.

4.3.4 Political Capital: Connecting the Dots of Iran's Prevailing Strategy in Iraq

A close scrutiny of Iran's influence in Iraq and its effect on the Iraqi political scene gives credence to Bourdieu's theory pertaining to the struggle over the political field. Intuitively, it would make sense that the PMUs comprising Shia militants would work together to rebuild the Iraqi state on common grounds and thrive toward a more prosperous country. However, after the dust settled from the fight against ISIS, the Iraqi political field became a fighting arena pitting local Shia factions loyal to their country on one hand against Iranian-backed factions loyal to Iran. Rather than consisting of a primordial struggle between two groups who believe in distinct religious interpretations or are adamant on diverging clerical loyalties, the conflict involves a far more competitive dimension over political capital. Each of the struggling groups aims to gain enough legitimacy to cement itself as worthy of governing a resource-rich nation, such that it can acquire both national and international leverage to accomplish its agenda. Thus far, it appears not just from the secondary literature, but also recent primary accounts, that Iran is not just more invested in this competition over Iraq's political field, but also far more successful than its rivals in achieving its aims.

In 2019, leaked intelligence reports, dubbed the "Iran Cables," revealed to what extent Iranian intelligence agencies had infiltrated the Iraqi political scene, in an attempt by the Iranian regime to grasp as much political capital, bypassing the Iraqi people altogether (Gross, 2020). In fact, the cables provided ample evidence of Iranian intervention in Iraq's politics, showing that Iran had effectively co-opted Iraqi leadership and bought off Iraqi agents who had previously worked for the U.S. Approximately 700 pages of intelligence reports, mostly cables between Iranian intelligence officers in the period spanning 2013-2015, made clear the degree to which the Iraqi political apparatus

was drenched in Iranian influence. The names of top Iraqi officials featured in the cables, where it was revealed that they met with Iranian intelligence officers to coordinate on political affairs (Gross, 2020). This enabled many of the leaders of the Iranian-backed PMUs to gain high political appointments, thereby providing Iran with unprecedented political leverage over the Iraqi state. The cables also shed light on Qassim Soleimani's role not just as a military commander but also as an agent of political propaganda. According to some of the intelligence officers' communications, Soleimani was not as prized a leader as was believed to be. Rather, he is painted as being a political opportunist, chasing opportunities to pose for photographs in different battle arenas against ISIS. This kind of behavior exemplifies how Iran sought to infiltrate the Iraqi political consciousness not merely by having its agents coerce or tempt top Iraqi officials into subjugation, but also by marketing itself as a savior: Its affiliated PMUs were hailed as heroes without whom Iraq would have been devastated. It all links back to the main objective of accruing various types of capital discussed by Bourdieu. On one hand, Iranian PMUs gained substantial political capital by being employed as pawns to infiltrate Iraqi political leadership at the highest echelons with the help of deeply-entrenched intelligence officers working in the background. On the other hand, the political legitimacy of these PMUs was augmented by the synergy created among all other types of capital, including the accumulation of symbolic capital as early as the days of the fight against ISIS. The message was clear: Iran defended Iraq. In exchange, the legitimacy brought to its PMUs would act as the primary asset in its successful takeover of a broken Iraq, dominating the narrative of its rival Sadrist PMUs.

In conjunction with the accumulation of social and symbolic capital, economic and coercive capital was utilized in synergistic fashion to build political capital more

effectively. They may sound evident, on the basis that economics and politics usually go hand-in-hand. However, in the case of Iranian influence in Iraq, Tehran's maneuvering in relation to its PMU affiliates is remarkable. For one, Iran injected the Iraqi economy with funds in the form of loans dedicated to the construction of vital projects. More importantly, it did so in industries that would simultaneously endow it with a chance to raise its symbolic capital. For example, it invested substantially in the holy cities of Karbala and Najaf, where traditional Shia shrines are visited by hundreds of thousands of Iranian pilgrims yearly. Under the guise of improving these cities' tourism prospects ("Iran, Iraq to Boost", 2010), the Iranian regime exerted its influence by assigning contracts to companies run by figures connected to its affiliated PMUs (Sullivan, 2011), thereby growing its economic capital while suggesting that it is supporting the Shia. Not to mention that Iran officially (in accordance with the Iraqi state) and unofficially (through the informal cross-border trading of its PMUs) flooded the Iraqi market with cheap goods. While this behavior formed part of a narrative that Iran-Iraq trade ties would strengthen both countries, contributing to symbolic capital, in reality it had deleterious effects on the Iraqi economy. In fact, it stifled Iraq's economic growth by turning the country into a net importer in various industries, including the industrial and agricultural sectors (Sullivan, 2011). Thus, through the employment of its affiliated PMUs, Iran has successfully managed to fill much of the political void left in Iraq in the aftermath of the U.S. invasion in 2003 and the attacks by ISIS. The way it did so falls in line with the Bourdieusian framework of political sociology, particularly in what pertains to the importance of economic, symbolic, social and coercive capital in the struggle over Iraq's political field.

4.4 Conclusion

The struggle over Iraqi's political field, as seen through the Bourdieusian lens, is fairly recent, as the void left by the US invasion of Iraq and the dismantling of the Baath regime, opened up the country to a myriad of destructive local and foreign influences. An historical assessment of sectarianism in Iraq indicates that the country is not particularly predisposed to sectarian tensions that merit the construction of a sectarian political system. In particular, the ideological differences present among different PMUs cannot reasonably explain the current intra-Shia conflict. Instead, this chapter has shown that the PMU groups are engaged in a battle over economic, coercive and symbolic/social capital that endows them with the legitimacy needed to gain political ground and dominate their opponents. In this battle, Iranian-affiliated PMUs have made much progress, especially with regard to economic and coercive capital. However, symbolic capital is still largely contested in the Iraqi political arena.

Chapter Five

Conclusion

5.1 Summary of Findings

This thesis has argued that the primordial and instrumental perspectives typically employed to study the phenomenon of sectarianism in the Middle East do not adequately contribute to understanding the scope and depth of an intra-sectarian struggle such as the one under study: the conflict involving different PMU factions in Iraq. More pertinent to this study is the Bourdieusian theoretical framework pertaining to political sociology and more specifically Bourdieu's work on the political field. Having jointly participated in the fight against ISIS on the basis of a sectarian narrative related to defending not just Iraq but also critical Shia shrines from the attacks of Sunni ISIS militants, it would be naïve to view the intra-Shia conflict as being the result of primordial sectarian sensitivities. At the same time, while the instrumentalization of sectarian identities would have played a potent part in the context of a struggle involving different sects, much like the case of Lebanon, in the Iraqi context such instrumentalization makes little sense, as the conflict pits different factions that share similar sectarian beliefs, albeit somewhat differentiated on the basis of diverging loyalties for different clerical authorities.

Such differentiation is not enough to warrant a substantial clash over political power, however. Rather, the PMUs are locked into a competitive struggle over control of Iraq that involves a struggle for sufficient political legitimacy that would endow PMUs with the ability to command politics and by extension the trust/acquiescence of

the Iraqi people and thus control over Iraq's resources. The behavior of Iranian-affiliated PMUs, in particular, corresponds to what Bourdieu described as a competition to amass different types of capital, the culmination of which enables the possession of enough political capital to dominate the political field. Within the overarching narrative of PMUs defending Iraq from Islamic militants and U.S. foreign interference, Iran-backed PMUs have managed to leverage Iranian influence to gradually accrue economic, coercive, symbolic and social capital at the expense of other PMUs loyal to Iraq.

By tapping into and fueling already existing clientelistic patronage networks, as well as controlling trade in border crossings, these PMUs have sustained enough economic capital to maintain popular support, particularly in areas where they have exerted their influence following the defeat of ISIS. Moreover, armed with military resources and experience in defending Iraqi soil, Iran-backed PMUs have secured ample legitimacy within the broader scope of government, having been painted as saviors.

As thus, they accrued political and coercive and political capital simultaneously by cementing themselves a core part of the Iraqi nation. In so far as social and symbolic capital is concerned, Iranian influence has also been pivotal in assisting its PMU proxies with gaining more legitimacy in the eyes of the Iraqi people. In fact, its activities on Iraqi soil have come hand-in-hand with Iran's investment in infrastructural projects, especially those aimed to exert various forms of soft power such as in the educational and religious sectors. However, recent popular protests against Iranian interference in Iraq suggests that local PMUs loyal to Iraqi clerical authorities still enjoy higher levels of symbolic and social capital, particularly Sadrists who are more rooted in Iraq than their Iran-backed counterparts.

5.2 Theoretical Implications

Intra-sectarian conflict in turbulent regions such as the Middle East has often been scrutinized from the primordial and instrumental perspectives, which are based on diametrically opposed premises regarding not just the motives behind the conflict, but also its socio-political dynamics. The primordial approach reduces the intra-sectarian struggle to historical roots, with a focus on perennial ideological differences, making it seems as though this kind of struggle is timeless and inevitable. However, this theoretical framework fails to explain why different groups from the same sect (Shia) have been locked in a power struggle for years. In fact, the ideological differences that differentiate Sadrists from Khomeinists, for example, do not warrant such acute political division in Iraq. At the same time, the instrumental viewpoint may help to explain how the sectarian card is used in the context of a divide-and-conquer strategy adopted by the ruling class, particularly under the umbrella of the *Muhasasa Ta'ifiya.* However, it does not allow for a full understanding of how and to what extent different PMU factions are vying against each other for more influence over the Iraqi state, especially when considering external political interference, mostly by Iran. Critically, this thesis did not zero in on sectarian identity as the main explanatory variable, especially in the absence of a relevant compelling rationale to do so in the context of a conflict that involves groups belonging to the same sect. Rather, Bourdieu's political sociology, and in particular his work on political domination and the struggle over the political field, offers a far more nuanced and explicatory tool to understand the intra-Shia conflict in Iraq by analyzing not just local and international political motives, but also what means are used to achieve this motive, utilizing various types of capital such as

symbolic/social, economic and coercive capital. Here, the main contribution of the thesis was its expansion on Dodge's Bourdieusian analysis of the Iraqi case, not only validating the scholar's findings and overall evaluation, but also integrating an array of new data that offers a more nuanced understanding of how different types of capital contribute to the cultivation of the political legitimacy needed to dominate the Iraqi political field. Thus, this thesis contributes to theory on intra-sectarian conflict in countries where this kind of conflict extends to groups who adhere to the same sect, offering a blueprint for the discussion of similar cases in different countries or regions.

5.3 Recommendations for Future Research

Given the nascent nature of the sectarian political system in Iraq, more research is needed to understand the current intra-sectarian conflict in depth, especially as the region undergoes fast developments that involve multiple international actors. In particular, it would be pertinent to examine how the US-Iran clash in the context of symbolic capital. As Iraqi protesters have made it clear that they wish to abolish or at least diminish external interference from their political realm, it remains to be seen whether the Shia connection with Iran will work in Iran's favor as it attempts to increase its symbolic capital in the country, as a means to the end of gaining more political leverage. This is especially relevant when considering the adversity expressed in the face of US forces who are perceived by PMU adversaries as being aggressors since the invasion of Iraq in 2003.

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