

The State and Nation as Envisioned by Shia Intellectuals in Iraq

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Introduction

There is a degree of ambiguity surrounding the nation and state-building project in Iraq. This ambiguity relates to the form of government and to the nation or state's relationship with the country's cultural and social system. **With regard to form**, there is ambiguity as to the country's orientations towards federal, decentralized, or centralized government on the one hand and the presidential or parliamentary system on the other. **Culturally**, there is ambiguity around the presumed or anticipated role of religion (Islam) in government legislation and directives. **With regard to social relations**, the ambiguity relates to the anticipated role of Iraq's various ethnic, denominational, and religious groups in the Iraqi nation and state-building project, especially that of the largest demographic group, the Shias. Although this project is evident in political activities within the political process, the position of the Shia elite (academics, activists, and specialists) is ambiguous.

While this ambiguity shapes the features of the Iraqi state and nation-building project, especially after 2003, the Shia intelligentsia, as the elite class that directs public opinion and produces the ideas and desired imaginary for that state and nation, is even more unclear. Who is this intelligentsia? Why the Shia intelligentsia in particular? What are its visions of the future Iraqi state and its imagined nation? What is required to achieve successful social integration and competent institutional administration – the two conditions for building the Iraqi nation and state?

This study aims to uncover the views of the Iraqi Shia intelligentsia in order to find answers to these questions, as well as to search for a cultural project that is opposed, reconciled to, or in line with the other political and religious state and nation-building projects.

This study has used a qualitative descriptive exploratory method through conducting semi-structured interviews with select Shia elite.

Interviews were conducted from 5/1/2017 to 18/1/2017 with ten members of the Shia elite, whose names and biographies are listed at the end of this paper.

The Intelligentsia: Definition and Indicators

In a striking expression, the contemporary American sociologist Lewis Coser stated that "intellectuals are the heirs of the priests and prophets. They concern

themselves with the search for and preservation of truth and the sacred communal values that govern the collective, society, and civilization. The intellectual is a hybrid being that produces artistic or scholarly work showing their commitment to the structure, who is at the same time capable of seeing the contradictions and working to call for their destruction."⁽¹⁾Coser sketches out the features of what an intellectual should be in terms of their relative commitment to the system or calling for it to be changed. The intellectual is conceived of as having a duty and as holding a free-thinking critical profession that conflicts with the institutional and identity affiliations of that position.

The intellectual's defence of the universal collective symbols, values, and rituals that together constitute a contemporary culture based on human rights, citizenship, and freedom is an act that rivals the clergy in their defence of the symbols, beliefs, and rituals that they advocate. Perhaps this competition is what brought Coser to describe intellectuals as "priests and prophets".

Yet, through their ongoing critique, intellectuals advocate an ongoing breaking of ranks from the structure and prevailing contexts, and is thus a source of permanent concern to the authorities, be they religious, political, or social.⁽²⁾

Anyone who produces ideas or opinions or participates in the public sphere can be an intellectual: intellectuals do not necessarily engage in intellectual work. In *Prison Notebooks*, Gramsci writes, "All men are intellectuals, but not all men have in society the function of intellectuals."⁽³⁾ Intellectuals are a project, not an exact specialization; they depend upon a combination of many specializations. An intellectual may be a politician, a member of the clergy, an academic, an activist, or a news personality. In this sense, an intellectual is a professional in addressing the public sphere, working to smash received ideas within intellectual analytical work, and also is skilled at influencing others using the media, social media tools, and publishing.

According to Edward Said, intellectuals should not form an intellectual aristocratic class isolated from the people, but rather make appeals to the widest public possible,⁽⁴⁾ which should be a natural public and not a partisan one. Here Said is referring to the danger of the intellectual turning into a politician using the same methods to seek power. Despite his warning against being affiliated with political

¹ Gerard Leclerc, **The Sociology of Intellectuals**, translated by George Kattoura (Beirut: Dar al-Kitab al-Jadid, 2008), p.19.

² Ibid., p. 26-27.

³ Antonio Gramsci. **Prison Notebooks**. Translated by Adel Ghanem (Beirut: Dar al-Mustaqbal al-Arabi), p.14.

⁴ Edward Said, **Representations of the Intellectual**, translated by Ghassan Ghosn (Beirut: Dar al-Nahar, 1994), p. 15

authority, Said warns against intellectuals following the public and favoring it in everything he sees, calling for the intellectual to "raise embarrassing questions" and even to disrupt public peace.⁽⁵⁾ The intellectual does not appease, nor create unanimity, but is a person wagering on their critical sense in rejecting easy formulas and worn-out and received ideas and assurances that flatter those in power.⁽⁶⁾

Participation in the public sphere and generating concepts is the work of leading activists, academics, and specialists in their field of knowledge, and can form criteria for classifying the intelligentsia/elite/intellectual that are the subject of this study.

The Shia Intelligentsia: Who and Why?

The Shias are not a compact and homogeneous bloc. Accordingly, the Shia intelligentsia is not a unified and homogeneous elite. The Shia, as one of Iraq's anthropological groups—like the other groups—contains economic, status, and social divisions, from aristocratic groups relying on capital to other middle and lower-class groups, and is split into urban, rural, and Bedouin configurations. The affiliations of individuals of this group are also divided into different political parties and religious orientations. After 2003 this group also split into 'inside' and 'outside', in terms of who was present in Iraq before the fall of the dictatorship in Baghdad. All of these sub-groups can be split into endless interests, delineated by the individual orientations of each person in the group. It thus does not make sense to regard the Shia as a group with a singular orientation, unified mind, synchronized conduct, or specific goal. The Shia intelligentsia also do not share a single orientation nor can they be categorized according to a specific goal or particular course.

In this study of the Shia elite, 'Shia' are defined using the cultural anthropological criteria of ethnicity rather than sectarian or confessional criteria. Ethnicity here is each group that feels itself to be or is defined by others as a group that has a distinctive character and interests, and as such ethnicity differs from people's individual belief and chosen affiliation. Thus, speaking to individuals that have a Shia denominational affiliation is fundamentally different from speaking with individuals that have Shia cultural origins in the anthropological sense. In the former, a secularist cannot be included, and in the latter, which what has been used in this study, the opposite is the case.

It is evident that the state and nation-building project in Iraq is not the domain of a specific cultural group or elite alone, as has been the case in most chapters of

⁵ Ibid., p. 24-29.

⁶ Ibid., p. 37.

contemporary Iraqi history. However, the period that followed the fall of the dictatorship in 2003 is notable for the broad entry of Shias, who carried the weight of the demographic majority, into the political process, which necessarily, and to the extent of their political and social weight in the country, made them politically and morally responsible for the events of this period and what followed. This, however, does not release the other ethnic groups, religions, denominations, constituents, and elites of their joint political and moral responsibility for the failures and successes of Iraq and the Iraqi nation.

State- and Nation-Building: Theoretical Position

The idea of the "state" is one of the key sociological concepts in use today, yet its limits and models remain a mystery.⁽⁷⁾ Although the state is manifested through its institutions, such as the civil service, courts, and police, the function of the state lies in welfare and management of the economy, the extent to which coercive force is used to maintain the regime, or the relation between politics and the bureaucracy that run the state, as well as the roles and legitimacy of the state in a changing and globalizing world. All of this places real question marks around the concept and definition of the state. In general, it can be said that the state is: *"A recognized legal-political entity within a specific geographical spot, whose citizens feel they are a part of it and whose institutions work to unify them."*

On the other hand, the nation is a cultural concept that refers to the degree of solidarity and cohesion among the individuals of a society who participate in public matters. The nation is a collective concept or imagined community, as Benedict Anderson says. The imagination here is not an illusion inasmuch as it is a method extending to daily activities; it is a "daily referendum," as Ernest Renan states. The nation is a group or groups living in one region possessing one culture. However, the nation is not a race or ethnicity, because ethnocentrism is the politicization of culture. It can be said that the nation is: *"The will of individuals living on a plot of land, under an economic system, with certain shared cultural symbols, and a political system that they feel represents them."*

Generally, American literature on "state-building" and "nation-building" tends to consider the two as the same process, and has dealt with state-building studies as a synonym for nation-building.

The course of nation- and state-building has not been successful in all areas of the world, and it is possible to distinguish the gap between the state and the nation in

⁷ John Scott (ed.), **Sociology: The Key Concepts**, translated by Mohammed Othman (Beirut: Arab Network for Research and Publishing, 2009), p. 198-202.

some of these formations termed nation-states. Thus, studies of state and nation-building are useful for countries whose nation and state projects lack consistency and an integrated structure.

In the Third World, it is generally possible to refer to the phenomena of failed states, which is often apparent at several levels. Most significant of these is **geographically**, where the state is leaning toward collapse and division, and its problems usually affect and are impacted by elements outside the "*limits of sovereignty*." **Politically**, the structure upholding the law and political system in the state are leaning toward dissolution or favoring the interest of one group, side, or individual. **Functionally**, the institutions representing the state are absent with regard to foreign affairs, as are the agencies capable of providing services to citizens domestically.⁽⁸⁾

Some of this may be attributed to some extent at the geographical level to the artificial borders that were imposed under colonialism; at the political and functional level, the faltering state is attributed largely to its failure to represent groups and individuals as a nation.

Here Noam Chomsky's term "failed states" is popular. Chomsky coined the term in his work on this type of state. Chomsky states that one of the characteristics that most distinguishes failed states from other states is their inability or lack of desire to protect their citizens from violence, while the governments in such countries regard themselves as above the law, both locally and internationally.⁽⁹⁾

With regard to nation-building, American political scientists have used the concept to describe the consistency and broad integration between state and society, and includes citizens' loyalty to the modern nation-state.

Lapierre stresses two important elements shaping the nation: **cultural unity**, and **economic unity**.⁽¹⁰⁾

Kazemi was more detailed in defining nation-building and its various stages, and asserts that nation-building is a process aimed at securing political stability in the form of a nation-state. This process relies on four dimensions: **first**, the development of a sense of integration between the state and its ideals and political philosophy; **second**, the expansion of social relations between sub-groups and sub-cultures in

⁸ Said al-Sadiqi, **The State in a Changing World: The National State and the New Global Challenges**, (Abu Dhabi: Emirates Center for Strategic Studies and Research, 2008), p. 129-130.

⁹ Noam Chomsky, **Failed States: The Abuse of Power and the Assault on Democracy**, translated by Sami al-Kaaki, (Beirut: Dar al-Kitab al-Arabi, 2007), p. 51.

¹⁰ Jean-William Lapierre, **Political Power**, translated by Elias Hana Elias, (Beirut: Editions Oueidat, 1974), p.

different regions; **third**, the gradual dissolution of the old social, economic, and psychological commitments and the acquisition of new ideals and values based on social acceptance of the other; **fourth**, developing the requisite infrastructure, communications, and laws needed for the flow of commodities and services between all regions of the state.⁽¹¹⁾

The emphasis of the above scholars on "integration" indicates its importance in nation-building. Integration aims to establish a shared cultural identity by melding together—and not necessarily dissolving—differences for the sake of sound relationships.

The Shia Intelligentsia and the System of Government

Iraqi Shia elite were divided in answering the question: "What system of government is the best for Iraq to adopt now to ensure respect of both religion and freedom?" The most prominent orientation was the strong rejection of any kind of involvement of religion in the state. Shia intellectual elites refer to the "secular system" as the ideal system for ensuring freedom and equality under a system that maintains diversity. Those holding this view note that the main cause of the present struggle in Iraq is due to the involvement of religion in various ways. Ahmed Abdel-Hussein says in this regard, "Only the secular system is capable of preventing war and managing Iraq's diversity." Intellectuals sharing this view use the term "secular system". Intellectuals holding a second view use the term "civil system"; this is the group of Shia intellectuals who indicated that it is possible for religion to have a role in the state under various headings, provided that this does not violate the separation of religion and state. Mazen al-Zeidi indicates this, saying, "Religion may be one of the sources of legislation for personal status laws, but not a standard of government." Saadoun Mohsen Damad does not break with this view when he says, "The call for a civil state is a kind of reformed secularism," and does not negate the possibility of religion having a role in the state.

These two different views of the role of religion in the political system indicate a further analysis. Abdel-Hussein al-Hanin states, "The call for a civil state is a front. There is nothing called a civil state having roots in philosophical thought; calling for this is an attempt to avoid calling for a secular state."

¹¹ Ali-Asghar Kazemi, "The Dilemma of Nation building in Post-Saddam Iraq", Journal of Law and Politics, Tehran, 2005, Islamic Azad University, Science and Research Campus, Vol. 1, no. 2.

In fact, throughout its modern history, Iraq has witnessed lasting confrontations between the Shia religious establishment and its political counterpart. During conciliatory periods, the religious establishment would overlook the government, in exchange for privileges such as freedom regarding their rituals, movement of clergy, and the like. Otherwise the political establishment was forced to confront the religious establishment, which affected its legitimacy and cost it much socially and politically. Religion has always formed one of the pillars of social identity in Iraq, and Iraq cannot be governed without religion playing a part. Perhaps the political establishment's adoption of the Sunni sectarian option throughout Iraqi history was brought about in part by politicians who were forced to adopt a religious option in order to guarantee remaining in power.

The Shia Intelligentsia and the Possible Commonalities for State/Nation-Building

"What are the commonalities on which a state that includes Shias, Sunnis, Kurds, minorities, and secularists can be built?" In answering this question, the Shia intellectual elite were divided into three groups. The first was deeply pessimistic with regard to there being any commonalities among Iraqis of the various groups at the present time. Ahmad Saadoun expressed this in a shocking manner, saying, "Iraq has nations that are killing each other, not political factions. The imagination doesn't contain an 'Iraqi' nation. There is a search for an alternative proposition that would encompass a Shia nation, a Sunni nation, and another nation that is Kurdish."

The second group viewed the commonalities in terms of what should be, based on legal and cultural accretion, and calls for a narrowly-defined and strictly applied concept of "citizenship"; this would be the main commonality of all groups. Ali Khafif refers to this view, saying: "Laws are for everyone, not one group over another." This view is strengthened by Mazen al-Zeidi's statement that "guaranteeing citizenship is the basic commonality for state and nation-building."

The third group referred to the possibility of arriving at commonalities among the various Iraqi groups through a set of procedures, most significantly legal and economic ones. Lahayi Abdel-Hussein says in this regard: "An economy based on inter-governorate collaboration should be designed," as deepening economic interests and citizenship are main factors that promote the commonalities that support state and nation-building.

In fact, the issue of existing and possible commonalities is blurred among the intellectuals, as the existing cultural and social commonalities such as religion, language, folk culture, dialect, customs, traditions, and the like were not taken into consideration by the Iraqi Shia intellectual, who viewed the imagined and utopian as examples of what the commonalities leading to state and nation-building should be. Thus, the intellectual focused on the entity granting citizenship and providing laws that deal with individuals as separate from subsidiary affiliations, i.e., the political authorities, and Shia intellectuals were clearly pessimistic over the prospect of confronting these powers and successfully convincing them.

The Shia Intelligentsia and the Requirements for the Integration of Iraqi Groups

Also regarding those factors which cause distancing and disagreement or rapprochement and harmony, Shia intellectuals were asked for suggestions on what Iraq needs to further integrate its various religious, denominational, national, and intellectual groups. Overall the answers were scattered in terms of the vision of what might lead to Iraqi nation-building, but together the answers can form integral elements for nation-building. Ali Wajih calls for emphasis on "intermarriage and economy" for integration among groups, while Saadoun Mohsen Damad called for "a real dialogue that eliminates fear." In the same context, Ali Anbouri said: "Integration requires a dialogue that leads to groups issuing historical apologies to one other."

With regard to education, culture, media, the mixing of students and professors in the universities, mandatory military service, tourism in Iraq and abroad, and inter-governorate integration of the economy, all were seen by Iraqi Shia intellectuals as basic elements that should be worked on to further the integration of Iraq's various groups.

Ahmed Saadawi notes that the only solution to the formation of an Iraqi nation in the midst of calls for nation-building on sectarian and ethnic grounds is "to work on the internal group borders. These borders include people who resist the idea of sectarian, ethnic, or religious groups." Ahmed Abdel-Hussein asserts that the criteria for integration include ample public space—streets, universities, media, and public institutions—and that "keeping the public sphere a shared space creates integration."

In general, it can be noted that in the opinion of the Iraqi Shia intelligentsia, the Iraqi nation is created, regulated, and overseen by the state. Without laws to achieve equality and justice and the expansion of the public sphere and prevent the stronger

groups from taking possession of it, the cultural structure led by secularists resistant to the idea of sub-groups cannot work to create an Iraqi national imagination. This means that the secularists no longer wish to nor are capable of creating a romantic idea of the nation based on emotional appeals and linguistic eloquence. Rather, they demand that the idea of the state and the nation be ideas that benefit the interests of individuals, and that individuals are able to realize a direct material benefit from the Iraqi state and nation through citizenship rights.

The Intellectuals: Who are they? What are their expected roles in state and nation-building?

The Iraqi Shia intelligentsia agrees that the intellectual produces concepts, bears the weight of society's concerns, and is a critic participating in public debate.

Ali Wajih says that the intellectual is a "promoter of knowledge", and is the standard-bearer of change concerned with social issues apart from the political framework. In al-Hanin's view, intellectuals are "those who call for change and influence public opinion, and do not just create intellectual output."

However, the Iraqi Shia elite differ over how close the intellectual should be to politics. Saadoun Mohsin Damad referred to intellectuals as "unaffiliated". For Mazen al-Zeidi they are "those who understand phenomena as removed from the political framework." Al-Anbouri takes things a bit further, saying, "The opportunism and ego of Iraqi intellectuals cause them to think about politics more than people." On the other side, Fares Harram believes that "intellectuals can be public leaders at certain historical stages" while Abdel-Hussein al-Hanin believes intellectuals can "spread awareness, whether in power or outside of it."

The views on the role of the intellectual in the nation and state-building project were similar to one another, and noted the importance of continuous criticism of self, other, and the authorities, spreading tolerance, promoting social commonalities and modern civic values, supporting the law, standing for freedom, and protecting society from the authorities.

Most of the intellectuals view it as among their duties to confront power and not to work with or through it. This reflects intellectuals' fear of exercising power, perhaps out of a fear of failure or of sliding into a position where they are the target of character assassination and systematic criticism, as is currently the case in the Iraqi political sphere. This is clearly reflected in Ahmed Saadawi's position when he says, "the only capital an intellectual has is his credibility; he can't sell himself for politics."

Shia intellectuals criticize themselves through "self-criticism as affiliation," as Ahmed Abdel-Hussein says. According to Ali Khafif, the intellectual should "form his positions according to the information and facts, and not suppositions". Ali Wajih sees that the job of the intellectual is "impossible given the existence of the active markets of outrage." Such sharp criticism of Iraqi intellectuals and their role also reflects their fear of affiliation (Shia) in the intelligentsia studied in this paper. It also points to the shell in which the elites crouch, fearful of politics and its dirt, although the intellectuals themselves have not hesitated to accept the invitation to contribute to or even lead public opinion in a task that appears especially political.

More than that, Iraqi intellectuals, especially Shia ones, have always sought out—or encouraged, or participated in—running for election or political positions. The question then is: do Iraqi intellectuals, with their strong positions on politicians, compete with them for power?

The Shia Intelligentsia and the Features of the Cultural Project for Nation/State-building

Despite the Shia intelligentsia's clear criticism of the political situation and the existing nation and state-building projects, the question that remains is: "Are there features of an Iraqi cultural project for nation and state-building?" The answers to this question were similarly pessimistic, while varying between the view that there is no cultural project concerned with nation and state-building to speak of, to the view that there are individual initiatives by Iraqi elites.

Lahayi Abdel-Hussein says, "We have individual intellectual names but not an intellectual class. There are scattered individuals within the general project." Ali Wajih supports this, saying, "There is no project, just individual attempts and sometimes waves of intellectuals."

In contrast, al-Anbouri believes that "what we have are emotional reactions, more than a constructive cultural institutional project." This is supported by Ali Khafif who says that "Iraqi intellectuals are populists, ineffective, and unproductive."

It appears that the main requirement of the Iraqi cultural project for nation and state-building is systematic and institutional group work, which the Iraqi intelligentsia lacks. Such a project might also require more than the efforts of individuals lined up to take positions against the political Islam currently governing Iraq; they need to produce knowledge contributing to the formation of rituals, symbols, and laws required for Iraqi nation and state-building.

Acceptance of Iraqi Nation and State-building Projects

None of the Shia intellectuals hesitated to state that the political project controls the cultural project (if any) in Iraq. In answering the question, "Which controls the other, the political the cultural, or the reverse?" they stated that it is the political that "possesses the money and the power," as al-Hanin says, and that "the spread of terrorism and violence supported the position of the politicians who exercise absolute power," according to Lahayi Abdel-Hussein. That means the politicians have a certain lack of acceptance of intellectuals' opinions and do not interact with the culture and intellectuals. Perhaps this is due to the lack of democratic traditions in a society where illiteracy is widespread, which means that the politician's position is always stronger than the intellectual's. This is why "the intellectual's dream is to become a politician," as Ali Wajih says.

Despite this, there is a view that diagnoses politicians with a kind of dread of intellectuals. Fares Harram says, "Since the protests started in 2011, the image of intellectuals has changed; they started to earn people's confidence and reached a position qualifying them to be politicians." Also in this regard, Saadoun Mohsin Damad states, "Today no politicians make light of intellectuals. They fear the intellectual's lash and voice."

In contrast to the view that sees the intellectual's acceptance of, and eternal struggle with politicians, there is another view that seems a little idealistic. Al-Anbouri refers to this when he says, "the politician and the intellectual complete each other." The relationship between intellectuals and politicians in the Iraqi nation and state-building process should be built on the integration of cultural projects with their political counterparts, instead of one of blackmail and subordination or ongoing animosity.

It is clear that the Sunni and Shia Islamic parties and figures are the strongest in terms of the current political process in Iraq. Do the intellectuals believe that it is possible to establish commonalities with political Islam for nation and state-building in Iraq, considering that this project requires broad social and political alliances that achieve a national consensus? The Shia elite were strongly divided on this, and fell into three main groups. The first forcefully rejected establishing any commonalities or dialogue with political Islam, opposing any project that could join them with the intellectuals. About this, Lahayi Abdel-Hussein says, "Intellectuals and politicians move in parallel; as long as political Islam doesn't wish to depart from religion as the final authority in government and administration, the two do not meet." Ali Wajih supports this saying, "Political Islam does not believe in the known boundaries of

politics. It believes deeply in the Shias in Iran or the Sunnis in Saudi Arabia or Egypt. This belief fragments the borders and sovereignty of nations."

The second group was less vehement than the first in calling for a kind of relinquishment by both sides in the interest of a national nation and state-building project. In this regard, al-Hanin says, "There could be an integrated relationship between the two provided that each side offers concessions in the interest of the other. Ahmed Abdel-Hussein indicated that establishing this kind of integrated relationship was "possible, but not with all Islamist parties, and certainly not with those who are considered part of the current authorities."

The third and last group seemed pessimistic at the prospect of any commonalities existing, whether at the present time or in the future. Mazen al-Zeidi refers to this when he says "it is not possible to talk about precursors of rapprochement". Fares Harram supports this view saying "a political Islam that makes concessions with regard to its red lines would have an open liberal orientation, which would be difficult. It can only be a religious leader, and is thus sacred and above all criticism. This makes the state weak."

In general it can be said that the basic dispute is between Shia intellectuals and political Islam, whose relationship is one of open animosity.

Political Islam in Iraq understands the symbolic weight of the civil and secular currents, as an open media, social media channels, and the international position on protecting civil and human rights are not in the interests of the religious currents.

The involvement of Islamist politicians in corruption cases and various crimes throughout the years following the fall of the dictatorship in 2003 put them on the defensive and forced them to make concessions on much of what are referred to as strict religious principles, such as their abandonment of, silence on, or inability to call for the establishment of a religious state. This also includes their concessions, silence, or failure with regard to changing the laws, directives, and non-religious customs common in Iraq's streets, such as women not wearing the veil, civil status, drinking alcohol, usurious transactions, and the like. Many Islamic political parties have even publicly called for a civil state and declared their partiality toward secularists, as has been recorded throughout the previous years of their governance. This of course does not deny that political Islam will remain supportive of outward shows of religion and religious rituals, and the application of Islamic laws whenever possible.

The Shia Intelligentsia and the Supreme Religious Authority

Iraqi Shias follow many religious authorities both in Iraq and abroad. However, Sayyid Ali al-Sistani is the supreme authority among Iraqi Shia circles, and as such is the most popular and influential. After 2003, al-Sistani came out of isolation in the city of Najaf with a pronouncement in which he remained at a "guiding distance" from politicians.

Most of al-Sistani's pronouncements, which he publishes as statements or fatwas, as well as the speeches given by his representatives, refer to a viable state as one which guarantees equality among citizens, respects plurality and diversity, acknowledges the rights of minorities, and upholds the principle of elections and peaceful transfer of power.⁽¹²⁾ Al-Sistani rejects any kind of sectarian control or political system based on sectarianism or racism,⁽¹³⁾ and believes that overcoming racial and sectarian quotas is possible through a return to the ballot box.⁽¹⁴⁾ This seems to be conditional on political and security conditions domestically and regionally, which have not, as of this writing, been secured, despite some attempts here and there.

Consistent with his understanding of Islamic jurisprudence, al-Sistani rejects members of the clergy having a direct role in the administrative and executive aspects [of government], calling on them to limit their involvement to offering general direction and guidance.⁽¹⁵⁾

Al-Sistani insists that it is the government's role to maintain security, and rejects militias or parallel institutions playing any part in the state's operation ⁽¹⁶⁾ even if they are under the leadership of the clergy or for objectives that the state is unable to realize or is negligent in doing so. ⁽¹⁷⁾

Al-Sistani's activities have grown to include precise details in society and the political field—which some might view as overreaching the role assigned to the jurist (faqih) in al-Sistani's own intellectual system, which is limited to advice, direction,

¹² Hamed al-Khafaf (prepared by), **Texts Published by His Eminence al-Sayyid al-Sistani (May the Almighty Prolong His Life) on the Iraqi Question**, (Dar al-Muarikh al-Arabi: Beirut, 2010), 2nd Ed., Document No. 31, p. 60; Document No. 39, p. 73; Document No. 52, p. 96; Document No. 53, p. 98-100; and Document No. 68, p. 125.

¹³ Ibid., Document No. 58, p. 110.

¹⁴ Ibid., Document No. 53, p. 98-100.

¹⁵ Ibid., p. 14, 20, and 30; Document No. 25, p. 51; Document No. 52, p. 95; Document No. 53, p. 98-100.

¹⁶ Ibid., Document No. 23, p. 48; Document No. 24, p. 49; Document No. 33, p. 64; Document No. 36, p. 69; Document No. 39, p. 73; Document No. 40, p. 76.

¹⁷ Ibid., Document No. 67, p. 123.

and general guidance. Al-Sistani has been successful in some of these interventions, such as his request that the Islamic Dawa Party change its candidate for prime minister in 2014 or his historic fatwa to wage jihad against ISIS after its occupation of Mosul.⁽¹⁸⁾ Other directives of his did not attract the attention of those blocking the political decision-making process, such as his request to cancel the Saturday holiday⁽¹⁹⁾ cancel the retirement pensions and privileges of officials,⁽²⁰⁾ change the date of final exams because they coincided with the month of Ramadan, conduct comprehensive reforms, or fight corruption.

The overall views of Iraq's supreme religious authority became of central interest to the Shia intelligentsia, especially after the wave of demonstrations and protests that started on May 31, 2015. The intellectual Shia elite highly value the Supreme Authority's positions. Fares Harram indicates in this regard that "the way the Supreme Authority deals with the state is exactly what the elite is calling for," adding, "the Supreme Authority's mission is to promote the religious establishment in a non-religious state." Saadoun Mohsin Damad supports this view, saying, "All of the Supreme Authority's interventions were good; we don't come across any positions that support what the forces of political Islam are doing when they ban freedoms, demonstrations, alcohol, or even laws of a religious nature such as the Ja'fari civil status law." Mazen al-Zeidi expressed similar views, saying "the Supreme Authority's interventions have preserved the unity of Iraq and prevented sectarian strife from expanding over the longer term."

Of course another view held by some Shia intellectuals, albeit the minority cannot be overlooked; these indicated that any interference by the Supreme Authority in political affairs is wrong. Ali Khafif says, "the Supreme Authority harmed state-building and should have distanced himself entirely from the project."

However, in general the Shia intellectual elite greatly value the supreme authority's positions, aware that the role the Shia religious establishment wants is a political formation that does not oppress the other and does not block the freedom of this establishment to play its (Vatican-like) role in Iraq and the world.

¹⁸ See al-Sistani's official website at: <http://www.sistani.org/arabic/archive/24918/>

¹⁹ Hamed al-Khafaf (prepared by), *Ibid.*, Document No. 76, p. 133.

²⁰ Written text of the Friday sermon in Karbala on 2/7/2014, given by Sheikh Mahdi al-Karbala'i, representative of al-Sayyid al-Sistani, and published on the official website of the Imam Hussein Shrine at: <http://imamhussain.org/fri/82vie.html>

and covered by various news agencies, including:

[http://ar.aswataliraq.info/\(S\(t2qvoibxaazwzgavohvegy45\)\)/Default1.aspx?page=article_page&id=327738](http://ar.aswataliraq.info/(S(t2qvoibxaazwzgavohvegy45))/Default1.aspx?page=article_page&id=327738)
and <http://www.elaph.com/Web/news/2014/2/874951.html>

The intellectuals reacted positively to the Supreme Authority's position on Iran and the ruling Shia alliance supported by Iran. Al-Hanin says that "the Supreme Authority regretted his support of the Shia Islamic alliance," while Ali Wajih stated that "the Supreme Authority took a clear stand against the political class loyal to Iran."

Yet, the intellectuals also noted the Supreme Authority's failure to block the spread of religious rituals in the public sphere. Lahayi Abdel-Hussein says, "The Supreme Authority did not touch on issues of religious reform such as the Hussein mourning rituals, processions, and Tatbir."

Regarding potential commonalities between the supreme authority and intellectuals within the Iraqi nation and state-building project, for the Shia intelligentsia the most prominent commonality clearly hinged on al-Sistani's call for a civil state. Mazen al-Zeidi says in this regard, "The Supreme Authority does not have political aspirations, and is on the side of intellectuals [who] do not believe in Governance of the Jurist (Wilayat al-Faqih). This is the least of the commonalities between us."

This does not negate the references some Shia intellectuals also made to the difficulty of finding commonalities between the intelligentsia and the supreme authority, despite the latter's positions supportive of a civil state. Ali al-Anbouri says, "Commonalities with the Supreme Authority cannot be established because his spiritual followers are fearful of this." Lahayi Abdel-Hussein also notes a seemingly fundamental point, "the religious establishment has called for a civil state when in fact its main authority is divine and not earthly; this in itself is a problem."

It can be said that the Shia intelligentsia does not in general object to a so-called "reformed secularism" taking the helm of the country's affairs. This secularism would grant some freedom to the religious establishment to operate, and allow for religion to be involved in certain matters such as civil status and the state's identity, at minimum. This is also conditional upon the authority's continued support of a civil state and lack of political or sectarian favoritism of one entity over another, which would violate the relative understanding implicitly reached by the Shia intelligentsia and the religious authority in Najaf.

The Shia Intelligentsia and the Iraqi Constitution

In speaking about the permanent Iraqi constitution as the main framework nurturing Iraqi state-building and the national imaginary, Shia intellectuals were found to have conflicting positions. In response to the question: "Does the constitution

enable the creation of equal citizenship for all Iraqis?" the Shia elite were divided into three different groups. The first objected to the text of the constitution as part of the problem afflicting Iraqi citizenship. In the view of this group, the Iraqi constitution is full of pitfalls and errors that lead to a conception of Iraqis as unequal. Ali Khafif says, "The first article of the constitution divides people into Muslims and non-Muslims. Article 140 on the disputed regions classifies people by ethnic group. Article 110 which permits governorates and regions to utilize petroleum resources creates economic inequality among the people. The current constitution is a minefield and generates conflict."

The second group had the complete opposite view of the first group, seeing the constitutional text as an important starting point for creating citizenship. But this group of Shia elites asserts that politicians have not enforced the constitution or, if they have, they only prioritized those sections that were in their interests. Fares Harram refers to this saying, "The constitution as a text attempts to be a model, despite certain problems, especially in interpreting public morals, the largest bloc, and the first article on laws not conflicting with democratic principles and the established religious provisions. The problem is the political practices that arose afterwards voided the constitution of all meaning." In this context, Mazen al-Zaidi also asserts that, "the current constitution contains the seeds of a state based on citizenship, but there are two obstacles to its implementation. First is the first paragraph of the constitution and second is enforcement of the constitutional articles by politicians."

The third group seems not to be as concerned with the text of the constitution as much as they are with Iraqis having a sense that they are citizens of the state. Ahmed Saadawi says, "It's not important for the constitution to contain articles on citizenship since the people do not have a sense of the importance of citizenship. There are three different ethnic groups, the Shia, the Sunna, and the Kurds who have not yet declared their independence. What is the use of thinking about citizenship? It's simply not useful to them right now."

In sum, the views of the Shia intelligentsia appear to protest the conduct of politicians and decision-makers in enforcing constitutional provisions. There is still no political spokesperson representing those calling for and promoting Iraqi citizenship; instead there are those who speak for sectarian and ethnic groups. There is no one who really calls for the equal citizenship of Iraqis. In other words, the commodity of ethnic grievances appears to be more marketable than calls for citizenship, which seems romantic in present-day Iraq.

The Shia Intelligentsia and School Curricula

School curricula, especially for the humanities at the primary, middle, and preparatory levels, are considered an important educational tool nurturing and producing generations that believe in Iraq as a state and nation. But what do Shia intellectuals think of the school curricula in religion, history, and national education that were designed after 2003?

In answering this question, there was consensus among Shia intellectuals on the need to eliminate the religion curriculum from Iraqi schools because they generate sectarian and religious divisions among Iraqis. Al-Hanin says, "I agree with eliminating the Islam curriculum and also with removing history that is controversial."

The intellectuals' answers also included their belief that the school curricula contain no clear discourse dealing with issues of pluralism and equality among Iraqis. Ahmed Saadawi refers to this saying, "The school curricula are a fabrication and don't contain a clear vision of the country." Ali al-Anbouri adds, "The nation cannot be taught; it requires institutions that connect its citizens to it, not instructing children in sentimentality."

Regarding the history curriculum, Ali Khafif says that it "includes a falsified and distorted history; the new generation will face their lives according to their sectarian or ethnic affiliation." Ahmed Abdel-Hussein supports this, saying, "this history curriculum is a disaster that revives historical disputes."

The intellectuals also seemed sensitive about teacher's positions in imposing their convictions on students, contrary to what is required legally and ethically. School curricula also, in the view of many of the Shia elite, appear to be a simple part of the problem, considering the role of the media and the discourses in Iraq's public sphere on the issues of diversity, citizenship, and equality. Ali Wajih refers to this saying, "No matter how much the curricula call for equality and diversity, they are weak in the face of teachers who in many cases spout a discourse of division and the media's daily onslaught of hateful discourse."

The Shia Intelligentsia and Unifying Symbols

Building an inclusive national identity for all Iraqis within the state and nation-building project requires symbols which might be national figures, or material or

moral role models that form a locus for affiliation with Iraq and the Iraqi nation. But, in the view of Shia intellectuals, what, or who, are the symbols that can constitute cultural commonalities among all Iraqis?

In answering this question, there was consensus among the Shia elite that there is no political role model at the present time that can be universal for all Iraqis. But they did not seem to object to considering some Iraqi political figures from the monarchy period (1917-1958) as unifying role models for Iraqis. This is referred to by al-Anbouri when he says, "The current politicians cannot be role models, although the politicians under the monarchy worked in the interest of Iraq."

Some intellectuals indicated that the monarchy period had plenty of cultural and civic, as well as political role models, all of which could bring Iraqis together. In this regard, Ahmed Saadawi says, "There are 40 years of creative, civic symbols from the monarchy period. All of them are national symbols that transcend ethnicity."

The Iraqi Shia intelligentsia asserted in general that ancient Assyrian Iraqi civilization, popular folklore, public culture, daily lives of Iraqis, and national and artistic production can all form non-divisive and inclusive symbols for Iraqis. Despite this, there are those who object to the possibility of historical figures being effective in uniting Iraqis. Ahmed Abdel-Hussein says, "The historical symbols are not effective symbols, they are fodder for writing songs and nothing else." Ali Khafif supports this, "Assyrian history and cultural figures are not symbols of transformation. It's not important to be proud of symbols; what matters is their ability to produce change. This romanticism is not reality."

The Shia Intelligentsia and National Identity

Building a national identity usually requires that there be a defined "us" and "them". But who is the 'other' for Iraq/Iraqis? In answering this question, Shia intellectuals agreed that there does not need to be an Other that is an enemy of Iraq. Lahayi Abdel-Hussein points out that, "The ideological other, such as Iran and Israel, erodes the minds of Iraqis and politicians to a great extent." Intellectuals refer to the need to be concerned with domestic national consensus as the thing that will produce an inclusive identity and not manufacture a supposed illusory enemy. Ahmed Abdel-Hussein refers to this in that, "the source of identity should be domestic and harmless in that the others do not attack it." Mazen al-Zeidi agrees with him on this when he points out that, "An inclusive identity can be made through the legal guarantees that ensure a dignified life for citizens." Fares Harram adds that, "For Iraq, the 'other' is whoever wants to destroy the state project and threatens the stability of society."

Saadoun Mohsen Damad stood out for his call for Iraqi groups to detach themselves from the regional dimensions. In this regard he says, "Clear borders are essential to identity. Iraqi Shias must distinguish themselves from their Iranian counterparts, and Iraqi Sunnis must distinguish themselves from their counterparts in the other Arab countries."

Overall, Shia intellectuals tend to give Iraq's enemy a neutral character. The Shia intelligentsia is not blind to the risks involved in giving the other an ideological character (such as secular, Iran, Arab, Israel, etc.) and thus asserted the need to be concerned with domestic consensus and not an illusory foreign element uniting people in a world based on exchange and mutually-beneficial interactions.

Summary and Conclusions

Shia intellectuals have not settled their position on the limits of the involvement of religion in the state. While some absolutely reject any interference of religion in the state, others tend to view religion as a factor that should be dealt with within the framework of the state within specific limits.

Shia intellectuals usually organize their arguments around the activities of the Shia political Islam currently governing Iraq, and it seems that the intellectuals are vehement to block everything having any relation to political Islam.

The positions of the supreme authority in support of a form of the modern civil state made the intellectuals feel close to his views, as opposed to those of political Islam.

A quick cursory review of the positions of the Shia intelligentsia can give the impression that Shia intellectuals compete with politicians for power, as they seek power even though they fear it. At the same time, Shia intellectuals compete with the religious clergy over their constituents. Deep down they acknowledge the fundamental disagreement with the clergy, yet they see themselves as forced to stand with them on many occasions, usually out of fear of political Islam, or to escape or fight it.

Division, frustration, and pessimism characterized the majority of the conversations and positions of the intellectuals, who usually analyzed the situation in Iraq from the perspective of what should be, and not from the lens of what the reality is and the possible remedies. Thus, a discourse of gloom, opposition, and resistance to politicians dominated the conversations of the Shia intelligentsia.

Shia intellectuals acknowledge the absence of a clear project for the Iraqi intelligentsia that clarifies their positions with regard to state and nation-building other than as relates to certain self-evident issues, and this reflects the lack of strong traditions of collective work among intellectuals that persists to this day.

The Shia intelligentsia asserted that the cultural and economic projects are the most important, and can lead in the end to the integration of Iraq's various groups. These two projects have rarely attracted the interest of the political class in power since 2003, as the facts show.

The Iraqi Shia intelligentsia believe that religious education courses must be eliminated from schools, that the history and other humanities curricula should be rewritten based on a clear vision of the nation and citizens that allows for the integration of Iraqi groups and acknowledges diversity, freedom, and human rights.

Shia intellectuals call for a domestically inclusive identity, through paying attention to the legal, service, and economic aspects that affect citizens, and they also reject the idea of an ideological enemy for Iraq. Identity, in their view, is the result of domestic policies, and not a product of fear of an enemy or an illusion thereof.

Brief biographies of the Shia intelligentsia named in this study

- Ahmed Saadawi is a novelist and poet who has written three poetry collections and four novels. He is also a journalist and civil rights activist.
- Ahmed Abdel-Hussein is a poet, writer, and civil rights activist. He writes articles and columns on the renewal of religious and political discourse.
- Saadoun Mohsin Damad is a journalist and writer. His works include *Idols of the Saints*, *The Tale of the Three Magic Words*, *Records of the Pronoun 'I'*, and *Exposing Secrets*, *Intellectual Shifts in the Relationship between Religion and the Sacred*
- Ali Wajih is a poet, journalist, and blogger.
- Ali Abbas Khafif is a novelist, short-story writer, and member of the worker's syndicate. He is author of *On Nationalism, Federalism, and the Political Questions*

- Abdel-Hussein al-Hanin is the author of the books *State-building and Views on the Future of the State*. He is president of the organization Tawasol for Development Research.
- Ali al-Anbouri writes for several Iraqi newspapers. He is chairman of the Fourth Republic Project, a coordinator of the Afro-Asian Network for Civil State, and director of the Iraq 2020 organization.
- Fares Harram is a poet, writer, and civil rights activist. He is chairman of the Najaf Authors and Writers Federation.
- Lahayi Abdel-Hussein is an academic specialized in sociology. She writes a newspaper column and is the author of many works on sociology.
- Mazen al-Zeidi is a writer, journalist, and editor-in-chief of *Al-Mada* Newspaper. He is interested in religious criticism and political thought.

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