

THE MARGINALIZATION OF IRAQI ISLAMISTS IN POLITICAL SCIENCE

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In 2014—after the overthrow of President Mohamed Morsi in Egypt and the resignation of the Ennahda-led government in Tunisia—a leader of the Moroccan Justice and Development Party told a group of foreign government officials that, “We’re the one last Islamist party remaining in government in the region.”¹ That leader was wrong. Islamist premiers and parties had governed Iraq for almost a decade at that point, and they remain in power there today. By almost any measure, the most successful elected Islamists in the Arab world over the past 15 years are in Baghdad. Yet political scientists, especially those in comparative politics, have largely ignored Iraq except in studies of terrorism, counterinsurgency, rebel governance, and foreign intervention. Far more attention has been paid to ISIS than to the dozens of more mainstream Islamist movements in Iraq, who are almost completely absent from comparative discussions of Islamist service provision, electioneering, “moderation,” and policy-making.

Why have political scientists ignored Iraq’s Islamists? I see two main reasons. First, many academics are sectarians (for lack of a better word), hesitant to compare Shi’ite Islamists with Sunnis. Some simply are more familiar with Sunni Islam and more comfortable discussing and analyzing Sunni movements than Shi’ite ones. But far too many others continue to see Shi’ite Islamist movements everywhere as subjects of the Iranian government. Others assume that the history and organization of Shi’ite Islamists are so different than that of Sunnis that any comparative

purchase is lost. These people tend to forget that Shi’ite Islamists often have very similar roots to Sunni Islamists. Iraq’s new prime minister was a leader of the Iraqi Communist Party in the 1970s before becoming an Islamist, a similar red-to-green trajectory that many Sunnis followed.² The founders of the Islamic Da’wa Party were partly inspired by the writing and activism of Muslim Brotherhood forefathers Hassan al-Banna and Sayyid Qutb. The second, and perhaps main, reason many political scientists continue to ignore Iraq is because of the “sin” of the 2003 invasion, which I address at the end of this piece.

I argue we have missed a rich set of cases with important variation on both right- and left-hand side variables. For example, Islamists in Iraq now have had more freedom for a longer period of time to govern, campaign, develop patronage networks, and change.

Consider some of the major themes in the study of Islamist movements:

ISLAMISTS IN POWER:

There are dozens of books and articles on what Islamists might do if they ever came to power, but—despite being in many ways an ideal case study—Iraq is almost entirely absent from these discussions. If you are interested in the conditions under which Islamists will seek to change personal status laws or mandate Islamic banking and finance, Iraq since 2005 could inspire theory or provide useful data. Iraq has

held five parliamentary elections since 2005, and a wide variety of Islamist parties, movements, and candidates have participated and won seats in each. Four members of Islamist parties have served as Prime Minister during that fourteen-year period, and each transition of leadership has been peaceful (if not always smooth), including the latest in which the Islamic Da'wa Party gave up power. A gaggle of other Islamist parties and movements—e.g., SCIRI/ISCI, Sadrists, Fadhila, the Iraqi Islamic Party, the Iraqi Accordance Front (Tawafuq)—have provided the majority of Iraq's ministers, deputy prime ministers, deputy presidents, chairs of parliamentary committees, and provincial governors. Yet political scientists pay far more attention to the 2011 to 2013 Ennahda government in Tunisia than the 2005 to 2018 Da'wa governments in Iraq.

IDEOLOGICAL CHANGE:

Several of Iraq's Shi'ite Islamist movements underwent ideological changes that would make for fascinating comparisons with groups elsewhere. For example, the Da'wa Party abandoned their support for *wilayat al-faqih* (guardianship of the jurist) in the 1990s or early 2000s and came to accept participation in an electoral system free from clerical oversight.³ Adil Abdul-Mahdi, the current prime minister, is a former member of the Supreme Islamic Iraqi Council, previously known as the Supreme Council for the Islamic Revolution in Iraq. That post-2003 transformation—from revolutionary SCIRI to elected ISCI—begs for book-length examinations, but we know more about the transformation in the 1980s of the relatively obscure Shiraziyyin (a transnational group of activists associated with the al-Shirazi family of Karbala) than we do about the Supreme Council's.⁴ Some of these transformations are quite recent, and I hope we see a wave of research (in Arabic and in English) on the ideological and doctrinal evolution of Da'wa, SCIRI/ISCI/Badr/Hakims, and especially the Sadr Movement(s). Studies of Iraqi Islamists over time—under Ba'athism, in exile, and after 2003—have the potential to redefine the agenda and terms of

debate in the study of if and how participation in pluralist political practices changes Islamists.

SALAFIS:

Salafis also have participated in Iraqi elections, and one was Speaker of the Council of Representatives for more than two years. Compared to cases such as Salafis in Egypt after 2011 or some Salafi movements in the Gulf, Iraqi Salafis have been largely ignored. I want to read a study of how and why some Salafis in Iraq—but not others—decided to participate in an electoral and political system that they knew would be dominated by Shi'ites. Comparing Shi'ite movements with Salafis might help us understand the conditions under and the process by which groups compromise ideological commitments when presented with political opportunities.

MUSLIM BROTHERHOOD PARTIES:

Iraq's Muslim Brotherhood has been influential, dynamic, and electorally successful, yet it is usually absent from discussions of Ikhwan and Ikhwan-like movements. Muslim Brotherhood leaders in the Iraqi Islamic Party (IIP) have served as Iraq's deputy president, deputy prime minister, and speaker of the Council of Representatives. Muslim Brothers have been ministers of Higher Education, Planning, State for Foreign Affairs, and State for Women's Affairs. Thirty years later, some political scientists of the Middle East remain fixated on the six months that the Jordanian Muslim Brotherhood spent as a (relatively powerless) part of the Jordanian government in 1990 to 1991. The Iraqi Muslim Brotherhood has been a constant presence (except for a brief hiatus in 2007 to 2008) in the Iraqi government since 2003.

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Similarly, the Iraqi Muslim Brotherhood has weathered splits, electoral defeats, challenges from Salafis,

constitutional debates, and political compromise. Yet they are ignored, even in explicit comparisons of mainstream Sunni Islamist movements. A prominent (and otherwise excellent) recent volume on Islamists in the MENA included case studies of twelve countries, but Iraq was left out.⁵ As in many other books, Iraq appears in the index only as “Kuwait occupation by” and “U.S. invasion of.”

SOCIAL SERVICES PROVISION:

We have several excellent studies of how Islamist movements in Egypt, Lebanon, and Turkey provide voters with medical care, schooling, and other social services and the conditions under which that translates into political and electoral mobilization. Iraq should be an ideal place to extend and challenge this literature because of its regularity of elections, competition among Islamists, and variation in resources that movements can access. Where are the detailed empirical studies of how Da’wa or the Sadrists use social service provision to achieve electoral success (and the limits of that connection)?

CROSS-IDEOLOGICAL COOPERATION:

For last year’s parliamentary election, Moqtada al-Sadr allied with the Iraqi Communist Party; the IIP joined Ayad Allawi’s secular Al-Wataniya list; and Ammar al-Hakim left the Supreme Council, which his family founded and he had led, to form the avowedly secular National Wisdom Movement. Finally, Iraq has several cases of Islamist movements with affiliated militias who decided to participate in elections. Since 2003, the divide between SCIRI/ISCI and the Badr Organization widened to a chasm and the Sadrists formed, froze, reconstituted, and disbanded various militias. More recently, a number of militias associated with the Hashd ash-Shaabi entered parliament, and their Fatah Alliance now dominates one of the two diverse blocs vying for power and influence in Iraq. These examples of cooperation beg for comparison with cases both in and out of the region. Where are the studies of electoral coalition formation and cross-ideological (and cross-“ethnic”)

cooperation?

WHAT EXPLAINS THIS ACADEMIC LACUNA?

Why have Iraq and its participatory Islamist movements remained pariahs for comparative scholars? Clearly the dangers of field research in Iraq after 2003 deterred many from visiting the country (aside from the Kurdish Region), but the vast majority of Iraq is safer today than it has been for years.⁶ One under-recognized but surprisingly accurate indicator of this safety is the dramatic increase in the number of international football matches that Iraq now hosts.⁷ Teams from other Arab states are no longer afraid of playing in Iraq; in March 2018, Iraq defeated Saudi Arabia 4-1 in a friendly match in Basra.⁸ As other countries in the region became more difficult to work in, we should have expected more students and scholars to look towards Iraq. While studying Islamists in Iraq still entails many sensitivities, it is not significantly more difficult than many other places in the Middle East (Lebanon, for example).

I think an important reason Iraq continues to be ignored is the long shadow cast by the 2003 U.S.-led invasion. The vast majority of political scientists opposed the invasion and consider the occupation a fiasco. For them, Iraq’s political system and dynamics are somehow tainted by their 2003 roots; Iraq’s democracy is seen as “imposed,” a confounding factor in any cross-national studies involving cases from Iraq. But the invasion was 16 years ago, and the occupation ended more than eight years ago. Iraq’s far-from-perfect political system perseveres, remains highly competitive, and continues to absorb a wide variety of actors. About 40 percent of Iraq’s population has been born since 2003; a majority of Iraqis do not remember life before this political system.⁹ Since the reopening of the Saudi Embassy in Baghdad in December 2016, Iraq has improved its diplomatic connections with Gulf states and, in many ways, reentered “the Arab fold.” It is far past time for a similar rapprochement between Iraq and political science.

¹ Quoted in Spiegel, Avi Max. 2017. "Morocco." In Hamid, Shadi, and William McCants. *Rethinking Political Islam*. New York: Oxford University Press. P. 69

² See, for example, Burgat, François. 2003. *Face to Face with Political Islam*. London: I.B. Tauris, and Roy, Olivier. 1998. *The Failure of Political Islam*. Cambridge: Harvard University Press.

³ See Baram, Amatzia. 2004. "Two Roads to Revolutionary Shi'ite Fundamentalism in Iraq." In Martin E. Marty and R. Scott Appleby. *Accounting for Fundamentalisms: The Dynamic Character of Movements*. Chicago: The University of Chicago Press. Pp. 531-588.

⁴ On the Shiraziyyin, see Louër, Laurence. 2008. *Transnational Shia Politics: Religious and Political Networks in the Gulf*. New York: Columbia University Press.

⁵ Hamid, Shadi, and William McCants. 2017. *Rethinking Political Islam*. New York: Oxford University Press. Full disclaimer: I wrote the chapter on Jordan.

⁶ See, for example, "Under Construction: Fifteen years after America's invasion, Iraq is getting back on its feet." *The Economist* March 31, 2018.

<https://www.economist.com/middle-east-and-africa/2018/03/31/fifteen-years-after-americas-invasion-iraq-is-getting-back-on-its-feet>

⁷ I thank Marsin Alshamary for this point.

⁸ After the match, King Salman promised to build the largest football stadium in the world in Baghdad.

⁹ Patel, David. 2018. "How Oil and Demography Shape Post-Saddam Iraq." *Middle East Brief* 122, Crown Center for Middle East Studies, Brandeis University.

<https://www.brandeis.edu/crown/publications/meb/meb122.html>
