

‘Beyond structure and agency: rethinking political identities in Iraq after 2003’.

Introduction.

Since the invasion of Iraq in 2003, those groups deploying ethno-sectarian rhetoric have dominated political mobilisation across the country. Like ethno-sectarian actors elsewhere, they have sought to impose religious difference as the ‘primary marker of modern political identity’ (Makdisi 2000: 7), seeking to solidify both the internal coherence of each group but, more importantly, the boundaries that divide groups from each other (Barth 1969: 15). This was certainly the case in the first two national elections after regime change held in 2005 and the two that followed in 2010 and 2014. Beyond electoral contestation, Iraq’s post-2003 descent into civil war was explained, and the violence this entailed justified, by those deploying sectarian rhetoric. However, viewed over the *longue durée* of Iraq’s history, not just the past fifteen years, the dominance of the post-2003 political field by ethno-sectarian rhetoric looks to be a puzzling historical aberration. Since its creation under a League of Nation’s Mandate in 1920, Iraq’s political field was certainly riven by ideological contestation, however the main fault lines were between those deploying different understandings of a broadly secular nationalism with different memberships and boundaries (Dodge 2018).

What can explain the apparent rise to prominence of political mobilisation dependent upon religiously referenced rhetoric? This paper seeks to answer that question by examining the dominant instrumental and ethno-symbolic explanations of ethnic and sectarian identities grouped within a broadly constructivist approach, both in the

abstract and how they have been deployed to explain the increasing contemporary influence of ethno-sectarian mobilisation in Iraq and the wider Middle East. The paper identifies explanatory value in these approaches but finds their focus on either ideational structures or individual rationality too narrow to provide a comprehensive explanation of what happened to political identities in Iraq after 2003.

Instead, the paper deploys what can be termed a 'Bourdieuian method', in an attempt to get beyond the polarities of structure and agency but also to add analytical focus to constructivist approaches.¹ To do this Pierre Bourdieu's conceptions of political field, principles of vision and division and symbolic violence are deployed to explain the dominance of ethno-sectarian political mobilisation in Iraq since 2003.

Explaining sectarian mobilisation in the Middle East.

The standard academic way of explaining the challenge that sectarian politics in the Middle East poses to unitary secular nationalism is to divide the competing theoretical schools into four, primordial, culturalist, constructivist, and rationalist approaches. However, those working within the wider academic field of ethnicity and nationalism argue that constructivism, by the end of the 1990s, became the dominant approach (Wimmer 2008: 972), leading Rogers Brubaker to argue that '... we are all constructivists now' (2009: 28).

The deployment of various approaches, within a broadly defined constructivism, has certainly moved the debate away from the structural teleology and claims of national homogeneity that characterised much of the modernist school of nationalism

(Hutchinson 2005: 2-11, 149). That said, it is far from clear that there is agreement on what constructivist studies of sectarianism in the Middle East involves. The intellectual pluralism of constructivist approaches to identity has lead Chandra to suggest they are only united by three working assumptions, that individuals can have multiple identities, that these can change and that this process of identity change can be driven by human processes (Chandra 2012: 19, 151).

However, Gorski and Turkmen-Dervisoglu argue that there remains a deep analytical divide amongst those working on the politics of identity, between macro-culturalists and micro-rationalists (Gorski and Turkmen-Dervisoglu 2013). Indeed, Fearon and Laitin, in an influential review piece, promote micro-rationalism by critiquing the underlying assumptions of the culturalist approach along with what they label ‘social construction by discourse’ as ‘smacking of essentialism’ (Fearon and Laitin 2000: 852). Chandra’s own constructivist method, following Fearon and Laitin, leads to a highly rationalist and individualist approach to ethnic identity where individuals decide which ethnic category of identity to activate after considering all possible alternatives (Chandra 2012: 28-37, 124).

This dominance of individualist and instrumentalist approaches, placed within a loosely defined constructivism, can be found across the majority of more recent work on the rise of sectarian identity in the Middle East. This is personified by Hashemi and Postel’s ‘sectarianisation thesis’, which focuses on the top down power of ruling elites that modernist approaches have been previously critiqued for (Hashemi and Postel 2017; Hutchinson 2005). Ruling elites, when faced with declining legitimacy, foster sectarian animus amongst their own population as a way of staying in power.

For this thesis, it is the instrumental actions of ruling elites that explain the rise of sectarianism across the region, especially in the wake of the 2011 ‘Arab Spring’ protests (also see Matthiesen 2013: ix-xii; Wehrey 2014: 205; al Rasheed 2017: 143).

There is certainly empirical evidence to support the ‘sectarianisation thesis’. Middle Eastern ruling elites have sought to manipulate identitarian politics to strengthen their rule. However, this argument becomes problematic when deployed without caveats. First, there is an assumption that without the self-seeking ruling elites, sectarian mobilisation would not take place, differences in religious doctrine or ritual would not have been politicised. This appears to give the elites of the region amazing powers of both persuasion and political mobilisation at the moment their own legitimacy is in steep decline. Secondly, it conjures up comparisons to reductive Marxist arguments about false consciousness. Sectarianisation appears to juxtapose a strategic, rational, instrumental and destructive ruling elite against a gullible mass population who do not know they are being manipulated. The unknowing masses are hence easily mobilised to engage in life threatening activities that are in the ruling elite’s interests but not their own.

A move away from rational instrumentalism towards the alternative ‘culturalist’ approach removes the top down causality but also has explanatory shortcomings that need to be addressed. At the centre of the culturist approach sits the work of A.D. Smith. Smith is widely cited by those seeking to develop an explanation of ethnic conflict that focuses on the power of symbolic politics (Kaufman 2001; Hutchinson 2005) and those who are seeking to develop a more psycho-cultural approach (Ross 2007). Smith’s account has also been influential on those trying to understand the rise

in sectarian tension across the Middle East (Potter 2013), as well as those working on Iraq (Haddad 2011, 2013). Smith's work is built around two arguments, the historicity of nations over the *longue durée* and the emotive power of the 'myth-symbol complex' in both shaping and mobilising groups. Smith's argument about the historicity of nations makes him vulnerable to Fearon and Laitin's accusations of essentialism. Smith argues that there is a strong continuity between the pre-modern and modern, with the vehicles for this continuity being 'ethnies' (Smith 2009: 26). Smith argues that it is around these ethnies, almost trans-historical in their reach, that political actors forge modern nations.

The second dominant aspect of Smith's work and by far the most influential, is the focus on competing myth-symbol complexes or 'ethno-historical memories' (Hutchinson 2005: 2-9). It is the ontological insecurity produced by competition between myth-symbol complexes and the fear of victory and hence domination by one over another, which leads to sub-state ethnic or sectarian conflict. It is this understanding of the emotive and competitive power of myth-symbol complexes that has become so influential. However, in order to escape the accusations of essentialism, the concept of the myth-symbol complex needs to be shorn from Smith's first argument about the historicity of ethnies. This would mean analysing myth-symbol complexes as modern creations, as powerful discourses created at specific times for specific reasons (Hutchinson 2005: 21-26, 74). This is what Kaufman and Ross have attempted to do (Kaufman 2001; Ross 2007).

Although Kaufman and Ross are careful to focus on Smith's ethno-symbolism, not his understanding of ethnies, there remains a strong sense, across their work, that ethnic

and sectarian conflict appears, if not inevitable, then highly likely. The instability caused by competing myth-symbol complexes can be mediated but these cultural differences appear to be the strongest ideological trends in any given society and the ones that are most likely to lend themselves to political mobilisation.

Although, as Wimmer and Brubaker argue, various forms of constructivism are now dominant within the study of ethnic and sectarian mobilisation, the pluralism of constructivism allows for analytical and ontological polarisation, with causality being given to either the rational instrumentalism of ruling elites or to collective culturalism of ethnic and sectarian groups. For a more accurate understanding of the rise of sectarian mobilisation in Iraq after 2003, an explanation is needed that can recognise the causality of instrumental rationality in addition to mobilisation at a societal level, whilst not losing sight of the influence of individual agency. It is the work of Pierre Bourdieu which can help us achieve this.

Pierre Bourdieu and the understanding of ethnic and sectarian identity.

If the study of nationalist, ethnic, and sectarian identity is constrained by the polarisation of rationalist individualism and collective structuralism, then applying insights from Pierre Bourdieu's work may well help to gain greater understanding. Bourdieu described his own working method as 'constructivist structuralism'. By this he meant his work identifies causative structures beyond the consciousness of agents, that agent's perceptions have a 'social genesis' (Bourdieu 1990: 123). However, he also wanted to reintroduce the role of agency that structuralism had sought to abolish, to make people's actions more than the outcome of obeying rules. Bourdieu also

wrote on ethnic and religious identity and his work has been influential in the wider field (Bentley 1987; Wimmer 2004; Wimmer 2008). He stressed that the solidification of ethnic and national identities during political mobilisation was the outcome of competitive struggles over social classification, that it was those who managed to control the most symbolic and material power who dictated which social categories came to dominate at any given moment (Bourdieu 1991: 220-21; Swartz 1998).

At the core of Bourdieu's working method and key to the examination of sectarian mobilisation in Iraq are four key concepts: habitus, field, various forms of capital, and the central notions of symbolic power and symbolic violence. The deployment of this method, this paper argues, can shed light upon why sectarian mobilisation has dominated post-regime change Iraq to the detriment of nationalism. Under Bourdieu's influence, this can be done without succumbing to an explanation that prioritises either structure or agency to the exclusion of the other.

At the centre of Bourdieu's social theory and his understanding of agency sits the individual's habitus. This is the cumulative sum of each person's socialisation, from the child within the family to the changing socialisation individuals are constantly subjected to within society. Its influence on both cognition and physical action is subconscious (Bourdieu 1980: 56). An individual's habitus is the target of on-going ideological or symbolic struggles within a society to shape perception and action. In Iraq after 2003, an individual's habitus, the centre of their understanding of the social world, would have been transformed by the material and ideational struggles to dominate the country's political field in the wake of regime change.

Every society transformed by modernity becomes divided into a number of specific spaces for competition, which Bourdieu labels fields. These fields, although interrelated, or 'homologous', are differentiated from each other by the nature of the competitors and the struggle they are engaged in. The boundaries of a field and the values to be fought over within it are set by the competitors (Bourdieu and Wacquant 1992: 97-105). The struggle for Iraqi identities after 2003 was primarily conducted within Iraq's political field.

Those fighting with each other for dominance within fields seek to accumulate and deploy capital to win their struggle. There are four main types of capital. The first is economic capital, money, and property rights (Bourdieu 1986). The second is social capital. This amounts to social networks and obligations, the ability to organise and mobilise, and the benefits that come from group membership. The third type is cultural capital. This can be objectified in material objects like paintings, books, and furniture but it can also be institutionalised in educational qualifications or embodied in an individual's bearing, her language capabilities, or scholarly or religious learning (Benson and Neveu 2005: 4; Bourdieu 1986; Emirbayer and Johnson 2008: 4; Swartz 1998).

Finally and most importantly for both his work and this paper's explanation of sectarianism in Iraq, Bourdieu identifies symbolic capital as the most significant capital and symbolic violence as the use of that capital to shape perceptions and order society. The struggle to gain symbolic power, to impose symbolic violence, is the

competition to structure the common sense operating in any given field and across society as a whole.

For Bourdieu, common sense is structured around the process of classification, the division and ordering of the social world through the imposition of categories and their naming. This is how agents gain their perception of the social world that they live in and are allocated the groups they become members of and hence their identities (Bourdieu 1991: 105, 170, 238). Symbolic violence draws distinctions and establishes hierarchies between different groups, removing empirical fluidity (Swartz 1998: 87). So the struggle for symbolic power in Iraq was the struggle to impose classifications of how the social world should be understood, what social categories would dominate common sense and be seen as legitimate.

A central focus for Bourdieu's work is the political field, its relationship with other fields and the state. The political field, like all fields, is an arena in which people and groups amass symbolic capital in the competition to impose their own vision as the dominant common sense (Bourdieu 2005: 36). Struggles within the political field, conducted by politicians, have the larger aim of defining the social world in its totality. Bourdieu labels these competing definitions of the social, 'principles of vision and division'. These, in the hands of politicians, start as 'speculative ideas' only to harden into powerful positions through their ability to be adopted by and hence mobilise people (Bourdieu 1994: 13; Bourdieu 2005: 39). The political field has a powerful role within society, a role of censorship, of 'limiting the universe of political discourse', of placing boundaries on what is politically thinkable (Bourdieu 1991: 172). It is within Iraq's political field, post-2003, that a dominant principle

vision was imposed and reshaped peoples' habitus. This new common sense stressed communalist identities, Shi'a, Sunni and Kurd, to the exclusion of all else.

Bourdieu understands the state as disaggregated, an 'ensemble of fields that are the site of struggles' (Bourdieu and Wacquant 1992: 111; Bourdieu 2014: 20). The struggle in the political field to propagate a dominant 'principle of vision and division' would be joined by struggles within different fields that make up the state; administrative, bureaucratic, and coercive and fields outside the state, like the religious field.

Bourdieu's definition of the political field and his understanding of the state is especially useful for understanding Iraqi politics (Zubaida 1989: 145-150; 1991: 207). To understand the state in Iraq since its creation in 1920 is to study a series of struggles to dominate various fields. The coercive field, before 1968 and after 2003, was deeply fractured with various different groups fighting for domination. After the invasion of 2003 the power and coherence of the state collapsed, thus giving greater power to other fields, especially the religious field.

The struggle to dominate Iraq after 2003 was indeed a competition between different groups seeking to impose different 'principles of vision and division' on Iraq's society. The *Muhasasa Ta'ifia* or sectarian apportionment system, that has shaped the political field since 2003, deliberately disarticulated the institutions of the state, awarding different ministries to different political parties. Struggles for domination were carried out within and between different fields across what was meant to be the Iraqi state.

Understanding Iraq's state and political field.

The post-2003 legacy of thirty-five years of Ba'athist dictatorship on Iraqi identities, its political field and state are contradictory. For a period of time in the late 1970s and early 1980s, the Ba'athist state's ideational power within the political field could be compared to Bourdieu's understanding of the state at the principle of its power as the 'central bank of symbolic capital'. During this time it used symbolic violence, coercive and economic capital to break the autonomy of other fields, especially the religious field. The unitary Iraqi nationalism placed at the core of the Ba'athist principle of vision and division certainly shaped the habitus of the majority of Arab Iraqis, as can be seen from opinion poll data after 2003.² However, the very high levels of coercive capital the state deployed to dominate Iraq's fields gave rise to a competing Shi'a-centric principle vision that started in Iraq's religious field in the 1970s, accelerated after the Iranian revolution of 1979 and reached a peak with the violent suppression of rebellions against the Iraqi government in 1991 (Dodge 2018: 33-34). The Iraqi state's coercive, financial, and symbolic capital was then drastically reduced by the 1980-88 Iran-Iraq war and then the aftermath of the 1990 invasion of Kuwait. The application of thirteen years of sanctions brought the state to the brink of collapse by 2003.

The political field and state in Iraq after 2003.

From a Bourdieusian perspective, it is primarily within Iraq's political field that the habitus and the political identities of individual Iraqis are shaped. Tracing the rise of

sectarianism within Iraq involves examining how Iraq's various fields were transformed by the invasion of 2003, regime change and the civil war that followed it. Baczko, Dorronsoro, and Quesnay argue that the retreat of a state in the face of civil war changes the relationship between fields and the value of capital within them (2017: 601, 603, 617). From the invasion by a US-led coalition in March 2003, Iraq's political field became internationalised. The United States formally occupied the country until April 2004, when it handed 'sovereignty' back to its allies, the group of Iraq politicians who had done some much to plan for and justify the invasion (Dodge 2004). It then attempted to shape the political field through a number of influential ambassadors and a large embassy staff. America's ability to wield economic capital dominated the economic and political field, spending US\$ 200 bn on reconstruction alone (Dodge 2012: 115). Its coercive capital should have allowed it to dominate, with its troops numbers ranging from 150,000 during the invasion to 171,000 at the height of its military engagement in 2007 (O'Hanlon and Livingston 2011: 13). However, it faced an insurgency, then civil war, it could do little to control. Although exercised in a less formal way, a number of regional states, foremost among them Iran, also deployed symbolic power and coercive and economic capital in an attempt to impose their own principle visions on Iraq's political field.

The Iraqi state after 2003, closely resembles Bourdieu's understanding of the state as a disaggregated 'ensemble of fields that are the site of struggles' (Bourdieu and Wacquant 1992: 111; Bourdieu 2014: 122). In April 2003, the civilian capacity of the state was dismantled by the looting that spread across Baghdad. 17 of Baghdad's 23 ministry buildings were destroyed. In addition, the US occupying authorities, obsessed about the potential threat of reconstituted authoritarianism, disbanded the

armed forces and intelligence services and purged the civil service of the top four levels of the Ba'ath party's membership, while banning any party member occupying the top three management levels of any government institution. They then divided the ministries with coercive capital between different political parties, deliberately setting up fields of competition within each ministry (Rathmell 2007: 7). The collapse of state capacity created space for other fields, specifically the religious field, to exercise greater power than it had done at any time in Iraq's previous history.

Principles of vision and division in Iraq's political field.

An individual's habitus, their socialisation, sense of self and place within a wider society, is shaped by competition within different fields. In the political field, politicians, groups, and parties struggle to amass symbolic capital, the ability to impose a vision of how society is to be ordered and have that vision inculcated into the habitus of the population.

The principle vision through which the United States sought to understand and transform Iraq had two aspects to it. The first was a transformative Neo-Liberalism. (Dodge 2010: 1270, 1274-5). The second aspect of the Bush administration's principle vision was how Iraq's political field was understood. Although the Bush administration was divided along personal, institutional and ideological lines, as soon as regime change in Iraq was discussed, a uniform principle vision of its society emerged. Across Central Intelligence Agency reports, National Security Council briefing papers, documents drawn up by both the State Department and Defence Department and then the post-facto autobiographies of the main decision-makers, Iraq

was perceived of as irrevocably divided along ethnic and religious lines between homogeneous and mutually antagonist communities of Shi'a, Sunni, and Kurd. From the start of planning, through the invasion itself to the first year of the occupation, that sectarian trope dominates perceptions of Iraq to the exclusion of almost anything else.³

In Iraq itself, principle visions that focused on exclusive Shi'a and Kurdish communal identities began to cohere in the 1970s and 1980s, driven by brutal attempts by the Ba'athist state to dominate all of Iraq's fields (Dodge 2018: 32-33, 340). However, the principle vision that came to dominate Iraq after 2003, the *Muhasasa Ta'ifia* or sectarian apportionment system, was developed in exile in the early 1990s.

The exiled opposition movement to Ba'athist rule began to cohere and gain international recognition after Iraq's invasion of Kuwait in August 1990, when the removal of the Ba'athist regime in Baghdad looked possible. A series of conferences and workshops in the Middle East and Europe drew opposition groups together in an attempt to unify and plan for an Iraq after regime change (al-Bayati 2011; Ismael and Ismael 2010: 85). In London, in July [2002](#), a workshop was held at the al-Khoei Foundation (Allawi 2007: 75). The resulting document, 'Declaration of the Shi'a of Iraq' (al-Rubi'e, Allawi and al-Hakim: [2002](#)), was signed by a number of Iraqi exiles who would later take senior positions in government after regime change. It sets out a powerful principle of vision and division.⁴ The document 'strives to elucidate a Shia perspective on the future of Iraq' and sets out a principle vision of Iraq as irrevocably divided between Sunni and Shi'a. It then champions the Shi'a Islamist movement as

the main political driver for the realisation of a long awaited Shi'a equality (al-Rubi'e, Allawi and al-Hakim: [2002](#)).

This assertion, in exile, of a principle of vision that reorders and divides Iraq's political field along identitarian lines reached a peak of coherence at an opposition conference held in Salah al-Din, an area of northern Iraq beyond Baghdad's rule, in October 1992. The 234 exiled politicians present at the event established a number of committees that were to act as a unified opposition and government in waiting. Most importantly, positions on these governing bodies were allocated according to the 'Salah al-Din principles', with a 'virtual census' dividing up the jobs according to the conference's assessment of the percentage of the population which were Shi'a, Kurdish and Sunni (Nawar 2003; al-Bayati 2011: 949-951, 955-957).

If the 'Declaration of the Shia of Iraq' asserted a Shi'a Islamist principle vision of an Iraq irrevocably divided between two sects, it is in Salah al-Din in 1992 that the *Muhasasa Ta'ifia* principle of vision became the dominant way for the opposition parties present to understand Iraqi society. This principle vision guided their plans for a post-Ba'athist Iraq from 1992 onwards, through the preparations for the invasion from 2001 to 2003, to their arrival in Baghdad as the parties chosen by the US government to run the country.

At the centre of this vision was the assertion of religious and ethnic identities, primarily, Shi'a, Sunni and Kurd but also Christian, Turkoman, and Assyrian, as the only units through which Iraq could be conceived, its politics organised and state-society relations institutionalised. For those championing this understanding, other

identities; ideological, regional, or class based, simply did not have the authenticity to have practical meaning. The seven major parties that came to dominate Iraqi politics after 2003, promoted the *Muhasasa Ta'ifia* principle vision.⁵ Instrumentally, they used it to guarantee their place at the centre of Iraq's political field while making sure that this vision delivered the rules for competition within the field but also the value of the symbolic capital they were fighting over. The *Muhasasa Ta'ifia* principle vision was hence deployed to restructure Iraq's political field. It was institutionalised through the formation of its first governing body, the Iraq Governing Council, de-Ba'athification after 2003, the elections in 2005, 2010, 2014 and 2018 and finally the civil war that dominated the country from 2004 to 2007.

Following the 'sectarianisation thesis', the *Muhasasa Ta'ifia* principle of vision and division was certainly deployed instrumentally to realise the interests of both the Bush administration and the seven dominant political parties who gained prominence in exile. However, there is ample evidence to suggest that the symbolic violence at the centre of this principle of vision and division, the reordering of Iraq's political field along sectarian lines, was believed by those seeking to impose it. They saw their principle vision of Iraq as reflecting reality. Following Bourdieu, the principle of vision and division was both agential, deployed to further the interests of the seven political parties and the US but also structural, it was shaped by causative structures beyond the consciousness of agents who deployed it. This principle vision and the application of symbolic violence it drove, shaped the de-Ba'athification campaign, the recreation of Iraq's political field and all of the national elections after regime change. It shows how a principle vision of sectarian division was forced upon Iraqi society

and transformed both the political field and with it the habitus of the majority of Iraqis in it.

De-Ba'athification.

The principle of vision and division shared by both the American occupiers and their formerly exiled Iraqi collaborators separated Iraq into three homogenous, mutually exclusive, and antagonistic ethno-religious communities: Shi'a, Sunni, and Kurd. The policy of aggressive de-Ba'athification was certainly aimed at driving the former ruling elite out of government but also stigmatising one section of the society, Sunni Arab Muslims, as supporters and beneficiaries of the old regime. In targeting Sunnis, it separated them from the other two groups, marginalised them from the new political order, and laid the groundwork for their persecution but also a rebellion against the new order.

Paul Bremer was the civilian head of the US occupation of Iraq, the Chief Administrator of the Coalition Provision Authority (CPA), from 12 May 2003 until 28 April 2004. It is indicative of the importance that he attached to de-Ba'athification that the first thing he did, four days after his arrival in Baghdad, was to issue General Order Number One, 'The De-Ba'athification of Iraqi Society'. This sacked anyone who had been in the top four most senior levels of the party from government service as well as forbidding anyone who had been a party member from occupying the three most senior levels of the civil service. Bremer then quickly handed over responsibility for executing this policy to the Iraqi Governing Council, the body he created for Iraq politicians to take responsibility for government ministries. In 2005, de-

Ba'athification was written into Iraq's new constitution, with the Accountability and Justice Law, passed by the Iraqi parliament in 2008, passing responsibility for de-Ba'athification to a new statutory body, the Higher National Commission for Accountability and Justice (Sissons and Al-Saiedi 2013: 11-22). Estimates suggest that de-Ba'athification resulted in 41,324 civil servants dismissed in the first month of its operation (Sissons and Al-Saiedi 2013: 22).

For the Bush administration, the principle vision of sectarian division was so strong amongst US decision-makers that party membership, or at least sympathy and fellow travelling, was extended, explicitly and by inference, to the whole Sunni section of Iraqi society. Bremer, when briefing Bush on declining security in June 2003, described the 'Sunni heartlands' of west and north Iraq as containing '... lots of sore losers' (Bremer 2006: 71). Douglas Feith, as Under Secretary of Defence for Policy, responsible in Washington for managing post-war Iraq, repeatedly criticised those he saw as adopting 'the Sunni perspective' for being 'inclined to look somewhat benignly on Baathists' and favour cutting a deal with them: '... such a deal might generally gratify Sunni Arabs, whose political predominance in Iraq the Baathists ensured' (Feith 2008: 419, 430). Associating the Sunni population of Iraq with the Ba'ath Party thus shaped the US principle vision. Both were defined as the enemy, giving clarity to perceptions of Iraqi society and moral certainty to US policy.

The demonisation of the Ba'ath Party and the need for the widest possible process of de-Ba'athification was shared and driven forward by prominent exiles who took up senior government positions when they returned to Iraq. Sissons and Al-Saiedi argue that the intellectual coherence and institutional power of de-Ba'athification came

directly from those exiles, specifically the leader of the Iraqi National Congress, Ahmed Chalabi (2013: 9). In a series of interviews with senior CPA officials, Aysegul Zeren found that their primary source of information and advice on de-Ba'athification came not from opinion polls or extended research but from senior formally exiled politicians who were now in positions of power (Zeren 2014: 124).

In 2002, the Ba'ath Party had 4 million affiliates, equivalent to 16.5 per cent of the population (Sassoon 2012: 50). Their membership was spread across all sections of society, with people joining for both ideological but also instrumental reasons. In the political field post-2003, politicians seeking to mobilise the Shi'a section of the population cast them unambiguously as the universal victims of Ba'athism. Within a sectarian principle of vision and division it was straightforward for an ex-member of the Ba'ath Party who happened to be Shi'a to claim their innocence, arguing their membership had been coerced, whereas former members who were Sunni, found proving their innocence meant over-turning a dominant presumption of guilt.

De-Ba'athification, instigated by Paul Bremer and then pursued by leading members of Iraq's new political elite, played a key role in shaping Iraq's political field, imposing a principle of vision and division that shaped the habitus of ordinary Iraqis. The source of this principle of vision was both agential but also structural. De-Ba'athification was first used by members of Iraq's political elite to accrue symbolic capital by associating themselves and their parties with regime change and the defence of the new political order from the menace of a re-assertive Ba'athism. By pursuing de-Ba'athification, a division was created between those Iraqis committed to the new order and those supposedly tainted with association with the old. This

division was at base sectarian, with the Shi'a section of society being defined as victims and the Sunnis complicit in Ba'athist rule. De-Ba'athification hence became a tool in competitive victimhood (Haddad 2011). Rationalist explanations of 'sectarianisation' can certainly point to the instrumental use of de-Ba'athification by members of the new ruling elite to exclude their political rivals, solidify their voting base and fracture the opposition. However, this does not explain the real emotive fear of a Ba'athist revival amongst sections of the population and the belief of key politicians, for example the prime minister from 2006 to 2014, Nuri al-Maliki, that such a revival was a real threat. On the other hand, ethno-symbolists are right to see de-Ba'athification's role in a wider struggle of competing myth-symbol complexes. However, deploying Bourdieu's notion of symbolic capital and symbolic violence allows us to recognise the analytical insights of both the rational instrumentalists and the ethno-symbolists whilst also understanding the structural role that de-Ba'athification played in the sectarian division of Iraq's political field at a specific moment in Iraq's history and explain its ideational power to both mobilise and demonise.

The creation of Muhasasa Ta'ifia system.

In June and July 2003, the CPA set about creating the Iraq Governing Council, (IGC) the first body after regime change designed to represent the Iraqi population during the occupation. The principle vision that Paul Bremer and the rest of the US administration were working through was so strong that the process of its formation was dominated by ensuring its ethno-sectarian balance. Upon announcing its creation in July 2003, the CPA declared it to be 'the most representative body in Iraq's

history'. However, in US eyes, the representative nature of the body's twenty-five members could not have come from the method of their selection, handpicked by CPA staff and then vetted by the dominant political parties (Dobbins 2009: 45). Instead, they were representative of Iraq's divided nature, of its ethno-sectarian communities, with thirteen Shi'a members, five Kurds, five Sunnis, a Turkoman and a Christian. However, the forced and rather bizarre nature of this arrangement was highlighted by the inclusion of Hamid Majid Mousa, the Iraqi Communist Party's representative, in the 'Shi'a block' (Rahim Francke 2003; Dodge 2012: 41-43).

The IGC and, more specifically, the parties that formed the majority of its membership, were then given the job of picking ministers to run Iraq's government and selecting members to draft the provisional constitution (al-Istabadi 2009: 1634). Not only had the *Muhasasa Ta'ifia* principle vision been used to pick Iraq's first post-2003 governing body, it had given economic capital to those parties promoting the ethno-sectarian division of Iraq's political field. Each party appointed ministers who controlled the resources and payroll of their ministries, accelerating the sacking of existing civil servants, justified through de-Ba'athification, whilst hiring those linked to their parties and the sectarian communities they claimed to represent (Special Inspector General for Iraq Reconstruction 2009: 250).

After the IGC was formed in 2003, during the interim government of 2004, and after each national election in 2005, 2010, 2014 and 2018, the *Muhasasa Ta'ifia* principle vision dictated that ministries and their resources were awarded to the ethno-sectarian parties as their reward for mobilising voters along ethno-sectarian lines and then taking part in government's of national unity. Each party would exploit the resources

of the ministry they were awarded to gain economic capital in their struggle to dominate the political field. The parties in control of ministries would issue a *Tazkiyya* or letter of recommendation to their followers. This would allow them to get jobs in the ministries they controlled (Herring and Rangwala 2006: 131). As a result, access to government employment, dominant in the Iraqi job market, was only guaranteed by pledging allegiance to one of the political parties promoting the *Muhasasa Ta'ifia*. Iraqis seeking government jobs were interpolated as members of exclusive ethno-sectarian communities, Sunni, Shi'a or Kurd, with their habitus being socialised through the *Muhasasa Ta'ifia* principle vision in return for access to economic capital. The extent of this practise can be seen in the rapid growth of the state payroll that swelled from 850,000 employees a year after regime change to between seven and nine million in 2016 (Mamouri 2016; Arango 2016; Chulov 2016; Morris 2016).

The transformation of the political field through electoral politics.

The imposition of symbolic violence through the *Muhasasa Ta'ifia* principle vision was further advanced through a series of national elections held in January and December 2005 and March 2010. The triumph of those parties seeking to impose the *Muhasasa Ta'ifia* on Iraq, further transformed the country's political field, and with it the habitus of its population.

The reassertion of the religious field.

The significance of the first elections since regime change was recognised by the formally exiled politicians seeking to dominate the country, the US authorities and the Shi'a religious authorities, the *Marji'yya* and its dominant Grand Ayatollah, Ali al-Husseini al-Sistani. The four senior Ayatollahs in Iraq, the *Hawza 'ilmiyya*, based in Najaf, combine economic capital with social and cultural capital. They are all *marjas*, subjects of emulation to their Shi'a followers. Their followers donate a fixed proportion of their wages each week to their chosen *marja*, as well as seeking their advice on a diverse range of religious and secular issues. Their cultural capital, their standing within Shi'a Islam, comes from their reputation as Islamic scholars. Their social capital comes from the network of *wakils*, or representatives, spread across Iraq (Visser 2006). Since the death of his predecessor in 1992, Grand Ayatollah al-Sistani has been recognised as the most senior Shi'a religious figure in Iraq. The religious field under Ba'athist rule had long been dominated by the state. Sistani's intervention in the 2005 elections represented an assertion of the power and influence of Iraq's religious field in a society where the state had collapsed and the political field was fractured following invasion and regime change.

Sistani was highly critical of sectarian based political mobilisation. However, it is clear that from 2004 onwards, he developed a coherent plan to use the symbolic and cultural capital he had amassed in the religious field to shape the political field. He thus set out to maximise Shi'a representation in the Iraqi parliament after the January 2005 elections. In 2004, he called a meeting with the other three senior Ayatollahs, ahead of the 2005 election and then set up a six-man committee to choose candidates for the coalition that fought the elections. They created the United Iraqi Alliance (UIA), an overtly Shi'a coalition which held within it all the Shi'a Islamist political

parties and a large number of independent politicians (Clover 2004; Allawi 2007: 341-343). Whatever the Ayatollah's intention, his central role in creating the UIA decisively asserted the power of Iraq's religious field to shape the country's political field. He lent his considerable symbolic, economic, cultural and social capital to an exclusively Shi'a coalition, in effect turning the elections into '... a referendum on identity [rather] than a straightforward issues-related election' (Allawi 2007: 391).

During the electoral campaign, Sistani issued influential statements urging his followers to vote, with his nationwide network of *wakils* maximising the turnout. Although he did not officially back the UIA, its constituent parties and politicians overtly associated themselves with him and his cultural and symbolic capital (McCarthy and Mansour 2004). The Shi'a section of the electorate was powerfully interpolated and mobilised to vote not only and exclusively as Shi'as but Shi'as who were to be represented in parliament and government by Islamist political parties.

Those within Iraq's political field who had opposed the US occupation and the new political order it had imposed were encouraged to boycott the elections, further increasing sectarian polarisation. Overall, voter turnout was 58 per cent. In areas with a strong Kurdish majority, turnout was as high as 70 per cent. In areas with a high Shi'a majority turnout was 75 per cent. However, in areas with a high Sunni population turnout was low, averaging 10 per cent (Dodge 2012: 215). Against this background it is no surprise that the overtly secular and nationalist coalition built by Iyad Allawi, Iraqi National Accord, only managed to win 13.8 per cent of the vote compared with 48.2 per cent of the vote for the UIA and 25.7 per cent for the Kurdish alliance.

The purpose of the January 2005 vote was to elect members of the assembly to draft the constitution, so after that process Iraq went back to the polls in December 2005 to elect a full-term government. This election differed because the Sunni section of Iraq's population were interpolated and mobilised to vote in overtly sectarian terms as Sunnis, juxtaposed against two rival communities, Shi'a and Kurd. The main electoral alliance involved in this process, *Jabha al-Tawafuq al-Iraq* (the Accord Front) was built around the Iraqi branch of the Muslim Brotherhood, the Islamic Party (IIP). Their goal was the sectarianisation of Iraq's Sunni population. This was triggered by a realisation that without mobilisation along explicitly sectarian lines, those seeking to represent the Sunni section of society would be excluded from the *Muhasasa Ta'ifia* and the access to economic capital it brought. The process gained cultural and social capital when the head of the Sunni *Waqf* or religious endowment, Adnan al-Dulaymi, gave his backing to the *Tawafuq* coalition (Meijer 2007: 5-19). Once again, Iyad Alawi attempted to build a secular nationalist coalition, the Iraq National List.

Electoral turnout for the December 2005 election rose to 79.6 per cent, indicating that the Sunni section of society had indeed been successfully mobilised by identitarian rhetoric and become integrated into the *Muhasasa Ta'ifia*. The shrinking space within Iraq's political field for a non-sectarian secular nationalist principle of vision was indicated by the decline in Allawi's vote to 8.02 per cent. Once again the Shi'a Islamist Iraqi National Alliance gained a plurality of the vote, gaining 41.19 per cent and dominated the formation of the government under the *Muhasasa Ta'ifia* system (Dodge 2012: 215).

The third national elections of 2010 saw the first sustained challenge to the *Muhasasa Ta'ifia* system. This was driven, to some extent, by the fracturing of the *Muhasasa Ta'ifia* principle vision and the large electoral coalitions that represented it. Ayatollah Sistani was reported at the time to have become increasingly frustrated with the corruption, sectarianism and government incoherence associated with the *Muhasasa Ta'ifia* (Gutman 2009). As such, he not only withdrew his symbolic, social and cultural capital from the United Iraqi Alliance but also pushed for a change to the electoral system that would favour more voter choice. Sistani's withdrawal of support and the reassertion of the autonomy of the political field from the religious field saw the Shi'a Islamist parties split into two competing factions, the original Iraqi National Alliance and the coalition built by the then Prime Minister, Nuri al Maliki, State of Law (Dawisha 2010: 34). This fracturing of social and symbolic capital in the political field also saw those seeking to interpolate and mobilise Iraqi Sunnis specifically as Sunnis become less effective. *Jabha al-Tawafuq al-Iraq* split with a number of its senior members leaving (Ottaway and Kaysi 2009).

Iyad Allawi set out to capitalise on the reduction in the influence of the religious field and hence the new fluidity in the struggle to dominate the political field. He increased his social capital by building a much broader based organisation to fight the elections, with eighteen parties; uniting politicians with strong regional organisations with those with national name recognition. The new coalition, *Iraqiya*, built its principle vision around its lack of contamination by the sectarianism and corruption central to the *Muhasasa Ta'ifia* since 2005. *Iraqiya*'s principle vision promoted an overt secular nationalist politics (Shadid 2010). *Iraqiya* set out, as the central part of its electoral campaign, to interpolate and mobilise the Iraqi electorate as secular citizens.

Iraq's newly competitive political field and Allawi's successful accrual of both social and symbolic capital, meant the election delivered a three way split, with *Iraqiya* winning 24.7 per cent of the vote, al-Maliki's State of Law, 24.2 per cent and the Iraqi National Alliance, 19.2 per cent (Dodge 2012: 216). Bourdieu argues that those competing within the political field share a complicity, an agreement about the rules of the game they are participating in. In 2010, it was clear that *Iraqiya* had breached the rules of the game that underpinned the sectarian vision at the core of the *Muhasasa Ta'ifia*. The rise to prominence of a coalition that won its votes on an overtly secular nationalist platform was a direct threat to the symbolic violence that underpinned and shaped the whole post-2003 political field. This threat not only saw the ethno-sectarian parties come together to save the *Muhasasa Ta'ifia* principle of vision but also US and Iranian diplomats join with them. This process lasted 249 days from polling day until the formation of the new government.

The final breakthrough came in November 2010. The sitting prime minister, Nuri al-Maliki, managed to use the systemic threat of *Iraqiya*'s vote to impose a rough and ready unity on the Kurdish and Shi'a parties, who had a great deal to lose. The *Muhasasa Ta'ifia*, with its symbolic violence imposing a sectarian identity on Iraq's political field had triumphed once again. Cabinet posts and the resources they brought with them were divided between the winning electoral coalitions. This was justified in the name of sectarian quotas. By bringing *Iraqiya* into another government of national unity on the basis of the *Muhasasa Ta'ifia*'s principle of vision, the threat it posed had been neutered. *Iraqiya* could now be treated as just another communalist party, replacing *Tawafuq* as the representatives of the Sunni vote.

Conclusions: Bourdieu, sectarianization and Iraq.

The US-led invasion of Iraq in 2003 was certainly an overt and ambitious attempt to transform the country after thirty-five years of Ba'athist rule. However, the aftermath of that invasion led to a restructuring of Iraq's political field that marginalised the influence of secular nationalism and favoured political parties promoting ethno-sectarian identity politics. This restructuring played a major part in the spread of politically sanctioned corruption, the rise of violence and the country's descent into civil war from 2004 to at least 2007. This was certainly not the intended outcome for the major players involved in regime change and its aftermath, the US government, Grand Ayatollah Ali Al-Sistani, and the seven formerly exiled but then dominant political parties. The two main academic approaches explaining the rise of ethnic and sectarian politics, the rational instrumentalism of the 'sectarianisation' thesis and the ethno-symbolists, would stress different reasons and hence causalities for this outcome. The sectarianisation approach would emphasise the role that political elites, both American and then Iraqi, played in mobilising Iraq's population along sectarian lines as a strategy for seizing and then holding on to power. There is clearly some explanatory value in this approach. However, it does not explain why they were so successful; why ethno-sectarian ideology, largely imported into the country after 2003, managed to mobilise the population and drive them in large numbers to the ballot box in 2005 and 2010 in support of these parties. The ethno-symbolic approach, on the other hand, explains ethno-sectarian politics as pre-existing the invasion in the form of competing 'myth-symbol' complexes. However, variation in

the popularity of these myth-symbol complexes and the rival attraction of other secular nationalist alternatives is more difficult for ethno-symbolism to explain.

The approach developed in this paper, broadly a 'Bourdiesian' one, does not seek to discount the explanatory veracity of the sectarianisation thesis or the ethno-symbolist approach. However, it seeks to broaden out the explanation and understand the causality behind it. The strength or weakness of these different identities is shaped by competition within political fields. The sectarian rhetoric that flourished after 2003 was not a return to nor a rejuvenation of previous identities suppressed under Ba'athism. Instead, the success of sectarian entrepreneurs was driven by the way that the political field and the capital being fought over within it was transformed by the invasion and its aftermath. What was ideationally attractive at times after 2003 was the result of that transformation not a continuum of events before it. At the centre of this explanation is the principle of vision and division used by Iraqi politicians in their attempt to order and dominate Iraq's political field. This principle of vision was clearly deployed instrumentally by agents competing in Iraq's political field. However, those agents were also shaped by the principle visions they were working within, their own agency was constrained by the ideational structures, the symbolic violence they were deploying. Although a Bourdieusian approach clearly, in agreement with the sectarianisation thesis, identifies the instrumental actions of the ruling elite, it sees that agency as constrained by the boundaries of the possible set by the political field they are competing in as well as their own habitus. It is clear that both US and Iraqi elites conceived of Iraq as riven by communal divisions. As such they were driven and constrained by ideational structures in the same way as the people they were attempting to mobilise.

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¹ On previous uses Bourdieu in the study of ethnic identity outside the Middle East see Bentley 1987, Wimmer 2004, Wimmer 2008.

² In 2004, the Iraqi Centre for Research and Strategic Studies found that 64.7% of Iraqis polled, favoured 'a politically centralised, unitary state as opposed to a federation', with 67% saying that they wanted both fiscal and administrative centralisation. Oxford Research International polls in February, March and June 2004, found broadly similar views. In response to the question 'which structure should Iraq

have in the future’, 79% of respondents agreed with the statement ‘one unified Iraq with a central government in Baghdad’. See Dodge 2005: 55.

³ See for example Central Intelligence Agency 2002; Feith 2003; Feith 2008: 201 and Rumsfeld 2011: 498.

⁴ These included Ali Allawi, who became Minister of Trade and Minister of Defence in the cabinet of the Iraq Governing Council, 2003-2004, and Minister of Finance in the Iraqi Transitional Government during 2005, Hussein al-Shahristani was Deputy Speaker of the Iraqi National Assembly during the Iraqi Transitional Government, Minister of Oil from 2006-2010, Deputy Prime Minister, 2010-2016, Minister for Higher Education and Scientific Research, 2014-2016 and Mowaffak al-Rubaie, member of the Iraq Governing Council, 2003-2004 and National Security Adviser, 2004-2009.

⁵ These seven parties were The Kurdistan Democratic Party, the Patriotic Union of Kurdistan, the Iraqi National Council, the Iraqi National Accord, the Supreme Council for Islamic Revolution in Iraq, the Dawa Islamic Party and the Iraqi Islamic Party.