

Instrumentalism and Its Explanation of Shia Elite Manipulation in Iraq After 2003

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Abstract

This study examines the role of Shia elite groups in manipulating sectarian identity in post-2003 Iraq from the perspective of instrumentalist theory. The research question addresses how instrumentalism explains the role of Shia elite groups in manipulating Shia sectarian identity after 2003. The importance of this study lies in its potential to demonstrate that the manipulation of Shia identity has contributed to external interference, political instability, ethnic imbalance, and the weakening of the country's political institutions. Based on a qualitative approach, the study examines the impact of influential Shia elites in Iraqi politics, focusing on figures like Nuri Al-Maliki and Muqtada Al-Sadr. Since gaining power in 2003, these elites have accessed substantial political, economic, and military resources, which they have used to promote their agendas. It highlights how they manipulate Shia identity for political, economic, and sectarian benefits through their influential positions. The findings suggest that their policies have contributed to the weakening and sectarianization of state institutions, increased external interference, and adversely affected the balance among ethnic groups, thereby escalating tensions.

Keyword: Instrumentalism, Iraq, Shia, Elite, Ethnic Conflict

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1. Introductory Chapter

1. 1. Introduction

Understanding the influence of the ruling elite on ethnic conflict is crucial as elites often play a decisive role in either decreasing or increasing ethnic tensions, significantly affecting multi-ethnic societies. Since the foundation of the Iraqi state until the early 21st century, different political systems have been implemented in Iraq, during which political elites manipulated ethnic identities and directly affected the balance among ethnic groups. Notably, the Sunni Arab elite led the monarchy (1921-1958) with British support (Scholvin, 2011, p.52). However, they could not maintain balance among ethnic groups, systematically excluding Kurds and Shia from key positions in the government. This policy created widespread distrust, especially after the monarchy's fall and the rise of the Republican elite (1958-1968). Abdul Karim Qasim continued this identity manipulation, promoting nationalist discourse and opposing pan-Arabism while refusing to grant Kurds the autonomy he had previously promised, all to secure power and strengthen his hold (Scholvin, 2011, pp.56-58). Moreover, this elite

set the stage for Ba'athist rule (1968-2003), particularly during Saddam Hussein's leadership, when ethnic conflict and manipulation of Kurdish and Shia identities reached their peak, leading to genocide, ethnic cleansing, and chemical attacks (Slim, 2019, p.3). The fall of the Ba'ath regime marked a turning point in Iraqi political history and resulted in the rise of a new ruling elite from different sectarian and ethnic groups. Specifically, the Shia elite gained authority 80 years after Iraq's foundation, thus, this study focuses on post-2003 Iraq under Shia ruling.

1.2. Statement of the Problem

Ethnic conflict in Iraq since 2003 is a key factor contributing to the country's political instability. The fall of Saddam Hussein's regime and the subsequent restructuring of the Iraqi political system based on ethnic and sectarian lines led to the strengthening of ethnic and sectarian identities within political competition. Instead of reducing ethnic tensions, these arrangements institutionalized sectarian divisions, worsened ethnic rivalries, and created a political environment where ethnic identity became the main factor influencing political and economic opportunities. The division of power along ethnic and sectarian lines has increased tensions and conflicts rather than promoting national unity. Since the US invasion of Iraq in 2003, the country has experienced ethnic conflict, posing a major challenge to political stability and social cohesion among Iraq's ethnic and sectarian groups. There has been ongoing debate about the nature of this ethnic conflict since 2003. Hence, researchers, politicians, and experts have studied extensively the causes of the post-2003 ethnic clashes among different ethnic groups. Some scholars, on the one hand, such as (Anderson & Stansfield, 2005, pp. 14-29), argue that the main cause and roots of the ethnic conflict in Iraq trace back to the foundation of the Iraqi state in 1921. Other scholars, including (Nasr, 2007), focus on the role of proxy wars, stating that support from regional

powers like Saudi Arabia and Iran for Shia and Sunni groups has intensified the conflict and promoted the interests of these regional powers. On the other hand, Anthony H. Cordesman, in a report published by the Center for Strategic and International Studies, links the conflict in Iraq to the structure of the Iraqi state as a failed state. He believes that after the fall of Saddam Hussein, Iraq moved towards violence, ethnic and sectarian tensions, and ineffective governance (Cordesman, 2019). Therefore, despite the factors previously identified, another cause of conflict discussed in this study is the manipulation of identities by elites, especially the Shia leadership. While much focus has been placed on Iraqi sectarian conflict, limited analysis exists on how elites use identity to consolidate power, marginalize rivals, and shape state institutions. This paper emphasizes the deliberate and strategic use of identity by key Shia actors, showing that identity is not a fixed social fact but a tool for political control. Understanding this manipulation is crucial to explaining Iraq's ongoing instability and declining national unity. This study covers the period from 2003 to 2023.

1.3 Research Question

The primary question of this study is: To what extent have Shia elites in Iraq manipulated sectarian identity since 2003, and how can instrumentalism explain their strategies?

1.4 Methodology

This study employs a qualitative approach combining case studies and critical discourse analysis to examine how Shia elites in Iraq have altered their identity since 2003. It focuses on three key actors—Nuri Al-Maliki, Muqtada Al-Sadr, and PMF leaders—chosen for their significant roles in shaping political developments after 2003.

The data is gathered from political speeches, media interviews, academic sources, government documents, and reports from reputable institutions. Critical discourse analysis is used to analyze how language and framing are employed to construct sectarian narratives, while thematic analysis identifies patterns in elite strategies. A purposive sampling method selects sources based on relevance, reliability, and the time period from 2003 to 2023. Only sources directly related to the chosen elites and confirmed through multiple accounts are included. This approach provides a comprehensive understanding of elite-driven identity politics within the framework of instrumentalism in Iraq's post-conflict and divided environment.

1.5 Literature Review

The literature on instrumentalism theory includes a large number of studies and writings. In the theoretical literature, many scholars have focused on instrumentalism theory in the field of ethnicity and the role of elites in manipulating ethnic identities. There is also literature related to the role of elites that is well discussed from various perspectives (Brass, 1991; Horowitz, 1985; Barth, 1969s et al.).

In this regard, Rashid Ammar Yas and Farooq Abdul Mawloud (2019) conducted a study entitled "The Role of the Political Elite in Aggravating Civil Peace in Iraq After 2003". Researchers examined the significant impact of political elites on civil peace in Iraq after the US invasion and regime change in 2003, focusing on the transition from a one-party system to a democratic framework characterized by multi-party elections and politics. The study determines how the new political elite, emerging during the transition, influenced social, political, and economic dynamics, often exacerbating sectarian instability and tensions. Finally, the study seeks to provide insights for improving governance and promoting stability in Iraq (Yas & Mawloud, 2019).

Mohammed Ali Bapir (2016) in his doctoral thesis entitled “How the Political Elite View Democracy in Deeply Divided Countries: The Case of Iraq”. examined the role of Shia, Sunni, and Kurdish political elites in shaping Iraqi democracy after 2003. On the one hand, it highlights that Shia elites predominantly favor a majority democracy that reflects the majority of their demographics, while they worry about power sharing that could dilute their influence. The Sunni elite, on the other hand, is between the majority and consensus models. The Kurdish political elite, with a history of autonomy, argue for a consensus democracy, emphasizing power sharing to protect minority rights and prevent marginalization. The study concludes that the successful establishment of democracy in Iraq is tied to the ability of elites to forge a power-sharing agreement that enhances intergroup trust (Bapir, 2019).

Further, Fred F. Odisho (2003) conducted a study entitled "Transition in Crisis: Stalled Democratization in post-2003 Iraq". The researcher emphasizes the elites' important role in Iraq's democratization process. The study combines structuralism and instrumentalism theory to analyze the absence of such an elite in Iraq, arguing that this lack hinders the government's ability to integrate networks of trust, reduce categorical inequality, and reduce the autonomy of autonomous power centers. Charles Tilley's framework is also applied, which posits that democratization involves increasing the integration of networks of trust in public policy, reducing the autonomy of power centers. The failure of Iraqi elites to unite and cooperate has led to a stagnation of democracy as sectarian divisions and distrust continue among ethno-sectarian groups (Odisho, 2023).

In the same line, Hiba Ali Hussein (2018) conducted a research entitled "The Role of the Political Elite and Political Intellectuals in Democratic Transition in Iraq as a Case Study". The study used a qualitative analytical method to investigate political awareness among community members and its effects on

stability and growth. It defines key concepts such as elites and political intellectuals, highlighting their impact on culture and political governance. The study concluded that a strong democratic transition in Iraq requires the presence of an educated and engaged elite who can foster a political culture that promotes democracy. It emphasizes the importance of intellectuals in shaping public opinion and guiding political discourse, advocating their active participation in the democratic process to ensure a stable and effective system of governance (Hussain, 2018).

Hence, after reviewing several articles and studies on the influence of political elites in Iraq, it is found out that prior researchers have primarily focused on one aspect of the issue. For instance, they have mostly studied the role of elites in social peace, democracy in developing nations, the state of democracy, and the involvement of elites and intellectuals in the transition to democracy. What distinguishes this study from previous studies is that the researcher focuses on the role of the Shia elite, especially their prominent leaders, in manipulating Shia identity. It examines the roles and agendas of each of these groups and elites after 2003 from the perspective of instrumentalist theory arguments

1.6 Structure of the study

This study is designed to develop a clear and logical argument. It begins with an introduction outlining the research problem and question, with its relevance to post-2003 Iraq. The literature review identifies gaps in existing work on sectarianism and instrumentalism, establishing the contribution of the study. The methodology section explains the qualitative approach and justifies the selection of cases. Core analysis examines how Shia elites have manipulated identity in Iraq, applying instrumentalism theory to specific actors and events, like: the role of militia groups in manipulating sectarian identity Finally, the paper explains the

findings, explores broader implications for Iraq politics and identity theory, and future research on elite-motivated identity construction

2. Theoretical Framework of Instrumentalism Theory

This section explores instrumentalism theory in order to analyse the causes of ethnic conflict. It begins by explaining the concept, followed by a discussion of the key assumptions of the theory as viewed by Paul Brass.

2.1 Conceptual Understanding of Instrumentalism

Instrumentalism has a broad theoretical and philosophical framework that encompasses ethnic conflicts and various intellectual and scientific approaches. This theory was developed in the 19th century by American philosophers, including Charles Sanders Peirce. Later, in the 20th century, William James and John Dewey played significant roles in promoting pragmatism within the framework of instrumental theory (Ghersa, n.d). However, the main theoretical argument of this study is to understand instrumentalism theory in the context of ethnic conflict. To grasp the emergence of instrumentalism, we must revisit the views and understandings of primordialism theory, which emphasizes that ethnic differences are the primary causes of conflict (Che, 2016, pp. 14-15).

In the second half of the 20th century, particularly since the 1970s, the instrumentalist approach became dominant in interpreting African ethnic conflicts. Proponents of instrumentalist theory, developed within the framework of the Marxist approach and class analysis, primarily regards nationality as a tool utilized by the elite to advance their own power and that of their classes (Ibhawoh, 2010, p. 223). Thus, instrumentalism emerged as another wave of theory, with scholars such as Paul Brass, Abner Cohen, Glazer, and Moynihan contributing extensively to its development. They elaborated on its main ideas and emphasized

the role of elites in using and manipulating national issues for political and economic gains (Duwarah, 2015, p. 34).

Understanding instrumentalism theory requires analyzing various scholarly perspectives that contribute to new insights into the causes of ethnic conflict. For instance, Varshney claims that the human race and identity are not permanent entities and hold no intrinsic value (Varshney, 2009, p. 282). Similarly, Paul Brass argues that ethnic identity and nationalism lack natural dimensions; rather, they are political constructs employed by political elites to achieve political and economic gains for themselves and their groups (Spender & Wollman, 2002, p.48). Thus, the views presented by Brass and Varshney emphasize the flexibility of ethnic identity, detaching it from historical contexts and suggesting that elites can manipulate ethnic identities based on political and social circumstances.

Furthermore, Abner Cohen, a prominent scholar of instrumentalism theory, posits that ethnicity serves an instrumental purpose. Specifically, the primary reason for a group's consolidation of ethnic identity is economic and political, not psychological (Nazir, 2019, p.13 cited in Kumar 2006, p.69). Consequently, political elites wield ethnic identities as tools to achieve political and economic objectives rather than as ends in themselves. Beside ethnic identities, instrumentalists highlight several additional factors that elucidate ethnic conflicts, such as security concerns. When ethnic groups perceive threats to their survival, they unite to ensure their security; during this process, political elites exploit the ensuing insecurity for their personal or political gains (Posen, 1993, pp.27-28). Posen's interpretation of instrumentalism centers around security issues, suggesting that one ethnic group's strength can threaten the security of another, particularly in multi-ethnic countries.

2.2 The Main Principles of Instrumentalism

The key principles of instrumentalism theory illuminate how political elites strategically manipulate national identities and cultures to pursue specific material or political objectives. While these elites serve as the primary actors in the analyses associated with this theory, it is essential to recognize that instrumentalism cannot be uniformly applied across its core tenets. Each scholar approaches the fundamental assumptions of instrumentalism from diverse perspectives, contributing various arguments to the discourse. Thus, this study aims to explore the pivotal assumptions presented by Paul R. Brass, examining the nuanced ways in which his insights shape an understanding of this complex theoretical framework.

First, instrumentalism perceives ethnic and sectarian groups as tools for elites to attain political and economic benefits. Paul Brass emphasizes that national identities are not inherently conflictual or stable; instead, they are created and transformed by elites in response to changing circumstances, dependent on specific situations (Brass, 1991, p. 13). Second, ethnic and sectarian conflicts can serve as powerful instruments for ruling elites when harnessed to garner support and consolidate control over key institutions. In this regard, Paul Brass contends that ethnic conflict does not arise directly from differences in ethnic identity. Rather, ethnic conflict emerges only when these identities are politicized or manipulated to further economic and political interests (Ozкимli, 2010, p. 89). Third, when analyzing the role of political elites in central states or states comprised of various groups, Brass's interpretation of instrumentalism emphasizes that nationalism is utilized by both the elites of central states and those of non-dominant groups. These interests may encompass greater political gains within the system, enhanced representation in the political arena, increased

control over state affairs, or boosted economic advantages over other groups (Ahmad, n.d, p. 73). These characteristics of Pual Brass are significant due to their relevance to the role of elites in ethnic conflict in Iraq. Analyzing these characteristics will help answer the research question, which examines the role of Shia elites in manipulating Shia identity in Iraq.

3. Shia Elite Manipulation in Iraq after 2003

This section analyzes the perspectives and policies of the Shia elite regarding the modification of sectarian identity in post-2003 Iraq. It focuses on the efforts of the Shia elite to centralize power, exploring sectarian mobilization and elite strategies in this context, and finally addressing the role of militia elites and the instrumentalization of sectarian identity during the post-2003 period.

3.1 Shia Elites' Power Centralization Efforts in Iraq

Shia efforts to gain power began prior to Saddam Hussein's downfall, especially after the second Gulf War and the first Iraqi opposition congress. At that congress, Shia groups attempted to reshape Iraq's political structure to serve their interests (Washington Institute, 1996). The fall of Saddam Hussein in 2003 created an opportunity for the Shia elite to take control. After 2003, a new political system emerged based on sectarianism and was dominated by Shias. Meanwhile, an insurgency with a clear sectarian tone, mainly led by Sunni elites and carried out by Sunni Arabs, responded to the rising significance of sectarian identity and Shias' rise to the top of Iraq's political hierarchy (Awwad, 2024, p. 58). The main goal of Shia leaders after the US invasion was to seize power and compensate for the oppression they had endured for over 80 years during the 20th century. Therefore, Shia leaders, especially Ali Al-Sistani, continuously emphasized the importance of holding elections as a way to gain popular

legitimacy and power for the Shias (Cole, 2006, p.34). After the US invasion of Iraq, one of the key questions facing Shia Islamic leaders was whether the government should be Islamic or federal. Earlier, at the Iraqi opposition congress, leaders agreed that Iraq after Saddam should be a federal democracy. However, accepting the political reality after 2003, especially the US occupation and the involvement of Kurds and Sunnis in Iraq's governance, Shia leaders were compelled to shift from Islamic views to pragmatic ones. They could not rule Iraq alone (Hasan, 2019, p.5). In other words, the Shia Islamic leaders who later gained power couldn't directly enforce their religious Islamic beliefs within state institutions but aimed to promote their religious agenda within sectarian politics.

After the 2005 Iraqi parliamentary elections, the Da'wah Party and other Shia Islamist parties joined forces to create the United Iraqi Coalition, which secured most parliamentary votes. This coalition provided the Shia elite with a historic opportunity to assume political power in Iraq for the first time in the country's history (Hasan, 2019). In 2005, Ibrahim Jaafari assumed the role of prime minister of the first elected Iraqi government after the US invasion. During his tenure, the Da'wah Party increased its influence by balancing rival forces, building consensus among Shias, and establishing an ethno-sectarian system (Fanttapie, 2023). From the start of Iraq's post-Saddam political process, Ibrahim Jaafari and Nuri Al-Maliki played key roles in reshaping Shia identity to strengthen their political standing. As prime minister, Jaafari symbolized Shia empowerment, but his failure to control rising sectarian violence weakened his position. This opened the door for Nuri Al-Maliki, a prominent Da'wah Party member who, while serving in parliament, used the Ba'athist Arabization process and parliamentary committees to portray the Sunni opposition as remnants of the old regime. He positioned himself as a strong defender of Shia interests against Baathists and Al-Qaeda, advocating opposition to sectarianism. This strategy

helped him become a prominent figure, presenting Shia dominance as vital for Iraqi stability and justice (Parker & Salman, 2013, pp. 71-72).

The 2006 bombing of the Samarra Mosque ignited widespread sectarian violence. The inadequate response from Shia leaders, especially Ibrahim Al-Jaafari, increased Sunni discontent and diminished both domestic and international support for his government. He resigned under US pressure, with the understanding that the Shia community and the Da'wah Party would retain the prime minister position to preserve Shia power (Norling, 2022, p. 112). As time passed without a strong candidate emerging, both the Americans and Iraqis supported Maliki, who was then a Da'wah Party member of parliament. He was elected prime minister in mid-2006 (Jeffrey, 2014). This marked the start of a new phase in Iraq's governance. Maliki viewed this as an opportunity to assert his dominance and push his political agenda, which resulted in his control over government institutions and the marginalization of other groups.

Early in his tenure, Nuri Al-Maliki aimed to maintain his power through "national unity" by involving nearly all ethnic and sectarian groups in his cabinet (Allawi, 2007, p. 445). To create a stable cabinet that would strengthen his political position, Kurdish and Sunni ethnic and sectarian groups participated in the political process. In this context, Maliki introduced several initiatives to reduce sectarian divisions in Iraq, including the prime minister's effort for national reconciliation. He also identified militias as a problem that needed to be addressed and proposed guidelines to allow certain factions of the insurgency and Baathists to reintegrate into Iraq's political system (Alawad, 2024, p. 61). During this period, Maliki's government remained stable in his first term. Through this approach, Maliki was able to present himself as a unifying leader while simultaneously strengthening his power without threatening his position.

Although Nuri Al-Maliki's formation of the cabinet marked a significant political step aimed at advancing democracy, he initially sought to manipulate governance institutions. He appointed trusted family members and members of the Da'wah Party to key state positions, centralized power within the prime minister's office by placing close allies in control, bypassed official chains of command, and created parallel structures to oversee intelligence and military operations. This strategy allowed him to weaken institutional independence and push his agenda through a network of loyal associates (Parker & Salman, 2013). This extensive network signaled a new political phase, characterized by a more authoritarian cabinet often referred to as the Malikiun (Haven, 2015, p. 3).

Another key aspect was the reform of the security sector during his first term as prime minister. This was mainly achieved through the creation of the Office of the Commander-in-Chief (OCINC) in 2007, placing loyalists under its control and beyond the oversight of the Ministries of Defense and Interior. The OCINC operated without legal accountability, directly commanding units and intelligence forces. Maliki issued orders independently, often bypassing the formal military hierarchy. Consequently, he intensified ethnic and sectarian conflicts by politicizing security operations, using state institutions to consolidate Shia dominance and suppress rival ethnic and sectarian groups (Sullivan, 2013, p. 11). Maliki's establishment of OCINC showcases Brass's principle of institutionalizing identity control. By removing military command from parliamentary oversight, Maliki secured a dominant Shia structure under the guise of national security—an example of instrumentalist maneuvering.

At the same time, Maliki strategically manipulated the Iraqi intelligence establishment to consolidate power and marginalize Sunnis, leading to further sectarian divisions between Shia and Sunni. To achieve this, he weakened the Iraqi National Intelligence Agency (INIS), led by Mohammed Shahwani, a Sunni.

He established the Ministry of Foreign Affairs for National Security Affairs (MSNSA) by appointing Shia ally Shirwan Al-Wa'il (Al Awwad, 2024, pp. 63-64). Furthermore, after Shahwani's resignation in 2009, Maliki launched a purge claiming to target Baathist dissidents and dismissed 376 mostly Sunni officers with experience, replacing them with members of the Da'wah Party (Bengali, 2010). This move not only dismantled intelligence influence but also further marginalized Sunnis in key positions and deepened sectarianism within state institutions. Therefore, the instrumentalism theory can explain why Maliki used sectarianism as a tool to seize power and control over state institutions, intensifying ethnic conflict.

The instrumentalist theoretical framework offers valuable insights into security issues by showing that the strength of one ethnic group's elite can threaten the security of another, especially in countries with diverse ethnic populations. For example, Nuri Al-Maliki consolidated his power over the Iraqi Kurds during his second term as prime minister. The central government in Baghdad adopted a tough stance on the Kurdistan Region's demands, escalating tensions between Kurds and Arabs and increasing the risk of military conflict (Wilgenburg, 2012, p. 49). For instance, in mid-2012, Maliki announced the creation of the Tigris Operations Command, which oversees security forces in Kirkuk and Diyala. This move aimed to weaken the Kurdistan Regional Government's position in favor of the federal government. Simultaneously, a security dispute led to an armed clash between Peshmerga forces and Iraqi federal police in Duzkhurmatu near Kirkuk in December 2012. The incident threatened to escalate into a larger conflict due to elite political maneuvers by Nuri Al-Maliki and former Kurdistan Regional Government President Massoud Barzani, who sent forces into such areas (Sullivan, 2013, pp. 9-10).

After the 2014 parliamentary elections, Maliki was unable to secure a third term as prime minister, but he continued to exert influence and maintain his political position after leaving office, remaining a powerful political figure. In this context, academic and political researcher Iyad Al-Anbar believes that, despite his failures, Nuri Al-Maliki has been the only political elite since 2003 to consistently exploit his political position to strengthen his leadership. This influence was more related to his personal power than to his party, the Da'wah Party (Husen, 2014). Additionally, the 2019 domestic protests in Iraq marked a new phase in elite struggles, with Nuri Al-Maliki actively maneuvering to reassert his political alliances. He leveraged elite networks within the Shia establishment, focusing on reorganizing the Rule of Law coalition and strengthening ties with armed factions loyal to him. Maliki characterized the protests as a threat to the Shia political order and used this narrative to justify consolidating power (Husen, 2024).

After the 2021 elections, Maliki and his coalition used the Iraqi Federal Supreme Court's coordination framework to block government formation attempts by interpreting the constitutional quorum for electing the president as requiring two-thirds of parliament. This legal move allowed Maliki's bloc to paralyze parliament simply by boycotting sessions, undermining Muqtada Al-Sadr's majority coalition. Maliki employed the judiciary to impose his political dominance, thereby maintaining influence and pressuring rivals to negotiate (Al-Jazeera (A), 2022). This tactic not only halted the formation of a new government but also helped Maliki further consolidate control over state institutions. Consequently, Maliki and his allies, in coordination with the Iranian coalition, capitalized on the resignation of 73 MPs. Maliki used this shift in power to block Sadr's efforts to form a government and pushed for a consensus candidate—Mohammed Shia' Al-Sudani—who had strong ties to his political network.

Maliki reaffirmed his influence over the prime ministerial position by uniting various Shia factions and employing legal and political strategies (World Politics View, 2022). This strategic move allowed the Maliki bloc to dominate the post-election landscape and shape the Iraqi government according to its interests.

Overall, Maliki's actions exemplify Brass instrumentalism theory, which shows that elites manipulate identity to secure power rather than express genuine group solidarity. By portraying Shia identity as threatening, he justified the centralization of security forces, control of the judiciary, and marginalization of Sunni and Kurdish rivals. Maliki's strategy turned sectarianism into a flexible political tool, consolidating power and weakening institutional checks. Thus, this supports Brace's argument that ethnic conflict does not stem from inherent differences but from identity constructions manipulated by elites to achieve political and economic dominance.

3.2 Identity Manipulation and Elite Populist Mobilization in Post-2003

The role of the populist elite in manipulating populist discourse has been one of the most prominent features of post-2003 Iraqi political discourse among the Shia elite. Among the most prominent figures in this dynamic is Muqtada Al-Sadr, whose influence has become more evident since the fall of Saddam Hussein's regime. Muqtada's emergence is linked to his father's role in founding the Al-Sadr movement in the 1990s, uniting people through shared identity and concern rather than formal organization, especially among marginalized southern tribes living on the outskirts of cities (Selvik & Amirteimour, 2020, p. 246). The rise of the Shia Islamic elite in Iraq, particularly after Saddam Hussein's weakening and fall, significantly contributed to Muqtada Al-Sadr's emergence as

a prominent religious and political leader in Iraq, especially following his father's assassination.

Sadr became a prominent political figure in Iraq after the 2003 U.S. invasion (Bruno, 2008). His policies initially opposed the U.S. occupation, while he adapted Shia sectarian identity to establish himself as the heir to his father's legacy and to gain loyalty among impoverished Shias. By providing various services, he cemented control in areas such as Sadr City. Through religious rhetoric and anti-American nationalism, he used Shia identity both as a source of empowerment and as a tool for political dominance (Bahry, 2024). From the very beginning of the political process, Muqtada Al-Sadr exploited the instability of Iraq's political and economic systems to strengthen his position among Shia masses. Simultaneously, he manipulated the post-U.S. occupation chaos by capitalizing on the collapse of state institutions and his father's legacy. Taking advantage of institutional disintegration, he enabled his followers—especially young imams and armed volunteers to fill the void by seizing control of mosques, hospitals, and public services, particularly in areas loyal to his father, such as Sadr City. While this grassroots takeover was somewhat disorganized, it fostered the perception of a rising movement. Muqtada used this momentum to position himself as the natural leader of a marginalized Shia base (International Crisis Group, 2006, p.7). In this context, Muqtada Al-Sadr employed sectarian identity as a strategy to garner support and legitimacy, supporting the main argument of instrumentalism theory that the political elite manipulate identity for their own political interests and gains.

The outbreak of the civil war in 2006 significantly influenced the politics of Iraq's elite due to ideological differences among opposing groups. As a leading Shia figure, Muqtada Al-Sadr exploited sectarian identity by using the Mahdi Army as a defender of the Shia community in Iraq. In response to attacks by Al-

Qaeda, an extremist Sunni insurgent group, the Mahdi Army engaged in widespread violence, especially in Baghdad, targeting Sunnis not for their actions but for their identities (International Crisis Group, 2008, p. i). With this approach, Sadr aimed to build trust among marginalized Shias through identity manipulation. However, in August 2007, a major clash in the holy city of Karbala between supporters of Muqtada's movement and the Supreme Shia Islamic Council affected Sadr's reputation (International Crisis Group, 2008, p. 1).

Meanwhile, by confronting U.S. forces and rival Shia groups like the Badr Corps, Sadr bolstered his image as a nationalist and anti-occupation religious leader (Bruno, 2008). His policies after 2003 focused on opposing the occupying forces and gaining popular support through nationalist sentiment, as seen during his participation in the Iraqi parliamentary elections when he supported Nuri Al-Maliki's bid for prime minister. Sadr set a timetable for the withdrawal of U.S. troops from Maliki's government, but it was ignored. In 2007, he withdrew six ministers. This move utilized anti-occupation sentiment to enhance his popularity (Al Jazeera (B), 2022). Therefore, Sadr's actions as a prominent Shia elite showcase how he fostered sectarian violence and manipulated his political positions as flexible tools to increase his influence amid changing political circumstances. This aligns with Paul Brass's argument on instrumentalism theory that elites shape national identities by transforming political realities and cultural symbols into political instruments.

The US withdrawal prompted Sadr's return and shifted his policy from aggressive to moderate. Sadr engaged in the political process and revised his identity policy by alternating between sectarian and nationalist rhetoric to serve his interests. In 2010, he urged Shia voters to support candidates advocating the withdrawal of all US troops in the general election. After his return in 2011, he presented himself as a nationalist reformer while maintaining his Shia power base

until he founded the nationalist-oriented Saraya Al-Salam group in 2014 to combat ISIS (Breaking News, 2024). Muqtada Al-Sadr's 2016 mass mobilization is a key example of elite manipulation by Muqtada Al-Sadr. He exploited public discontent to pressure the government while positioning himself as a reformist and anti-establishment figure, distancing himself from the ruling elite but still influencing major political outcomes. His rally in Tahrir Square signals a strategic shift—using street power to influence elite decisions and presenting himself as part of the political and central elite (Al-Marashi, 2016).

Additionally, by controlling public sentiment, Sadr depicted himself as both a protest leader and a political reformer. For instance, between 2015 and 2018, he mobilized mass protests to increase his support among desperate Iraqis. At the same time, he maintained control over state institutions and built alliances with secular and liberal actors to expand his appeal. This dual strategy energized his base and attracted new voters, resulting in a doubling of the Sadrist vote share in 2018 and securing both political and broader economic influence within the state (Mansur & DCruz, 2022, pp. 7-8). In this context, Paul Brass significantly contributes to understanding Muqtada Al-Sadr's policies through the lens of instrumentalism theory, as Brass argues that elites or groups use identity to mobilize masses in defense of or pursuit of their larger interests.

Muqtada Al-Sadr's manipulation of the October 2019 demonstrations served several political goals. By initially supporting the protests, he aligned himself with popular discontent against the ruling elite. Sadr saw the October demonstrations as a tool to strengthen his political position within the system and to establish dominance over state institutions, especially after the resignation of Adel Abdul Mahdi's cabinet. In an interview with Sharqia television, he emphasized on his aim to form a government based on a political majority and criticized many Shia elites in power as corrupt and selfish, blaming them for Iraq's

political decline and foreign dependence. He called for a new elite of moralists and reformers. In this context, he positioned himself as the right alternative, advocating accountability, political renewal, and distancing from and punishing Iranian allies (Al-Sharqiyah, 2020).

Meanwhile, Muqtada Sadr sought to pursue his political agenda by forming a government led by Mohammed Tawfiq Alawi. However, Shia elites were wary of Sadr's intentions and his proposed cabinet, fearing that his dominance would marginalize rival factions, concentrate power within the government, and disrupt the balance among Shia groups (Al-kli, 2020). Therefore, if Mohammed Tawfiq Alawi's cabinet had been formed, Iraq might have faced a serious political crisis, as Sadr aimed to implement his agenda by excluding Shia political elites close to Iran from governance. This increased the risk of internal sectarian conflict among Shia elites.

Hence, Elite manipulation through political alliances is one of the ways political elites shape power, protect their interests, and seize control. Accordingly, Sadr refused to form an ethno-sectarian coalition government and instead moved toward a national majority government with the Sunni Sovereignty Coalition and the Kurdistan Democratic Party (KDP). While Sadr's slogan was a national majority government aimed at eliminating foreign interference, he was unable to form a government due to the dominance of elites working closely with Iran and taking advantage of Iranian hegemony. Eight months later, Muqtada withdrew from the process and ordered MPs to resign (Fars, 2022). This not only affected the process but also led to protests by Sadr supporters and armed groups like Saraya Al-Salam attacking the Iraqi parliament and the Green Zone, resulting in clashes with armed groups belonging to PMF and the death of about 22 people (Mansour & D Cruz, 2022, p. 2). Thus, Sadr remains one of the most influential

Shia leaders, maintaining his influence from 2003 to the present through his policy of supporting Shia supporters who are independent of Iranian hegemony.

Overall, Muqtada Al-Sadr's shift between sectarian, nationalist, and reformist identities strongly supports Brace's instrumentalist argument that identity is a strategic tool rather than a fixed reality. He used religious and nationalist rhetoric to rally support, marginalize rivals, and increase his political influence. As both an insider and a protest leader, Sadr consistently adapted his identity narrative to fit the changing political landscape. This affirms Brass's view that elites reshape identity narratives to achieve immediate political goals and strengthen power in unstable contexts.

3.3 Militia Elites and the Instrumentalization of Sectarian Identity in Post-2003

After the fall of the Ba'ath regime, Iraq experienced a collapse of political and institutional power, especially within security institutions. This collapse created a power vacuum that was quickly filled by several militia groups, particularly Shia militias. This situation provided a significant opportunity for these Shia militia groups. After 2003, several militia groups supported by Shia elites in Iraq emerged in the political scene. However, the influence of some groups has been stronger than others in shaping Shia identity. The Badr Corps, the Mahdi Army, and AAH have been the three most powerful military militia groups in Iraq. Badr was formed in Iran during the Iran-Iraq war as the former armed wing of the Iraqi Supreme Islamic Council, gaining widespread support from Iraqi refugees who had fled to Iran by recruiting Iraqi prisoners of war (Smith, Malik & Knights, 2021).

The Badr Corps benefited from its integration into the political system after 2003, as its influence gradually increased under the leadership of Hadi Amiri,

who had strong ties to the Iranian Revolutionary Guards and oversaw both Badr's political and military affairs. He maintained his political position and established dominance over state institutions, particularly the Ministry of Interior and the Federal Police, which has 37,000 personnel (Alaadin, 2017, pp. 3-4). Additionally, following 2003, Badr Corps elites, especially Hadi Amiri, exploited sectarian identity, particularly between 2004 and 2006, initiating a brutal sectarian war against Iraq's Sunni population. Hadi Amiri is accused of being responsible for the deaths of up to 2,000 Sunnis during this period. This occurred within a strategy aimed at protecting the Shia community. Such manipulation of identity worsened the Sunni-Shia divide (Counter Extremism Project, n.d., p. 2).

The unstable sectarian environment in Iraq created opportunities for other groups to rise, notably the AAH, which split from the Mahdi Army and was founded in 2006 by Qais Al-Khazali. As a powerful Iranian-backed Shia militia group, AAH elites like Qais Al-Khazali manipulated Shia identities by conducting military operations against U.S. forces in Iraq (United Against Nuclear Iran, n.d.). Furthermore, Qais Al-Khazali used his Shia identity to strengthen the power of Ahl Al-Haq, claiming to defend Shia communities against Sunni extremists and justifying violence through religion. At the same time, he built a political and social image by establishing offices, schools, and distributing materials to connect with and influence Shia communities (Aladdin, 2017, pp. 4-5). Therefore, the strategy of AAH elites from its beginning until the rise of ISIS has been to oppose U.S. forces and expand its influence within Shia society.

After ISIS's arrival, the influence and power of militia group elites grew in controlling state institutions, especially after Shia Supreme Marja'i Ali Al-Sistani issued a fatwa on June 13, 2014, calling for compulsory jihad against Islamic State fighters (Sistani, 2014). Sistani's fatwa represented a key turning point in

how the elite viewed the sectarian nature of armed groups. Although Sistani, as a leading Shia religious figure, did not intend to formalize militia groups, his fatwa provided a framework for the Shia elite to unify these militias into a single force. This created an opportunity for the Shia elite to legitimize these forces under the name of the Popular Mobilization Force (PMF) (Iraqi Parliament, 2016). While the Iraqi constitution bans the formation of armed militias outside the official armed forces (Iraqi Constitution, 2005, art. 9), the creation of the PMF was unconstitutional. This move was driven by the Shia elite despite the existence of the Iraqi army. Therefore, passing the PMF law in the Iraqi parliament marked a pivotal moment for the Shia elites, pushing Iraq toward a sectarian, ideological state to advance their political and ideological goals.

Influential PMF elites identified themselves as defenders of Shia identity and status in Iraq against Sunni extremism, drawing on Ayatollah Al-Sistani's 2014 fatwa to gain political and legal legitimacy. Leaders like Hadi Amiri and the late Abu Mahdi Al-Muhandis influenced the PMF's agenda and policies, which have received financial and political support from Iran for decades (Aladdin, 2017, p. 1). In addition to being part of Iran's Shia political elite for many years, the return of these elites to Iraq after the Ba'ath regime's fall provided strong support for Iranian hegemony to implement its agendas in Iraq through these groups. Iran's position thus gave these group elites leverage to use Iranian support in imposing their sectarian and political dominance over the state. For example, Hadi Amiri, a leading PMF figure and leader of the Badr Movement, said in an interview with the Shaa Media Network: "We are using the Federal Court to our interests" (Shaa, 2015).

Similarly, Qais Al-Khazali, the leader of the AAH, stated "the elites of the coordination framework view the prime minister as the director general, and all strategic political and security decisions in Iraq are determined by the elites of the

coordination framework” (Malk, 2022). In other words, state institutions have become tools in the hands of these elites, while none of the PMF elites hold a political or legal position within the state institutions. However, due to their political, military, and economic dominance, they influence the use of state institutions and can leverage them for their benefit.

Furthermore, in terms of instrumentalism theory and Paul Brass's arguments, one of the tools elites use to their advantage is manipulating racial identities to achieve economic gains. In this context, after the armed militias were legalized by the Iraqi Parliament, the ruling PMF elites attempted to divert the state budget for their own interests. Most PMF groups are led by Nuri Al-Maliki, Hadi Al-Amiri, and Qais Al-Khazali, who command the largest armed forces among the PMF (Taha, Hussien & Gulpi, 2023, p. 145).

Although PMF forces are legalized by the Iraqi Parliament, they operate as a religious force. This presence of armed groups outside the official power of the state allows these elites to easily manipulate the economy and use the state budget to their advantage. For example, after the 2018 Iraqi parliamentary elections, they utilized their political dominance to influence the passing of the national budget. In 2018, the budget allocated about 1.4 trillion dinars to PMF groups, and in 2019, that increased to over 1.5 trillion dinars (Federal General Budget of the Republic of Iraq, 2019). The budget has increased annually, and in the three-year Iraqi budget approved in 2023, the PMF budget is estimated at over 3 trillion dinars (Federal General Budget of the Republic of Iraq, 2023). This demonstrates the continual growth of the PMF budget driven by the ruling elites, who shape Iraq's parliament and government, seeking to expand the PMF's financial resources to safeguard and strengthen their political and economic positions.

Additionally, to further control Iraq's economy, PMF leaders started pressuring the government in 2018 to establish an economic entity under their control (Malk,

Smith & Knights, 2023). This pressure continued until late November 2022, when the government led by Mohammed Shia Sudani decided to establish Al-Muhandis Company in honor of Abu Mahdi Al-Muhandis, a leader of the Popular Mobilization Forces, with a capital of 100 billion dinars. The company has since begun implementing over 60 service projects across several southern Iraqi provinces (Al-Nawwab, 2023). One of the main goals of PMF elites through this company was to access state budgets and projects, leveraging its economic power, especially for the elites of AAH, Nujaba, Imam Ali, Sayyid Shuhada, and Hezbollah (Mika, 2023, p. 65).

Overall, PMF elites support Brass's claim that identity is a tool for elite power rather than an intrinsic fact. By portraying the militias as protectors of Shia identity against ISIS and external threats, leaders like Amiri and Khazzali secured legal status, government funding, and political dominance. The manipulation of religious stories and their economic roots shows how identity can be built to justify parallel power structures. This affirms Brass's view that elites actively create and manipulate identities to gain strategic advantages and strengthen their power.

4. Conclusions

To conclude, this study examined sectarian identity manipulation by the Shia elite from the perspective of instrumentalism theory. The research question was how identity has been used as a political tool by Shia elites, and how instrumentalism can provide a sufficient framework for understanding this process. Through qualitative and case methodology, the findings suggest that identity in the post-2003 Iraqi environment was neither fixed nor culturally primitive, but fluid, strategically mobilized by elites to gain and maintain power. At the same time, sectarian identity was not merely expressed but actively

constructed and manipulated by elites to serve political, economic, and strategic goals.

In terms of analyzing the arguments of this study, it is found that Shia elites in post-2003 Iraq, especially figures such as Nuri Al-Maliki, Muqtada Al-Sadr, and militia group leaders of militia groups manipulated sectarian identity to consolidate political and economic power. These elites exploited religious narratives, state institutions, and legal mechanisms to marginalize rivals, centralize power, and dominate national politics. As a result, identity manipulation had several critical consequences: weakened state institutions, increased authoritarianism, heightened sectarian conflict, and decreased trust among ethnic groups. Additionally, the rise to power of Iranian-backed Shia militias further undermined Iraqi sovereignty and contributed to foreign intervention. This manipulation has also fostered ethnic imbalances and retarded democratic development. Overall, elite-driven politicization of identity has intensified instability, fragmented national unity, and deepened Iraq's structural and sectarian crises. Elite manipulation of identity has been a major factor in the division, instability and weakness of Iraqi state institutions since 2003, the study found.

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پوخته

ئەم توێژینەمۆیه لە پروانگەیی تیۆری ئامرازگەراییمۆه رۆلی گروپە نوخبە شیعەکان لە دەستکاریکردنی ناسنامەیی تائیفی لە عێراق لە دواي سالی ۲۰۰۳ دەکۆلێتمۆه. پرسیاری توێژینەمۆهکە ئەمۆیه کە چۆن ئامرازگەراییی رۆلی گروپە نوخبە شیعەکان لە دەستکاریکردنی ناسنامەیی تائیفی شیعە لە دواي ۲۰۰۳ پروون دەکاتمۆه. گرنگی توێژینەمۆهکە لەمۆدایە کە دەتوانی ئەمۆه نیشان بدات دەستکاریکردنی شوناسی شیعە لەلایەن نوخبەکانی شیعە بەشدار بوو لە دەستوەردانی دەرەکی و ناسەقامگیری سیاسی و ناهاوسەنگی نەژادی و لاوازی دامەزرانە سیاسییەکانی ولات. توێژینەمۆهکە بە پشت بەستن بە رێبازی چۆنایەتی تیشک دەخاتە سەر رۆلی نوخبە کاریگەرەکانی شیعە لە گۆرەپانی سیاسی عێراق بەتایبەت نوری مالیکی، موقتەدا سەدر و نوخبەیی هیژە چەکارەکان و رۆلیان لە دەستکاریکردنی ناسنامەیی شیعەدا، چونکە لە دواي سالی ۲۰۰۳ مۆه شیعەکان بە گرتتە دەستی دەسلالت لە عێراق سەرچاوەی سیاسی، ئابووری، سەربازی و جەماوەریان وەک ئامرازیک بەکارهێناوە بۆ بەهێزکردنی پێگەیی سیاسی خۆیان. دۆزینەمۆهکان ئاماژە بەمۆه دەکەن سیاسەتی نوخبەکانی شیعە لە دواي ۲۰۰۳ بەشداری کردووە لە لاوازبوون و بە تائیفیکردنی دامەزرانەکانی دەولەت و زیادبوونی دەستوەردانی دەرەکی ئەمۆش کاریگەری نەڕینی لەسەر هاوسەنگی نیوان گروپە نەژادییەکان دروستکردووە و گرژییەکانی زیادکردووە.

ووشە سەرەکیەکان: ئامرازگەراییی، عێراق، شیعە، نوخبە، مللانیی نەژادی

الملخص:

يقوم هذه دراسة بدراسة دور الجماعات النخبوية الشيعية في تعديل الهوية الطائفية في العراق بعد عام ۲۰۰۳ من من منظور النظرية الأدائية. السؤال هذه الدراسة هي كيف تبين و تفسر النظرية الأدائية دور الجماعات النخبوية الشيعية في التلاعب بالهوية الطائفية الشيعية بعد عام ۲۰۰۳. وتكمن أهمية الدراسة في أنها تستطيع أن تظهر أن تعديل الهوية الشيعية من قبل النخب الشيعية ساهم في التدخل الخارجي وعدم الاستقرار السياسي واختلال التوازن العرقي وضعف المؤسسات السياسية في البلاد. تعتمد الدراسة على المنهج النوعي، وتركز على دور النخب الشيعية المؤثرة في الساحة السياسية العراقية، وخاصة نوري المالكي ومقتدى الصدر ونخبة القوات المسلحة ودورها في تعديل الهوية الشيعية، لأنه بعد أن تولى الشيعة السلطة في العراق بعد عام ۲۰۰۳، استخدموا الموارد السياسية، الاقتصادية، العسكرية والشعبية كوسيلة لتعزيز مكانتهم السياسية. وتشير النتائج إلى أن سياسات النخب الشيعية بعد عام ۲۰۰۳ ساهمت في إضعاف مؤسسات الدولة وتطويقها وزيادة التدخل الخارجي، مما أثر سلباً على التوازن بين المجموعات العرقية وزاد من التوترات.

الكلمات المفتاحية: الأدائية، العراق، الشيعة، النخبة، الصراع العرقي.