Toby Dodge and Renad Mansour, "Sectarianization and desectarianization in the struggle for Iraq's political field", paper submitted to *The Review of Faith & International Affairs*.

Introduction.

Iraq's political system, an elite pact justified through ethno-religious consociationalism or sectarian apportionment (*Muhasasa Ta'ifiyya*), was created in the aftermath of invasion and regime change in 2003. The system's legitimation was based on a very specific understanding of Iraqi society and the role of elections in managing that society. Ideationally, the ruling elite sought to justify their dominance of the political system by arguing that Iraq was irrevocably divided between ethnic and religious groups, primarily Shi'a, Sunni and Kurd. After each national election, long negotiations result in the creation of governments of national unity. Separate communal blocks, represented by 'their' senior politicians, are rewarded for participation in the democratic process by being given cabinet positions, senior civil servants and state resources. The distribution of state resources to these communities through their politicians is meant to tie them to the state and a peaceful status quo.

However, this system did not prevent the brutal civil war that raged in Iraq from 2004 until 2008. This saw violence deployed by some of the same politicians active in government, either to defend the newly imposed system, demand a larger stake in it or overthrow it completely. Once the civil war ended and communally justified violence declined, other negative consequences of the system became increasingly apparent, namely the widespread and systematically sanctioned political corruption at its core and the institutional incoherence the system created. The system consequently lacked the ability to deliver even basic state services.

A sustained post-civil war challenge to the system has come through a series of mass demonstrations, starting in 2009, but reaching their peak, in terms of size and ideational coherence, in 2019. The protest movement developed a powerful critique of the post-2003 political system, blaming it for corruption and state weakness. Ideationally, it went further, directly linking the sectarianization of Iraq's political system to the failures of the state.

The sustained challenge to the system's ideational justification, from 2009 onwards, undermined its legitimacy, led to a steep decline in electoral turnout and a steady reduction in the popular credibility of the country's ruling elite. However, the rise of a social movement challenging the system has not resulted in its reform or a sustainable process of desectarianization. Instead, as indicated by the latest round of protests in 2019, the ruling elite has reverted to the use of covert and overt violence, in an attempt to demobilize the protestors and defend their own positions of power. In the face of its unpopularity, the majority of Iraq's politicians may have moved away from the overt promotion of

sectarianism, but the political system still functions, as it has since 2003, with systemic corruption and coercion taking the place of sectarian ideology in terms of delivering elite cohesion and defending the status quo. From 2003 to 2019, the Iraqi system has moved from *Muhasasa Ta'ifiyya,* overt sectarian apportionment, to *Nidham Muhasasa,* systemic apportionment. In this sense, the system has certainly responded to the popular challenge it faced. It did this, in the first instance, by moving away from the using overt sectarian discourse. When this did not work, the ruling elite's deployed increasing amounts of violence.

Sectarianization, post-sectarianization and anti-sectarianization.

As the literature on sectarianism in the Middle East has evolved, it is now possible to make a series of distinctions between sectarianism, post-sectarianism and anti-sectarianism (Valbjørn 2019). Methodologically, the clarity of these analytical distinctions are helped by Rogers Brubaker's argument that identities are "… induced - by *political fields* of particular kinds" (Brubaker 1996, 17). Under this analytical rubric, sectarianism, as well as its competitors, nationalism and secularism, can all be viewed as relational categories of practice, ways of ordering a specific society deployed by those in competition with each other for the allegiance of a population contained within a given political field (Brubaker and Cooper 2000, 4**)**. If a political field is dominated by any one of these categories it is because those seeking to impose their vision have managed to assemble the largest amount of ideational, institutional and coercive resources. Historically, across the Middle East and in Iraq specifically, the competition between Arab Nationalism, state-based nationalism, Islamism and sectarianism, has utilized ideology, coercion and state institutional capacity in this interactive struggle to impose competing categories of practice (Dodge 2018). In Iraq since 2003, the dominant category of practice has been one focused on sectarian division. This, however, has increasingly been challenged by a broadly secular nationalist category of practice.

Ussama Makdisi defines sectarianism as " … a process - not an object, not an event, and certainly not a primordial trait". This process sees politicians or sectarian entrepreneurs, seeking to impose religious difference as the "… primary marker of modern political identity …" (Makdisi 2008; Makdisi 2000). As the work of Fredrik Barth details, agents involved in this process seek to solidify both the internal coherence of each religious group but, more importantly, the boundaries that divide groups from each other (Barth 1969).

However, because this process is a relational competition within a political field, the dominance of different categories of practice vary, depending on resources those who are struggling to impose them can amass. From 2003 to 2005, sectarianism was dominant in Iraq's political field. After 2005, there was a struggle in Iraq's political field between those arguing for a sectarian vision

and those making the case for what Valbjørn label's 'post-sectarianism', where political mobilization seeks to move sectarian categories from 'hot' issues of conflict to 'banal', accepted but non-contentious units of societal organization (Valbjørn 2019; Billig 1995). However, from 2009 onwards, a third, overtly anti-sectarian position has become increasingly influential. This challenges the political system and the role of sectarian categories of practice at its core. Instead, it seeks to develop an alternative nationalist and secular set of categories of practice.

The sectarianization of Iraq's political field.

Iraq's current political system was imposed upon the country in the aftermath of the 2003 US-led invasion and regime change. From within the terminology of comparative politics, this system more closely represents pluralist understandings of the state as an arena of intra-elite competition rather than the coherent neo-Weberian perception of the state as a set of coherent hierarchical institutions juxtaposed against and autonomous from society (Skocpol 1985, 4). Instead, the system encompasses the "… ongoing struggles among shifting coalitions over the rules for daily behavior" (Migdal 2011, 11).

This view of the state is clearly influenced by the work of Pierre Bourdieu. For Bourdieu, the state itself has no intrinsic agency, no collective ability for purposive action. Instead, it is "… an ensemble of administrative or bureaucratic fields …" which are themselves the sites of struggles for domination (Bourdieu and Wacquant 1992, 111-112).

With the fear of a renewed authoritarianism to the fore, the Iraqi system since 2003 was deliberately disaggregated, with miniseries, especially those with high levels of coercive capital (Defense and Interior) awarded to or even divided amongst different and competing parties (Rathmell 2007). The state was also, as part of the post-2003 political settlement, disaggregated after each election, in 2005, 2010, 2014 and 2018, with different ministries and senior positions within the civil service divided amongst competing victorious political parties (Dodge 2019b). Under this rubric, the Cabinet and the Prime Minister's Office became the only formal vehicles for adjudication between competing parties and the different state institutions they control.

For Bourdieu, because the state is conceived of as a series of disaggregated fields, competition for the domination and subjugation of a population largely takes place within a country's political field. It is within the political field that politicians, journalists and in Iraq's case, figures of religious authority and militias leaders compete with each other to impose dominant categories of practice on society, to tell society how it is to be structured, who can be a member and what their permitted identities are (Bourdieu 1991, 172, 192; Bourdieu 2005, 33-29). The players in the political field compete over different forms of capital whose possession delivers the ability to dominate. These

include money and financial resources, for Bourdieu economic capital and the control and deployment of violence, coercive capital, but also social capital, the ability to organize and mobilize groups and symbolic capital. The struggle to amass symbolic capital is the competition to define the common sense that shapes thought and behavior in any given society, "… the perception which social agents have of the social world" (Bourdieu 1991, 166-170). So, as Bourdieu would have predicted, the struggle to dominate Iraq's political field has been structured around the competition to amass three main forms of capital, coercive, economic and symbolic.

For Bourdieu, symbolic capital, the power to define common sense and impose a *nomos*, or principle vision of how society is structured, is the most valuable resource in the competition to dominate a country's political field and hence shape the way its population perceived of their world. The principle vision or ideational basis of Iraq's current political system was developed by exiled activists in the early 1990s. Saddam Hussein's invasion of Kuwait in August 1990, meant the removal of his regime became an objective of US policy (Dodge 2010, 82-90). Previously peripheral exiled opposition figures gained the backing of the United States to hold a series of conferences through the 1990s to plan for regime change. The most important of these was held in the town of Salah al-Din, newly liberated from the Iraqi regime, in October 1992. In order to increase their social capital and international legitimacy, a number of disparate opposition groups agreed to form one overarching coordinating body, the Iraqi National Congress (INC). Of greater significance for the sectarianization of Iraq post 2003, they allocated positions on the committees and leadership council that ran the INC through quotas that were based on a 'virtual census' that conceived of Iraq exclusively in ethno-sectarian terms, with "… Shi'a Arabs representing 55 per cent of the population, Sunni Arabs 22 per cent, and Kurds 19 per cent" (Nawar 2003). The exiled groups who formed the INC had imposed what Bourdieu would term 'symbolic violence' on Iraq. They conceived Iraqi society exclusively through the sectarian lens of the religious and ethnic identity of its population, marginalizing other possible categorizes, including class, geography or gender. What became know as the 'Salah al-Din quotas', based on a 'virtual census', structured the organization of the opposition to Ba'athist rule but also their plans for a post-Ba'athist future government of Iraq. From 1992 onwards, through the London Conference, held in December 2002, three months before the invasion, to the aftermath of regime change in Iraq, what became known as the 'Salah al-Din consensus' shaped a vision for the sectarianization of Iraq.

In the immediate aftermath of the invasion, it was the senior figures from the political parties that formed the INC and ran the Salah al-Din and London conferences that came to dominate the new political system imposed upon Iraq. Initially, the civilian head of the US occupation, Paul Bremer, sought to marginalize the formerly exiled parties and their leadership, regarding them as unrepresentative of wider Iraqi society (Bremer 2006, 43-44, 49). However, as

the violent opposition to the occupation increased and the United Nations took a larger role, it became clear that the occupation had to at least consult an Iraqi body, if not share power with them.   In June and July 2003, the occupation authority, the Coalition Provisional Authority (CPA) spent six weeks selecting the membership of a twenty-five person Governing Council (Dobbins 2009, 45). This body went on to select the ministers who would run the first post-regime change government.

The sectarianization of Iraq's political system can be seen in how the Governing Council was selected. The parties who organized the Salah al-Din conference lobbied the CPA to ensure that the Governing Council conformed to the symbolic violence of the 'Salah al-Din quotas' (Clover 2003). CPA officials then drew up lists of potential candidates with their religious and ethnic origins to the fore. Each proposed candidate was then approved by the newly returned exiled parties (Chandrasekaran 2003). When the Governing Council was announced on 13 July, 2003, the symbolic violence done to Iraqi society was clear as Paul Bremer stressed that its membership, 13 Shi'a, 5 Kurds, 5 Sunnis and 1 Turkmen and 1 Assyrian "… represents all the strands from Iraq's complicated social structure" (Bremer 2003). Iraq's first governing body after regime change, whose role was to represent Iraqis and their sovereignty under occupation, had been overtly formed through the application of symbolic violence, it had been structured to represent Iraq as a society primarily, if not exclusively, made up of religious and ethnic categories of practice.

Electoral politics and the struggle for Iraq's political field.

Iraq held its first national elections in 2005. The role of the United Nations, Grand Ayatollah Ali al-Sistani and the formerly exiled parties all contributed to the elections playing a major role in the sectarianization of Iraq.   First the elections were held under a closed list system, using the whole of Iraq as a single electoral district. This was acknowledged by the UN at the time as favoring communal mobilization (Hamoudi 2014, 49-50; Daragahi 2004). Local issues and personalities got lost as large coalitions deployed the symbolic violence of ethnic and sectarian rhetoric to define their constituencies, divide them against other communities and mobilize them for the ballot box. Grand Ayatollah Ali al-Sistani had demanded that the CPA move quickly towards elections.   Once a date for elections was scheduled he organized a single coalition of Shi'a parties to maximize the community's influence in parliament. The result was the United Iraqi Alliance (UIA), all of whose candidates had to agree to three things; to maintain voting discipline within the coalition, "… not change the Islamic character of the Iraqi people …" and not support any legislation that opposed the Sharia (Clover 2004).

The voting results themselves indicated that the sectarianization of the electorate had been successful. Total voter turnout was 58 percent. However,

turnout in areas with Kurdish and Shi'a majorities were much higher, at 75 and 90 percent. There had been a successful campaign to encourage Sunni sections of the population to boycott the elections, held as they were under US occupation and in the face of rising violence. This resulted in turnout in Sunni majority areas averaging less than 10 percent (Dodge 2012, 215).

The elections in January 2005 were for a temporary national assembly to write the country's new constitution. Once this was complete, Iraqis voted again in December 2005. The December 2005 polls probably marked the high point in the electoral sectarianism. The United Iraqi Alliance again ran its campaign claiming to be the dominant voice of Iraq's Shi'as. In these second national elections the Sunni section of Iraq's population were also successfully mobilized to vote in overtly sectarian terms as Sunnis, juxtaposed against two rival communities, Shi'a and Kurd. The electoral coalition that achieved this was *Jabha al-Tawafuq al-Iraq* (the Accord Front). Their participation in this process of sectarianization was motivated by a realization that without mobilization along explicitly sectarian lines, those seeking to represent the Sunni section of society would be excluded from the political system and hence access to the various capitals it delivered.

The decline of electoral sectarianization.

The national elections of 2010, however, saw a major challenge to the sectarianization of the electoral system. This was made possible by the fracturing of the large ethno-sectarian blocs. This fracturing saw the main vehicle for the sectarianization of the Shi'a vote split into two coalitions, the United Iraqi Alliance and the State of Law. The vehicle for the sectarianization of the Sunnis, *Jabha al-Tawafuq al-Iraq*, likewise split (Ottaway and Kaysi 2012).

Iyad Allawi, the leader of the Iraqi National List (*Iraqiya*), set out to exploit this new space within the political field. He built *Iraqiya*'s social capital by including eighteen parties, allying politicians with coherent regional organizations to those holding a national profile. Allawi sought to exploit the declining symbolic capital of overt sectarianism by building *Iraqiya*'s campaign around a critique of the sectarian politics that had driven the country into civil war. In its place, *Iraqiya*'s own symbolic capital was built on an overt secular nationalism with equal citizenship for all (Shadid 2010).

The *Iraqiya* coalition, in seeking to build a cross-communal electoral coalition, posed a direct threat to the symbolic capital of the ruling elite and the system they had built. This challenge was mediated by the use of de-Ba'athification legislation to ban a large number of *Iraqiya*'s candidates from participating in the 2010 elections. This move not only sought to exclude them from the vote but also to use symbolic violence to taint them by association with the myriad sins of thirty-five years of Ba'athist rule (Visser 2010). The 'Ba'athist threat'

then became a key plank of Nuri al-Maliki's election campaign (Dodge 2012, 154).

Iraq's increasingly fluid political field saw the vote split into three major sections, with *Iraqiya* winning 24.7 per cent of the vote, Maliki's State of Law, who mixed an overtly Shi'a Islamism with calls for a stronger state, gaining 24.2 per cent and the Iraqi National Alliance, 19.2 per cent, with an overall turnout of 62 percent (Dodge 2012, 216). *Iraqiya's* success clearly posed a challenged to the symbolic capital justifying the whole system. It had won votes across central and southern Iraq with an overtly secular nationalist category of practice. This challenge saw the ethno-sectarian parties rally alongside Iranian and American diplomats to defend the symbolic violence of the *Muhasasa Ta'ifiyya* and hence the system itself.

By November 2010, Nuri al-Maliki had managed to use the threat of *Iraqiya*'s electoral success to unify the rest of the ruling elite. Ministerial posts and state resources were, once again, allotted to the parties that had won the elections. The symbolic violence of sectarianism was deployed in the political field to justify this. *Iraqiya* were subjected to sectarianization, re-labeled as another communalist party, representative of Sunni Iraqis. This would remove the threat they posed to the symbolic capital underpinning the whole system, they would be integrated into the elite pact as a junior member, signing up to its rules and benefiting from its distribution of state resources. The threat of de-Ba'athification would be held over *Iraqiya*'s senior members to ensure they played their allotted role and did not try, once again, to challenge the system as a whole.

The 2014 elections proved that Iraq's political field had become even more fractured. In 2005, those parties wanting to represent the Kurdish and Shi'a sections of the population formed two single blocks whose logic was to maximize the ethno-sectarian voting patterns. In 2010, Iyad Allawi rallied those parties seeking to mobilize both the secular but also Sunni voters into one coalition, *Iraqiyya*. In 2014, both the Shi'a, Sunni and secular parties failed to unite into vote maximizing coalitions, instead choosing to run in much smaller organizations, with a greater diffusion of symbolic capital across Iraq's political field. The Shi'a parties divided into three main electoral groupings. The largest was Prime Minister Nuri al-Maliki's State of Law coalition. Muqtada a-Sadr's supporters left the UIA to run their own *Ahrar* coalition. Finally, Ammar Hakim's party, the Islamic Supreme Council of Iraq, formed the *Muwatin* alliance. Those seeking to mobilize the Sunni and the secular vote also split three ways. Iyad Allawi saw the previous alliance he ran, *Iraqiyya*, fracture and was forced to assemble a much smaller group, renamed *Wataniyya*. The Speaker of Parliament, Osama al-Nujaifi, was the main beneficiary of *Iraqiyya*'s demise, bringing a significant number of its former members into an overtly pan-Sunni alliance *Mutahhidun*. Finally, another *Iraqiyya* veteran, the former Deputy Prime Minister, Saleh al-Mutlaq, formed

the *Arabiyya* bloc (Mustafa 2013). The three Kurdish parties, the Kurdistan Democratic Party, the Patriotic Union of Kurdistan and Goran, also failed to unify under one nation-wide banner (Visser 2014).

With the ethno-sectarian electoral blocs fracturing, the election campaign saw a similar division in attempts to amass symbolic capital. The incumbent prime minister, Nuri al-Maliki, once again engaged in an overtly sectarian campaign, attempting to solidify Shi'a voters by juxtaposing the 'Shi'a community' against Sunnis and Kurds. He deployed overt Shi'a imagery at his rallies and damned his Sunni opponents as complicit in terrorism. Sadr, on the other hand, labeled Maliki a "… tyrant, dictator and a dominating figure …" who was responsible for the corruption that now touched every aspect of the state (Al Arabiya News 2014). Hakim, like Sadr, recognized that sectarianism had run its course as a source of symbolic capital. Instead, he attempted to portray his own alliance as a policy orientated, more technocratic, problem-solving organization that could bridge the sectarian divide through negotiation (Hasan 2014).

The results of the 2014 elections but not their aftermath, reflected both the fractured nature of the electoral campaign but also the success of Nuri al-Maliki, both as an incumbent but also as a politician unafraid of indulging in overt and divisive sectarian rhetoric. Nuri al-Maliki's coalition, State of Law, secured 92 seats. Maliki himself won the highest personal backing of any Iraqi politician with 721,000 votes. However, Maliki's overall position was greatly strengthened by the fractured votes of those who opposed him. Muqtada al-Sadr's *Ahrar* came second with 34 seats, followed by Hakim's *Muwatin* with 29. Nujaifi's *Mutahhidun* gained 23 seats and Allawi's *Wataniya* gaining 21. The Kurdistan Democratic Party secured 25 seats and the Patriotic Union of Kurdistan securing 21. Turnout was further reduced to 52 percent (Rasheed and al-Rube'ii 2014).

The rise of anti-sectarianism and a sustained challenge to the system.

Nuri al-Maliki's aim to win a third term as Iraqi prime minister was undermined by the fall of Mosul to the forces of the Islamic State in June 2014. The Islamic State's ability to remobilize, along with the collapse of the Iraqi army in the face of their advance, were blamed on polices that Maliki pursued while in office. However, beyond the specific policies pursued by Maliki, the political system itself was becoming the target of popular discontent.

In 2009 and 2010, this challenge took the form of sporadic and disconnected protests in reaction to the government's inability to deliver dependable electricity supplies during the summer months. However, in 2011, against the background of the region-wide protests of the 'Arab Spring', a campaign against the symbolic capital at the center of the system, its overt sectarianism,

became more coherent, developing the social and symbolic capital needed to launch a sustained challenge to the whole post-2003 system.

In 2011, nation-wide protests were staged across southern Iraq, in Kurdish majority areas and in Baghdad's Tahrir Square. The geographical spread of the protests indicated that opposition to sectarianization had begun to amass both social and symbolic capital. In the southern Shi'a majority province of Dhi Qar, protestors blamed poor government services on the sectarian division of government placed at the center of the *Muhasasa Ta'ifiyya* (Visser 2011). A similar argument was developed by protestors in Baghdad, with a critique of ethno-sectarian symbolic violence being married to a mobilization around a unitary secular nationalism (Fordham 2011).

This movement gained much greater symbolic and social capital in the summer of 2015. Protest started in southern Iraq. However, when a young demonstrator, Muntadhar Ali Ghani al-Hilifi, was shot in Basra province, the movement became national (Robin 2016). Faleh Jabar estimated that a million people took to the streets of Baghdad in September 2015 (Jabar 2018). This movement's symbolic capital was secured through a critique of the system that linked the sectarianization of Iraq's political field to the omnipresence of systemically sanctioned corruption, "In the name of religion the thieves have robbed us". (*Bismil deen baguna al-haramiya*) (Jabar 2018).

In the wake of the 2015 demonstrations, the 2018 elections saw the two dominant, post-2005 trends continue and accelerate, first there was a further fracturing of the ethno-sectarian electoral blocs and secondly, for all but a minority of coalitions, ethno-sectarian campaign rhetoric was dispensed with and replaced by policy based debates about how best to solve Iraq's economic problems. The electoral coalitions mainly focused on the Shi'a section of Iraq's population went from three in 2014 to five in 2018, incumbent Prime Minister, Haider al-Abadi's, Victory Alliance (*Tahaluf al- Nasr*), former prime minister, Nouri al-Maliki's State of Law Coalition (*Itilaf Dawlat al-Qanun*, SOL), the coalition representing the militias, Hadi al-Ameri's Conquest Alliance (*Tahaluf al-Fateh*), Ammar al-Hakim's National Wisdom Movement (*Tayar al-Hikma al-Watani*) and Muqtada al-Sadr's Revolutionaries for Reform Alliance (*Tahaluf al-al-Sairoon*). Ayad Allawi's *Watania* competed for the Sunni vote against Usama al-Nujaifi's United for Reform Coalition (*Itilaf Muttaḥidoon lil-Islah*). The two main Kurdish parties, the PUK and KDP fought separate campaigns and competed with a third party, Goran (Mansour and Burlinghaus 2018).

What was even more striking was the influence the 2015 demonstrations had on symbolic capital in Iraq's political field. The majority of coalitions did not engage in campaigning based on sectarian rhetoric, only Nuri al-Maliki's State of Law Coalition ran an overt 'Shi'a-centric' campaign, focusing heavily on Shi'a marginalization (Mansour and Burlinghaus 2018). The rest of the

coalitions largely engaged in election campaigns that focused on the major problems dominating voter's lives, the economy and government corruption. The majority of parties running saw a decline in their vote, with al-Maliki suffering the most at the ballot box, seeing his support reduce by approximately 85 percent (Al-Ali 2018). It was Sadr's approach to the elections that captured the anti-status quo and anti-sectarian mood of the general public. He formed an alliance with the Iraqi Communist Party and demanded the thoroughgoing reform of the political system. This allowed him to obtain the most seats (54) and a similar amount of votes as in the 2014 elections (Renad and van den Toorn 2018).

However, beyond the fractured electoral coalitions and the marked lack of sect based campaigning, the most important aspect of the 2018 campaign was the low turn out at 44 percent nationally, 33 percent in Baghdad and as low as 10 percent in Basra (Mansour 2018). During the election campaign itself, those seeking to organize a boycott were a vocal presence across Iraqi social media. This combined with a general popular apathy. Both were driven by a widespread sense across Iraq's political field that voting would not challenge the coercive and economic capital amassed by the widely discredited political parties that had dominated since 2003.

The battle for Iraq's political field: symbolic and coercive capital in the defense of the system.

During October and November 2019, over a million Iraqis repeatedly went onto the streets of Baghdad and cities and towns across the south of the country in a series of protests against the *Nidham Muhasasa,* the symbolic violence that justified it and the systemic corruption and coercion at its core. This movement represented the largest grassroots political mobilization in Iraq since 2003 and, as such, the greatest challenge to the post-2003 order that the ruling elite had faced. The response of the political leaders in Baghdad was telling and exemplified the self-reinforcing mechanisms that have, to date, ensured the survival of *Nidham Muhasasa*. These mechanisms include unsuccessful attempts to transform the symbolic capital used to justify the system and the use of high levels of coercive capital to suppress the demonstrations. In the words of a senior Shi'a Islamist militia commander, "… our duty is to protect the political order (*nizam al-siyasi*), wherever it is threatened."[1]

At the core of this latest wave of protests was an attempt to develop the symbolic and social capital needed to directly challenge the system and remove those who had built it from power. As demonstrations and public sentiment against the elite and system grew, the protest movement rallied around a new symbolic capital. The demonstrations were initially driven forward by popular frustration and anger with the role that politically sanctioned corruption plays at the core of the system (Foltyn 2019). Abu Ali al-Majidi, a protestor on the streets of Baghdad in October 2019, summed up the sentiments of the

demonstrations when he argued, "They have eaten away at the country like cancer … They are all corrupt thieves." Salem Abbas, another demonstrator said, "They have looted the nation and destroyed a whole generation" (Abdul-Ahad 2019a, 2019b). The 'they', in both cases, was the party elite, resident the Green Zone, across the river from the epicenter of the demonstrations in Tahrir Square.

However, as the protests grew and were subject to extensive and extended violence, their demands radicalized and expanded to encompass a program for the transformation of the whole system. The protest movement demanded that the political parties, central to electoral sectarianization of the *Muhasasa Ta'ifiyya*, renounce power. Party offices across the south of Iraq were burnt down with those parties and organizations seen as supportive of reform in 2015, the Sadrist movement and the Iraqi Communist Party, damned in 2019 for taking part in government formation of 2018 (Hasan 2019).

Finally, in early November, the protest movement cohered to the extent that it could issue a manifesto of demands, a ten-point program circulated in Tahrir Square in the first edition of the protestor's own newspaper, *TuqTuq*, and promoted through the banners displayed on the demonstrator's headquarters overlooking the square. The symbolic capital at the core of these demands formed a new principle vision designed to transform Iraq's political field. The category of practise was shaped by an assertion of equal citizenship and rights and a secular Iraqi nationalism. The manifesto called for the resignation of the current government and its replacement by an independent non-party caretaker administration. This was to be followed by the complete overhaul of electoral regulations and supervisory authorities, new laws to identify the sources of party political funding and new national elections supervised by the United Nations. Overall, one of the many banners hung from the protestor's HQ summed up the core demands:

> "The country wants the fall of Bremer's constitution, the fall of Bremer's parties, the electoral law to be changed, the parties law to be changed and the IMF treaties to be revoked."

The political elite, when faced with the largest social movement in Iraq's post-2003 history deployed its coercive and symbolic capital in an attempt to regain control of the political field. First, all the major members of the existing ruling elite promised thoroughgoing reforms to the Muhasasa system. From the start of the protests, the President Barham Saleh and the Prime Minister, Ail Abdul-Mahdi, appeared on national television promising greater employment opportunities for young people and new election laws to end the dominance of the post-2003 political parties (Abdul-Mahdi 2019). Given that similar pledges had been given during and after the 2011 and 2015 protests, this unsurprisingly did not convince the demonstrators to demobilize.

The next strategy was to challenge the symbolic capital of the demonstrators by suggesting they were not demanding equal citizenship in the name of a unified secular nationalism but instead working for outside powers, primarily Israel and the United States. This strategy was pursued by the Shi'a Islamist militia leaders, Qais al-Khazaali and Hadi al-Amiri in a series of televised interviews and speeches (Al-Khazali 2019).

When it was clear their symbolic capital was no longer influential in Iraq's political field, the ruling elite resorted to the heavy use of coercive capital. In Baghdad and other parts of the south in October and November 2019, a campaign of targeted assassination, intelligence gathering on opposition movements, intimidation of activists and the closing down of news outlets was deployed. During a two-month period, thousands were arrested and tortured, 300 killed and thousands more wounded (UNAMIa 2019; UNAMIb 2019). The logic of such a campaign was an extension of similar tactics deployed following the 2018 protests in Basra, where the security forces targeted protesters and civil society activists and successfully created an environment of fear, ending the protests and reducing the likelihood of future protests.[2]

As the protests continued into November 2019, the ruling elite divided around the best way to defend the *Nidham Muhasasa*. Hadi al-Ameri mobilized key Shia Islamists parties, the two dominant Kurdish parties (KDP and some in the PUK) and individual Sunni leaders (Khamis al-Khanjar) in defense of the system. This grand coalition aims to govern as it has done since 2003, using high levels of coercion to meet the challenge of the protest movement. A rival to this strategy came from within Ameri's own Shi'a Islamist camp, as Qais al-Khazali focused on centralizing power within system in a "semi-presidency". Khazali argued that Iraq could no longer rely on a loose elite bargain but needed a strong leader with concentrated coercive and economic capital. He proposed that the parliament would chose this new president, guaranteeing the logic of demography would result in a Shi'a retaining the post.[3] In short, although Iraqis had for several years challenged the ethno-sectarianism symbolic violence at the core of the *Nidham Muhasasa*, the elite nonetheless continued to use its logic to mount a defense of the system

Conclusions. Symbolic violence, coercive capital and the struggle for Iraq's political field.

The political parties who have dominated the post-2003 political field have done so through the deployment of symbolic, economic and coercive capital. Their use of symbolic capital directly led to the sectarianization of Iraq's political field, reaching its peak during the two national election campaigns of 2005. However, as the large electoral blocs, used as vehicles for ethno-sectarian mobilization, fractured the symbolic capital accrued by the parties competing in the political field declined. None of the parties involved in regime change and the creation of the political system in its aftermath managed to

develop an alternative source of symbolic capital. The economic capital that the ruling elite accrued through dominating the various institutions of the Iraqi state became a central part of the system and its stability as politically sanctioned corruption created elite cohesion (Dodge 2019b). However, this political corruption also became the main driver of de-legitimation (Dodge 2019a). As the symbolic capital attained through sectarian rhetoric declined and public resentment at systemic corruption grew, Iraq's post-2003 political field became more competitive and open to challenge. This challenge, since 2009, has become primarily focused on secular, nationalist categories of practice promoted by the protest movement. This movement has set out to develop the symbolic capital needed to develop a new principle vision of how society should be structured. It has gained increasing symbolic and social capital from 2011 to 2015. In 2019, it became one of the largest protest movements in Iraq's history, mobilizing people across the major cities and towns of southern Iraq and putting a million people on the streets of Baghdad. The ruling elite found it impossible to use their own already weak symbolic capital to challenge a movement based on calls for an equal countywide citizenship and a secular Iraqi nationalism. Instead, they resorted to deploying very high levels of covert and overt coercive capital, killing hundreds of demonstrators, wounding many thousands and arresting and torturing many thousands more. The response to this movement has transformed Iraq's political field, making the status quo dependent upon violence. This approach to regime survival was made necessary because sectarianization failed to mobilize the population and corruption became a major source of popular alienation. In spite of sectarianization's failure, it remains the guiding logic for the ruling elite's plans for survival.

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[1] Anonymous author interview, February 2019, Baghdad.

[2] Anonymous authors interviews with civil society activists, Basra, February 2019.

[3] Author interview with Qais al-Khazali, Baghdad, December 2018.