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ECONOMIC, SOCIAL, AND CULTURAL DRIVERS OF SOCIAL MOVEMENTS IN POST-2003 IRAQ

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ABSTRACT

The social movements in Iraq following 2003 were driven by a complex interplay of economic, social, and cultural factors rooted in the country's post-war challenges. Economically, the reliance on a rentier, oil-dependent economy (95% of revenue) exacerbated structural weaknesses, leading to high unemployment (39% overall, 57% among youth), rampant corruption, and a lack of diversification into productive sectors like industry and agriculture. The legacy of wars, sanctions, and political sectarianism further dismantled the middle class, destroyed infrastructure, and entrenched social inequalities, with wealth concentrated among a new elite tied to political powers. Socially, the rise of sectarian and ethnic divisions, fueled by the political quota system, fragmented national identity, displaced millions, and marginalized communities like Christians, Yazidis, and Mandaeans. Culturally, the erosion of civil society, coupled with widespread poverty, illiteracy, and restricted freedoms, deepened public discontent. Issues such as corruption, terrorism (e.g., ISIS's 2014 occupation of Mosul), internal displacement, gender inequality, and curtailed civil liberties further intensified social unrest. These factors collectively fostered a demand for systemic change, highlighting the need for a democratic, inclusive state based on citizenship, justice, and equitable resource distribution to address Iraq's multifaceted crises.

KEYWORDS: Social movements, Post-2003 Iraq, Rentier economy, Sectarianism, Systemic change

INTRODUCTION

The post-2003 era in Iraq marks a pivotal chapter defined by profound economic, social, and cultural transformations triggered by the U.S.-led invasion and subsequent regime change. The dismantling of Saddam Hussein's authoritarian rule, while initially perceived as a pathway to democratic renewal, unleashed a cascade of crises that reshaped the nation's trajectory. The imposition of a political system rooted in sectarian and ethnic quotas, coupled with the legacy of wars, sanctions, and occupation, fractured Iraq's social fabric, eroded its economic foundations, and deepened cultural divides. These conditions gave rise to dynamic social movements driven by widespread discontent with systemic corruption, economic inequality, and the erosion of national identity. This article explores the interplay

of economic stagnation, social injustices, and cultural fragmentation as key drivers of Iraq's post-2003 social movements, analyzing how these factors have fueled collective action and demands for systemic reform. By examining the structural and historical forces at play, it seeks to illuminate the complexities of Iraq's ongoing struggle for stability, justice, and unity.

First: The Economic Dimension of the General Crisis

The method of regime changes in Iraq through war, coupled with the crisis of building a system based on political and ethnic sectarianism in 2003, has impacted all aspects of life, creating new repercussions for the overall political, economic, and social conditions. This added new burdens to the legacy of thirteen years of economic sanctions that weakened Iraq's middle class. The American occupation further exacerbated this weakness and vulnerability ((Y. Saleh, personal communication, October 25, 2015).

The Iraqi people bore additional heavy burdens, alongside those from the First Gulf War (Iran-Iraq War) 1980-1988, and Second Gulf War (Iraqi invasion of Kuwait) 1990-1991, the regime's internal wars against the Kurds, the destruction of over 4,000 Kurdish villages and the displacement of their residents, the draining of the marshes, and the displacement of their secure inhabitants. All these heinous crimes were factors in destroying the infrastructure, impoverishing the Iraqi people, and tearing apart their social fabric. Twenty-three years of Saddam's rule led to the dismantling of civil society (K. Madhat, personal communication, December 29, 2015) and created a security vacuum that enabled the rise and increased activity of certain militias.

On the other hand, there was an absence of a developmental economic vision based on diversifying Iraq's economy and focusing on real sectors such as industry, agriculture, and tourism. Instead, the economy relied heavily—up to 95%—on oil revenues, making oil the primary resource in Iraq's economy and leaving the country at the mercy of oil market fluctuations and price volatility (A. J. M. Fattah, personal communication, December 2, 2015).

The rentier nature of Iraq's economy deepened (that relies heavily on revenues from natural resources or non-productive activities, such as oil or gas), with commercial and service activities dominating, while industry, agriculture, and productive activities in general declined. This was accompanied by rising unemployment rates, particularly among young people. Some discussions about the rentier nature of Iraq's economy post-2003 and economic diversification have been mere rhetoric, not backed by real or practical measures (Abdullah & Mahdi, 2015). The World Bank estimates unemployment at around 39%, while among youth aged 15–29, it exceeds 57% (Iraqi Communist Party, 2012, p. 20). The state apparatus has bloated, with significant disparities in salaries and wages, rampant financial and administrative corruption, and the leakage of a high percentage of large government budget allocations into the pockets of merchants, contractors, senior politicians, and influential state officials.

Although precise national statistics on the extent of corruption in Iraq are unavailable, estimates from Transparency International, which publishes global corruption indices, indicate that Iraq ranks last on the the corruption index (Saleh, 2012). The deterioration of electricity supply has weakened the productive performance of thousands of factories, workshops, laboratories, and agricultural activities, alongside a significant decline in the performance of most service and tourism facilities (Iraqi Communist Party, 2012, p. 39).

This has led, in recent years, to the emergence of a class of exorbitantly wealthy merchants, parasitic brokers, and contractors with close ties to influential figures in the state from the ruling political blocs (Saleh, 2012). Their wealth accumulated, and they gained high incomes through large salaries, privileges, and rentier activities unrelated to production, not to mention illicit revenues tied to financial and administrative corruption through their shares in supply and reconstruction contracts (A. J. M. Fattah, personal communication, December 2, 2015), many of which were fictitious. This opened the door wide to entrenched financial and administrative corruption.

As a result, social disparities intensified, and there are indications that this intertwining of interests has become more evident in the formation of cooperative and mutually supportive relationships between wealthy individuals and influential political blocs, to the extent that it is now well-known that several major merchants and contractors, those who have seized a significant share of the state's major projects are financing political lists, parties, and figures that hold political and economic decision-making power. Some have also begun reshaping the political landscape by funding the establishment of new political party groups to perpetuate the dominance of influential forces (Rights Alliance, 2014, p. 3).

The wealth of new officials has expanded, and the influence of newly rich capitalists, the so-called "fat cats," has grown. They have joined influential parties, secured positions within them, and won seats in the parliament, not only to achieve personal interests but also to influence public policies and adapt them to the needs of a particular type of capitalism, parasitic, rent-seeking, and corrupt form. Meanwhile, influential figures live in extreme wealth amidst widespread poverty and deprivation (Saleh, 2012, pp. 9–14).

This economic situation has impacted the structure of society, contributing to significant social disparities. The high incomes of certain individuals, particularly from the ruling class and senior state officials, have led to a stark contrast between a small wealthy elite and a large class with low incomes. This has generated psychological dissatisfaction with new wealth distribution and redistribution policies (Al-Ajli et al., 2011, p. 480). The gap between the rich and the poor has widened, with an increasing number of millionaires and billionaires who have enriched themselves at the expense of the people and the national economy. A specific group has monopolized wealth through various means, and the ruling political class in Iraq has entrenched a rent-seeking character in shaping the economic-social-political patronage network (Abdullah & Mahdi, 2015, p. 69), while large segments of the Iraqi population live at or below the poverty line (K. Habib, personal communication, January 5, 2015).

Notably, the noticeable improvement in general living conditions has not been accompanied by a reduction in this internal gap; rather, it has deepened the divide and perpetuated social disparities, exacerbating the issue of poor distribution and redistribution of income and wealth among Iraqi society (Iraqi Communist Party, 2012, p. 96). Social inequality has worsened, and class and social stratification have deepened, leading to discontent and dissatisfaction. The defining feature of this inequality favors a corrupt political class. The unjust distribution of wealth has produced various forms of social inequality, obstructing the emergence of shared visions or unified civil social actions (Yasin, 2011, p. 23).

The outcome of the past decade shows worsening social inequality, deepening class stratification, and increasing levels of poverty and marginalization, alongside the spread of illiteracy and the deterioration of education (Al-Tanir, 2009, p. 55). Thus, it can be said that, despite attempts by the ideology of influential forces to obscure reality, poverty, marginalization, illiteracy, disease, and unemployment are the logical results of transferring wealth from the poor to the "whales of power" and its concentration among those in authority. This is not an inevitable fate but a product of the power structure, the prevailing production relations, and the ownership framework, as well as the structure of the Iraqi economy. Additionally, continuous population growth, unaccompanied by corresponding economic growth (Saleh, 2012, p. 8), the rent-seeking and one-sided nature of the economy, and its worsening structural imbalances contribute to this reality.

In conclusion, no genuine and serious change in the current reality can be guaranteed without a sincere effort to transform Iraq's economic reality and shift its rent-seeking, consumption-based structure toward a productive one. This would, in turn, transform the societal structure and its class composition, accompanied by changes in individual and collective societal consciousness. This is a complex, long, and arduous task, but there is no alternative (K. Habib, personal communication, January 5, 2015).

The economic policies of successive governments have been characterized by a lack of vision, and the unified strategies and policies of the state in the fields of development, finance, and others, along with the forced weakening of the state's role, particularly in the economic sphere, have had significant consequences. Meanwhile, there has been an ongoing exaggeration in emphasizing the advantages of the free market in the country's economy, without examining the tangible reality and its requirements. This hinders the process of reconstruction and rebuilding of productive sectors, industrial, agricultural, and service-oriented, and obstructs the achievement of comprehensive and sustainable economic development. There is an urgent need for an economic policy that thoroughly understands how to leverage Iraq's primary resource, crude oil, both as a material and a financial resource, for the benefit of development (Habib, 2003, p. 27).

The economic measures and legislation aimed at attracting foreign investment have not achieved notable success. Despite the issuance of Investment Law No. 13 of 2006 and its subsequent amendments, investment does not thrive in environments of instability, abnormal conditions, and

corruption. Corruption often involves companies lacking the necessary competence, which affects the quality and standard of work due to their failure to adhere to required specifications (Habib, 2003, p. 28).

Since 2015, Iraq has faced highly complex economic conditions linked to the persistent low level of oil sales revenues. The price of a barrel of oil dropped from \$120 in previous years to \$40 in 2015, losing 60% of its value (Jabbar, 2015). Coupled with rising state expenditures and military operations against terrorism and ISIS, Iraq faced a range of political, economic, and social challenges (Al-Nasiri, 2015). As a result, the government was forced to implement austerity measures that directly impacted citizens' living conditions.

The lower-income and non-income groups bore the brunt of these measures due to unfair tax burdens, such as sales taxes and various fees, reductions in food ration card allocations, the elimination of allocations for displaced people, the closure of job appointments, rising unemployment rates, and increasing poverty among large segments of society, pushing more citizens below the poverty line (The Executive Office of the Iraqi Democratic Current, 2015). The government's announcement of plans to liquidate a large number of state-owned companies, instead of rehabilitating them by removing incompetent elements, bureaucracy, outdated equipment, and corruption (Research Team, 2007, p. 33), protecting national products, and aiding their marketing, while prioritizing the interests and future of workers and their families, further exacerbated the situation.

Second: The Impact of Economic Policies on Social and Cultural Realities

The crisis of the government's general policies, including one-sided economic policies, has created additional complications for Iraqi society as a whole, causing confusion, tension, and further aggravation of people's suffering and grievances. These policies have left profound impacts on the structure of Iraqi society in the following several ways:

1. Corruption and Its Impact on Social Values

The expansion of corruption and the worsening of living difficulties for popular classes, combined with the lack of job opportunities even for university graduates, who are now forced to take any job unrelated to their field of study to earn a living (Taha, 2010, p. 24), have elevated corruption to the level of a tool used by the government to manage economic policy (Research Team, 2007, p. 94).

2. Terrorism and Its Escalation

Particularly the impact of the Islamic State (ISIS) and its control over Mosul province. On the morning of Tuesday, June 10, 2014, everyone woke up to the shocking news of the fall of Mosul city in Nineveh province into the hands of ISIS. Many believed the announcement of the "Islamic State" was just propaganda and a virtual fiction (Abu Haniya and Abu Rumman, 2015, p. 127). The organization occupied areas of the Nineveh Plain and Sinjar, forcibly displaced Christians from Mosul, committed the most heinous genocide against the Yazidis in Sinjar, brutally attacked and enslaved Yazidi women,

and traded them in a market set up by ISIS for trafficking women. Thus, ISIS committed the most barbaric and regressive crimes of the century under the banners of religion and Sharia, leading to the displacement of millions of Iraqis amid armed conflict out of fear for their lives. The organization also occupied Anbar, Salahuddin, and large areas of Diyala and Babylon provinces, with their threat reaching the outskirts of the capital, Baghdad.

3. Quota system (Muhasasa)

Criticism and complaints are no longer limited to citizens suffering from the lack of services despite massive spending, whether in electricity, sewage, road paving, municipal services, drinking water provision, school construction and rehabilitation, or the establishment of health centers, clinics, and hospitals. Additionally, there has been a failure to fulfill food ration card entitlements for years, with a decline in the quality of its items (Al-Hafiz, 2013, p. 123). Beyond the deterioration of public and social services in both quantity and quality, these conditions have been accompanied by a less visible destruction related to the psychological impact of crises on Iraqis, especially children. All these factors have led to the collapse of human security (Yassin et al., 2010, p. 6) and all areas of work and activity under the state's responsibility, whether represented by the federal authority or local governments in the provinces. Senior state officials have acknowledged that the government's problems are centered around the quota system and its repercussions (H. Aziz, personal communication, 2016).

Previous statements by government officials indicated that not a single significant project has been completed in recent years due to inefficiency, corruption in selecting implementing companies, bureaucracy, and outdated laws and regulations. Influential forces have failed to overcome their incompetence or succeed in finding solutions to the multiplying problems and crises in their mutual relations and joint management of the country's affairs, as long as they remain captive to the logic of the sectarian and ethnic quota system. Escaping the crisis of the sectarian and ethnic quota system is unimaginable without changing the balance of political forces in society through a genuine, rational, and necessarily Iraqi alternative. This alternative must be capable of creating a new balance in the state, society, and culture (Al-Janabi, 2012, p. 120). This role should be played by supporters of the national democratic project, which advocates for establishing a democratic civil state based on citizenship, freedoms, and social justice.

4. Identity conflict

The period after 2003 witnessed the rise of sub-identities at the expense of national identity, distorting and fragmenting the social fabric of Iraqi society. On the social level, addressing these challenges requires treating citizens equally, reducing the migration of population components through policies that avoid exclusion and marginalization, ensuring equality for all, and involving them in managing the country's affairs away from the sectarian quota system (K. Hantoush, personal communication, 2015). Additionally, there should be a focus on the issue of returning displaced people to their areas and addressing post-return problems in those regions. The parties involved in sectarian conflict are

indistinguishable, as they are united in serving the sectarian project. They quickly rekindle sectarian division by invoking sub-identities, resorting to them when needed.

Repeated crises, especially after the occupation of Mosul, have proven that they are leaders of their sects, not of Iraq. Sectarianism has become a threat to democracy (Hafiz, 2011, p. 358), and there has been no political stability in Iraq due to corruption and the quota system throughout the post-change period (K. Habib, personal communication, January 5, 2015). Sectarian ideology has overshadowed the democratic civil ideology embodied in promoting citizenship as the basis for building a state that preserves everyone's rights.

The need to formulate a democratic alternative has become evident and the rational capable of manifesting in a national political social movement and forming an Iraqi democratic project (Al-Janabi, 2012, p. 94). For democracy is not achieved by sectarian thought or thought that conceals sectarianism (Kasid, 2005, p. 68), but rather we need a national vision that looks at citizens with the eye of equality. There is no doubt that the crisis is closely related to the nature of the political system based on sectarian and ethnic quotas, and also the divisions of a tribal and ethno-sectarian nature affect the political structure of the state (Abdullah, 2010, p. 302), as sectarianism in general and political sectarianism in particular is nothing but the curtailed formula of the system, the state, society, and nationalism (Al-Janabi, 2012, p. 98).

5. Violence and Counter-Violence

Violence and counter-violence have deepened the crisis and led to casualties. An Amnesty International report indicates disturbing evidence of targeting political activists, with individuals subjected to arrest and torture for participating in protests, as well as attacks on journalists, media outlets, and government critics (Voice of Humanity, 2001, p. 16). Assassinations and targeting of journalists and media professionals have continued, with Iraq ranking among the top countries for victims in journalism and media. Some were killed or kidnapped due to their writings, others due to their sectarian identity, reflecting the critical role journalists and media professionals play in daily life (Al-Anbari, 2011, p. 72).

6. Migration

The ongoing hemorrhage of migration, particularly among Christians and Mandaean Sabaeans, intensified after ISIS's occupation of Mosul, affecting Yazidis and Shabak communities. The lack of measures to ensure respect for these citizens' religious beliefs and to guarantee their administrative and cultural rights, which would preserve Iraq's diverse national, religious, and sectarian social fabric as a cultural enrichment, has contributed to this situation (Al-Shakarji, 2007, p. 11). This led thousands of displaced people and citizens to migrate, especially in 2015, to Europe through illegal and unsafe routes, such as crossing the Aegean Sea from Turkey in unsafe boats, seeking a new life or job opportunities for youth.

Reports indicated that 3,000 Iraqis, 70% of whom are young people, are migrating to Turkey through 15 daily flights during the months of September and October. Additionally, 400,000 people, including Iraqis and Syrians, left Iraq for Turkey during the same two months, according to reports from the Human Rights Commission. Estimates suggest even larger numbers, with no precise figures available from the government or parliament (Al-Mada, Sep. 8, 2015).

This process was not without victims, including families, youth, and children who drowned. Youth were the largest group of migrants, alongside various social strata, with the majority from middle-class backgrounds across all religious, sectarian, and national affiliations. The migration of doctors and scientific expertise was notable (Al-Mada, Dec. 19, 2015). The International Organization for Migration reported that 2015 witnessed the largest migration wave due to terrorism from Iraq and other countries since World War II (Al-Mada, Dec. 31, 2015). A direct cause of this massive migration was Turkey's facilitation of border crossings to Europe, aiming to pressure European countries and retaliate for their stances, particularly their refusal to establish a buffer zone in Syria. Germany's welcoming stance toward migrants also played a role.

7. Internal Displacement

Iraq faced its most severe human displacement crisis, with millions of citizens fleeing from these provinces, leaving everything behind. They scattered across Iraq's governorates, primarily concentrating in the Kurdistan Region, Baghdad, and Kirkuk, as well as other governorates south of Baghdad. According to statistics published by the International Organization for Migration in its displacement tracking matrix, over 3.1 million Iraqis were displaced as of July 30, 2015 (International Organization for Migration, 2015). Reports indicate that approximately 15% of the displaced were from Fallujah, Ramadi, and surrounding areas, 68% were from central and northern Iraq, and the Kurdistan Region hosted 28% of the displaced (Al-Mada, Aug. 12, 2015). The displacement crisis led to numerous challenges, including difficulties in providing housing, food, and essential needs due to the large numbers and the lack of preparedness by local governments.

8. Absence of Social Justice

The gap widened between the affluent and those living below the poverty line, even during years of high oil revenues, as oil failed to achieve social justice in distributing income and benefits among Iraq's population (Abdullah, 2015 a, p. 71). There was no policy for social guarantees, and the most basic conditions for social justice were absent. Economic, cultural, and social rights suffered from marginalization (Hammadi, 2011, p. 106), as individuals have the right to a decent standard of living to maintain health, well-being, and dignity. This is particularly evident when citizens' demands for economic and social rights related to human dignity and livelihood, such as education, employment, social security, child protection, and other rights, are ignored (Hammadi, 2011, p. 108). Increasing segments of the population and society began seeking credible alternatives to the political forces they had previously supported in two electoral cycles, which disappointed their hopes and failed to improve

their conditions. Iraqis, especially the youth, recognized the extent of injustice and corruption (Al-Naimi, 2014, p. 82). The solution lies in establishing a state of law and forming national parties that address Iraqis as citizens, regardless of their identities (Cordesman et al., 2007, p. 108).

9. Marginalization of Women's Participation

Women's involvement in political life and state activities remained limited, confined to a narrow framework that did not extend to the state's executive bodies. There was a lack of equal opportunities for women in various fields of work. There were no efforts toward the elimination of discrimination against women or the alleviation of their suffering, especially in cases of the absence, loss, or unemployment of the family breadwinner, forcing women to bear the responsibility (Hamza, 2011, p. 58). This sometimes led to sacrificing their education, contributing to their exhaustion, and occasionally compelling them to work long hours, which negatively impacted their health (Hamza, 2011, p. 118).

10. Restrictions on Freedoms

The deepening political crisis was accompanied by growing trends toward centralized power and the narrowing of participation in political decision-making. Security apparatus violations of freedoms increased, including arrests and harassment targeting democratic activists in political parties, civil society organizations, trade unions, and professional associations, reflecting military institution interference in political life (Abdullah, 2015 b., p. 60). Human rights organizations reported significant violations, including unlawful arrests, prison abuses, and restrictions on freedoms by extremist forces.

CONCLUSION

The social movements in Iraq post-2003 reflect a society grappling with the compounded effects of economic mismanagement, social inequality, and cultural fragmentation. The rentier economy's overreliance on oil, coupled with systemic corruption and the sectarian quota system, has entrenched a cycle of poverty, unemployment, and marginalization, alienating large segments of the population, particularly youth and women. Social disparities, exacerbated by the absence of developmental policies and the persistence of identity-based conflicts, have undermined national cohesion and fueled widespread unrest. Culturally, the rise of sub-identities and the erosion of civic values under the weight of violence and displacement have further complicated efforts to forge a unified democratic vision. Yet, these challenges have also galvanized Iraqis to demand accountability, social justice, and a reimagined political order rooted in citizenship and equality. Addressing these drivers requires a fundamental restructuring of Iraq's economic model toward diversification and productivity, alongside political reforms to dismantle sectarianism and foster inclusive governance. While the path to transformation is fraught with obstacles, the resilience of Iraq's social movements offers hope for a future where economic equity, social cohesion, and cultural pluralism can coexist.

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