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THE POLITICAL HYBRIDIZATION OF MIDDLE EASTERN STATES: IRAQ AS A CASE STUDY

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Abstract

This article analyzes the future features of Iraqi statehood, drawing on hybrid regime theory and a broad understanding of political system transformation. In this context, we assume that post-ISIS Iraq has a pluralistic security perspective (state versus militia), which has led to a second feature: the challenge to the monopoly of violence by the Popular Mobilization Forces. This, in turn, affects the legitimacy of political authority and the state's defense policy. In the article, using hybrid regime theory, social identity theory, and Pierre Bourdieu's concept of homology, the authors argue that Iraq is not a failed state, but a country with a highly hybrid political system, where formal democratic institutions coexist with informal networks of sectarian and militarized power. By examining the historical development of Shia militias and their integration into the Iraqi state system since 2014, the article reveals the rise of parallel governance structures and security pluralism. The dual identity of the Popular Mobilization Forces, as a state-backed military force and an autonomous sectarian formation, challenges Max Weber's ideas of sovereignty and the sociology of the state, blurring the line between legitimacy and coercion. The example of Iraq is illustrative and particularly interesting, as the formation of a new elite took place in conditions of political and sectarian conflict and struggle. Moreover, the emergence of a new elite in the new Iraqi state and Iraqi society occurred simultaneously with regional transformation processes, characterized by global and regional clashes between different centers of power, which, in turn, influenced the hybridization of Iraq's domestic political processes.

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Introduction

Modern Iraq offers a unique example of the rebuilding of state structures after a massive military invasion. This process was initiated by the aggressor state and took place under its close guidance and supervision. However, the initial conditions of US external control were modified by the new Iraqi elites who came to power, organizing themselves into new political parties and parliamentary blocs that functioned within the framework of newly created government bodies, including those responsible for foreign policy.

Iraqi political forces, operating within the context of a political system created externally and forced to largely follow the interests of its architects, also had their own interests. To realize these, they needed to maneuver in the foreign policy arena, developing relations with other states—primarily Iran, the Sunni Arab states of the region, Turkey, the EU, European states, Russia, China, and other global and regional players. In the current context of active US interference in the internal affairs of states whose behavior does not align with the American vision of global strategy, the experience of Iraq, which is gaining foreign policy agency following the externally orchestrated collapse of its state system, is of particular interest and underscores the relevance of this research.

The post-2003 political transformation of Iraq provides a powerful perspective for examining the development of statehood in the Middle East, especially in areas influenced by foreign intervention, sectarian politics, and non-state armed groups. The U.S.-led invasion of Iraq not only removed the Ba'athist regime but also initiated a fragmented and contested process of rebuilding the state. The result in the following years was not a unified democratic state but a hybrid political system characterized by the coexistence of democratic institutions and authoritarian practices (Levitsky and Way 2010; Schedler 2002). Among the most influential actors in this transformation have been Shia armed groups, which gained prominence after Saddam Hussein's fall. Their roles have included filling security voids, resisting foreign occupation, and participating in state formation and politics. The Popular Mobilization Forces (PMF), in particular, mark a significant turning point in the militarization of politics and the hybrid nature of the Iraqi state. These developments have blurred the distinctions between formal and informal authority, state and non-state actors, and legitimate and illegitimate violence. Despite the presence of elections, a constitution, and democratic institutions, the Iraqi state has struggled to establish a strong, centralized monopoly on violence or achieve sustainable governance. The growing involvement of Shia armed groups within the state apparatus has contributed to a fragmented and often contradictory governance system, resembling a hybrid regime (Dodge 2012; Dodge 2024; Mansour 2021). The institutionalization of militias, especially the PMF, exemplifies a form of security pluralism that remains under-theorized in mainstream discussions of hybrid regimes.

In this research, we seek to analyze the role of Shia armed groups, especially the PMF, in the hybridization of the Iraqi state post-2003 and post-2014. We aim to explore how these actors function as both state-builders and spoilers, and how their political, military, and symbolic capital has reshaped Iraq's political landscape. Specifically, our paper will first investigate how Shia militias were integrated into political and security institutions, and secondly, we explore how sectarian identity was leveraged in state-building processes. Finally, we theorize the coexistence of parallel armed formations as a core feature of Iraq's hybrid regime.

Research Questions

To understand the hybridization process of the Iraqi state since 2003, and specifically in the post-ISIS era, we pose a question in this paper as follows: *How has the natural structure of Shia armed groups, characterized by confrontation, conflict, and resistance, helped shape and influence the hybrid nature of the Iraqi political system?*

By combining hybrid regime theory with insights from political sociology and identity theory, our paper presents a multifaceted view of how non-state armed groups function within and around official state institutions. While much of the existing literature has concentrated on electoral manipulation or institutional decline (Schedler 2002; Levitsky and Way 2010; Palani 2025), our research underscores the security aspect of hybridity, especially the coexistence of parallel military forces and sectarian dynamics, which are key to Iraq's post-conflict situation. Additionally, the paper highlights important gaps in the current Iraq literature: specifically, the long-term political impacts of PMF integration, the sectarian shaping of national identity, and the gradual loss of state legitimacy from both grassroots and institutional levels (Haddad 2020; Mansour 2017; Linde 2009).

Theoretical Framework

The Iraqi case highlights the complexities of post-conflict statehood, where democratic institutions coexist with informal networks of coercion, patronage, and identity-based mobilization. To understand these contradictions, our research uses an interdisciplinary theoretical framework that combines Hybrid regime theory, Social identity theory (SIT), and Bourdieu's theory of homology. Together, these frameworks provide a nuanced understanding of how state authority, identity, and armed power intersect in Iraq's complex political landscape.

Hybrid regime theory (HRT): According to HRT, political systems that lie between democracy and authoritarianism can be in the circle of hybrid regimes. These types of regimes often have democratic institutions—such as elections, parliaments, and constitutions—yet lack genuine political competition, the rule of law, or civil liberties (Levitsky and Way 2010; O'Driscoll and Costantini 2024). These regimes allow very limited pluralism and maintain informal authoritarian control by clientelism, repression, and manipulation of institutions (Schedler 2002). Such regimes have increased in the post-Cold War period, especially in transitional states where international pressures for democratization meet strong informal political legacies (Ekman 2009; Cassani 2014). Scholars frequently identify features like electoral

authoritarianism, competitive authoritarianism, and illiberal democracy as minor symptoms of hybrid regimes (Diamond 2002; O'Driscoll and Costantini 2024). In post-2003 Iraq, the democratization process efforts resulted in the creation and development of electoral institutions, a constitution, and power-sharing mechanisms. However, these formal structures were compromised by ethno-sectarian patronage networks, politicized security forces, and widespread corruption (Dodge 2012; Mako and McCulloch 2024). Our research suggests that Iraq exemplifies a deep hybrid regime where not only institutions but also security forces are hybridized.

Social identity theory (SIT): This theory, developed by Henri Tajfel and John Turner (2000), argues that individuals derive part of their identity and self-esteem from group affiliations, and it is based on three pillars: 1) Social categorization (us vs. them), 2) Social comparison (evaluating one's group relative to others), 3) In-group favoritism and out-group bias.

This process becomes politically salient when identity is tied to access to power, resources, or legitimacy.

In the post-2003 Iraqi context, SIT helps to understand the recurrence and politicization of Shia identity in the post-Saddam era. Historically, the Shia population was marginalized under Ba'athist rule, and they emerged as the political majority in the post-2003 period. This dynamic change of the Shia identity was both psychological and institutional: As a marginalized people in the past, they came into new positions of power while reinforcing narratives of historical victimhood and moral superiority (Haddad 2020). From that perspective, the Shia militias exploited these dynamics by portraying themselves as defenders of the community and the nation. In-group narratives were reinforced through religious rituals (e.g., Ashura), media, and political discourse, while Sunni communities and Western forces were often framed as out-groups.

Bourdieu's theory of homology: Pierre Bourdieu's sociological theory focuses on the concepts of field, capital, and habitus (Bourdieu 1984, 1991). Fields—like religion, politics, or the military—are arenas of competition for power and legitimacy. Capital can be economic, cultural, symbolic, or political, and individuals or groups will take advantage of it to advance their position within or across fields. Homology states the structural correspondence across different fields: people who occupy similar positions in one field (e.g., religion) tend to occupy similar ones in others (e.g., politics). This pattern reflects shared habitus, or embodied dispositions shaped by social conditions.

Homology in Post-2003 Iraq

Bourdieu's theory is particularly valuable in understanding how Shia identity in Iraq is embedded across multiple fields:

- Religious field: Faithfulness to clerical institutions in Najaf or Qom,
- Political field: Backing for parties like Dawa, SCIRI, or PMF-affiliated factions,
- Cultural field: Magnifying martyrdom, pilgrimage, and resistance,
- Economic field: Access to state resources via militia-linked networks.

For example, members of the PMF not only rely on military power but also on religious legitimacy and populist discourse. These areas are interconnected—they

reinforce each other and help Shia armed groups build multidimensional authority (Mansour 2017; Mako and McCulloch 2024).

A Dual Theoretical Perspective

In this part, first, we look at how identity meets structure, and by integrating SIT with Bourdieu's theory of homology, we identify that identity is not only a psychological anchor but also a structurally conditioned position within Iraq's deeply divided social fields. Using the SIT, we will clarify why individuals affiliate with certain groups and adopt in-group symbols. Bourdieu explains why those groups' symbols vary by class, field, and political access. This integrated framework allows us to reconceptualize hybrid regimes beyond their institutional façade. It highlights the coexistence of multiple sources of authority—military, religious, symbolic—and the hybridization of state functions via informal and sectarian channels. Iraq, therefore, is not simply a failed democratic project but a deep hybrid regime where fields are restructured around identity-based capital and armed networks. We have outlined a multi-layered theoretical framework to analyze Iraq's hybrid political system. By combining Hybrid regime theory, Social identity theory, and Bourdieu's theory of homology, we offer a strong lens to explore how Shia armed groups mediate statehood, identity, and power in post-2003 Iraq.

Theoretical Contributions

By doing this research, we have developed the Hybrid regime theory by including the dimension of security hybridity, and arguing that the coexistence of parallel military structures should be recognized as a defining and not subsidiary feature of certain hybrid regimes. Existing models have focused primarily on electoral authoritarianism or institutional erosion (Levitsky and Way 2010; Mako and McCulloch 2024), while neglecting how the monopoly on violence is fragmented in post-conflict contexts like Iraq. By merging Social identity theory with Bourdieu's sociology, we provide a more comprehensive understanding of how identity is formed and positioned within hybrid regimes. While SIT explains individual and group-level identification processes, Bourdieu highlights the structural reproduction of power through habitus, capital, and field. In conclusion, we can say that these theories provide a strong framework for analyzing sectarian state formation in Iraq.

Historical Background of Shia Armed Groups in Iraq

The political and military development of Shia groups in Iraq needs to be understood by looking at the historical factors that shaped their emergence. In the first stage, they were portrayed as fighters and resistance to Saddam Hussein's Ba'athist regime, then to their integration and reconstruction of the political system in the post-2003 political order, and finally, they are now institutionalized within state security structures after 2014, which has put them both in function and form (Beese 2024). By using a chronological and analytical approach, we account for these groups' transformation, demonstrating how their path is closely linked to broader processes of state failure, sectarianism, and hybridization.

1. The Shia Community during the Authoritarian Repression (1980-2003): The situation for the Shia community in Iraq changed significantly during the eight-year war between Iraq and Iran. Although the Shia were integrated into various aspects of Iraqi society, the war led them to resist Saddam Hussein's regime. Political and religious groups within the Shia community faced systematic repression, with major parties like the Islamic Dawa Party and the Supreme Council for Islamic Revolution in Iraq (SCIRI) being banned. As a result, many leaders went into exile, primarily in Iran. In 1982, SCIRI established its armed wing, the Badr Brigades, with support from the Iranian Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC). These militias, initially formed during their exile, later returned to Iraq with strong transnational connections and ideological influences stemming from the Iranian Islamic Revolution. Since the Gulf War in 1991, a new era started for the Shia community, where they faced systematic marginalization. The 1991 Shia uprising in southern Iraq, following the Gulf War, was brutally crushed by Saddam's forces, further entrenching a legacy of state violence and victimhood. These influential experiences fostered deep distrust toward centralized state institutions and helped lay the foundation for community-based security networks.

2. Political Dominance and Fragmentation (2003-2014): Post-Invasion 2003 marked a Shift in the balance of power, and the whole Iraqi social and political construction was changed. The invasion led to the dismantling of Iraq's Ba'athist regime and started a new political era dominated by Shia Islamist parties, many of which returned from exile. The Dawa Party, SCIRI, and later the Sadrist Movement became dominant forces in the new political field (Dodge 2012; Dodge 2024). On the one hand, during this period, the intra-Shia competition started. On the other hand, there is growing Sunni disenfranchisement. While the Shia were in their euphoric time and they were celebrating for removal of Saddam's regime, a bloody sectarian confrontation broke out. As a result of this, the Shia militias, in the name of the Mahdi Army, were formed and led by Muqtada al-Sadr. Emerging as a populist force rooted in urban poor communities, the Mahdi Army waged both anti-U.S. insurgency and sectarian warfare during the 2006–2008 civil conflict. At the same time, SCIRI's military wing, now renamed Badr Organization, was deeply embedded within the Ministry of Interior and other state institutions (Mansour 2017; Mansour and Jabar 2017). These developments reflected the militia-state duality—Shia armed groups operated both within and outside formal political structures, often shaping state policy while maintaining autonomous armed capacity.

3. Post-2014 as a New Era for the Institutionalization Process of the PMF: Two turning points happened in the new history of Iraq, and they were the fall of ISIS and a Fatwa from Sistani for the formation of the PMF. First, the control of ISIS of the Sunni cities and the fall of Mosul as the second-largest city to ISIS in June 2014, triggered a national crisis. In the sake of the Shia population from the barbaric behavior of ISIS, Grand Ayatollah Ali al-Sistani issued a fatwa calling for the defense of Iraq. It resulted in the formation of the PMF, an umbrella coalition of mostly Shia militias, though it later came to include Sunni, Christian, and Yazidi units as well (Mansour 2021). The PMF was quickly legalized by the Iraqi parliament and other Iraqi state institutions. But maintained considerable operational independence.

Fragmentation and Factionalism

The PMF is not a monolithic force. It comprises three loosely defined factions:

1. Pro-Iranian groups (e.g., Kata'ib Hezbollah, Asa'ib Ahl al-Haq) with ideological and logistical ties to Tehran,
2. Clerically aligned groups (e.g., Saraya al-Salam, those affiliated with Sistani),
3. State-aligned groups with formal ties to Iraqi national institutions.

The internal diversification and fragmentation of these armed groups reflect the heterogeneous nature of hybrid power in Iraq. Even though these groups have been legalized under the law since 2016, but still these militias pursue different agendas, operate under different command structures, and express varying degrees of loyalty to the state.

From Insurgents to Institutions: The Institutionalization of Iraqi Shia Militias in State Power

After the military defeat of ISIS, PMF-affiliated political factions participated in the first parliamentary election in post-ISIS Iraq in 2018, and subsequently became formally involved in and integrated into the country's established political structures, operating within institutions such as governments, legislatures, courts, and political parties. The Fatah Alliance, composed of groups like Badr and Asa'ib Ahl al-Haq, won a significant share of seats in the 2018 parliamentary elections. This marked an important phase in the militia-to-party transition, similar to Hezbollah's dual role in Lebanon. These groups not only occupied sectors such as defense and security policy but also engaged in ministries and governing institutions. Although they entered politics, it did not, however, mean that they disarmed and demobilized; they now operate on two levels—having political parties where they actively exercise their political rights, and maintaining military wings that can be used at any time to gain more power or to pressure groups that oppose their interests (Mansour 2021; Mansour and Salisbury 2019). As a consequence of this long and very complicated process, these armed groups become a parallel governance and provide services such as security, infrastructure repair, and welfare distribution in areas where the central government is weak or absent. This action from the groups can easily and smoothly take place in the Iraqi society, and specifically inside the Shia community, due to the community's feature of being clientelism. This positions the Shia armed groups as parallel governance providers, strengthening their grassroots legitimacy and reinforcing identity-based networks. Their embeddedness in the state enables access to public funds, patronage networks, and immunity from legal accountability (Haddad, 2020). The table below illustrates the evolution of Shia armed groups in Iraq. Initially, they were characterized as rebels fighting for their rights against the Ba'ath regime. After Saddam's fall, there were two main groups of Shia armed factions: the first, such as the Mahdi Army, was considered an informalized group, while the second, including groups like Badr, Islamic Dawa Party, and Islamic Supreme Council of Iraq, shifted from armed struggle to political competition. They engaged in formal politics, becoming deeply embedded in the architecture of the post-2003 Iraqi state. The turning point came after the post-Sistani Fatwa, which transformed these groups into entities

seen as institutionalized and legalized by law. Ultimately, they became the architects of Iraq's hybrid regime through their roles in governance, identity construction, and coercive authority (see Table 1).

Table 1. Critical Junctures in the Evolution and Hybridization of Armed Power

Period	Militia Evolution	Role
1980-2003	Exile & repression (Dawa, SCIRI, Badr)	Resistance; ideological growth
2003-2010	Mahdi Army, Badr, and militias in the government	Armed insurgency, ministry infiltration
2014-2017	PMF formation after Sistani's fatwa	Counter-terrorism, national mobilization
Since 2017	PMF legalized and entered politics (Fatah Alliance)	Hybrid militia-party governance

Case Analysis: Iraq's Route to the Hybridization Process

The historical and chronological analysis of these groups allows us to better understand them and provides a foundation for implementing the theoretical framework to evaluate how the PMF influences the hybridization of the Iraqi state in the post-ISIS era. In the next section of our article, we examine the hybridization of the Iraqi political system, applying theories and historical background to analyze the actual transformation of the Iraqi state, with particular focus on the PMF and the logic of hybrid governance.

The Pathway for the Start of the Hybridization Process

One of the most important turning points in the modern history of Iraq and in the history up to the hybridization of the Iraqi system is the post-2003 era. The post-2003 Iraqi state contains all the essential features of a hybrid political regime: maintaining the system, which only on the surface covers structures of democratic governance, and that system, with all its institutions, is formed very sharply by informal networks of power, patronage, and coercion (Levitsky and Way 2010; Schedler 2002). What is more undeniable and unarguable is that the hybridization process is more evident in the field of security, for example, the Iraqi formal state institutions to a high degree are under the command of influential Shia armed groups' leaders, most notably the PMF. Even though officially the Iraqi security institutions are separated from PMF and factions, still, these Shia commanders from PMF and factions are so powerful that they control every corner of the security sectors. They are not only infiltrating electoral or institutional establishments, but also (to a very high probability, they are the sole engineers behind the designing of the state institutions) in their security architecture and identity-based political order. In the following sections, we will explore and identify the key factors, focusing on the PMF and other factions, through theories to understand how these armed groups have been able to transform the Iraqi political system in the past and will continue to do so in the future.

The Hybridization Process through Militia-State Integration

Legalization Without Demilitarization: Since 2016, the PMF has been officially recognized and incorporated into Iraqi state institutions by the Iraqi parliament through Law No. 40. This law includes two essential features: first, it provides the legal requirements, and consequently, it legalizes the existence of the PMF. The most important feature is the funding sources that finance its operations, logistics, and member salaries. To secure its funding, the PMF came under the Ministry of Defense. However, this did not change its hierarchy or organizational chains; instead, it retained its command structures, ideological orientations, and material resources, resulting in a dual authority structure within the security sector (Mansour 2021; Mansour and Salisbury 2019). This duality—being part of the state on one hand and maintaining its network on the other—led to the PMF being created as a temporary entity, not a transitional one, but rather as an institutionalized force. It distorted the boundaries between the state and non-state armed groups. While the PMF is paid by the state, they are not fully subordinate to its command, exemplifying what Schedler (2002) would call a "menu of manipulation," adapted from the political to the military domain.

Parallel Armies are an Advantage, not a disadvantage: Now the PMF is operating as a parallel army, while the PMF can still keep its ideological goals, strategic priorities, and territorial control zones. Shia political parties that have ruled since 2014—a year that is seen as a turning moment in the formation of the PMF—have embraced military pluralism as a governance strategy, reflecting a deeper kind of hybridization in which it is not just a symptom of state weakness. Diverse groups of factions within the Iraqi government that have been in the formation of the government and now are working intensively in the state's institutions rely on the PMF for getting political support, electoral backing, and dominating over local constituencies (Mansour 2017; Mansour and Jabar 2017). In this regard, we can say that militia involvement in politics will be seen as a tool of elite competition, not simply a security necessity.

Identity, Loyalty, and Political Capital

Sectarian Identity as Political Currency: Social identity theory (SIT) helps explain the rise of in-group/out-group dynamics that underpin the legitimacy of Shia militias. PMF units have strategically framed themselves as defenders of the Shia community, particularly in their battles against ISIS, which was often portrayed as a Sunni-dominated force. This narrative has reinforced in-group solidarity while fostering distrust and marginalization of out-groups (Haddad, 2020). The PMF thus mobilizes sectarian identity not only for recruitment but also to claim moral legitimacy in the national imaginary. This becomes a form of symbolic capital in Bourdieu’s terms, which can then be converted into political and economic power.

Homology across Fields

Drawing on Bourdieu’s theory of homology, the PMF’s influence cuts across multiple social fields:

- Political field: PMF-affiliated parties like the Fatah Alliance hold seats in parliament and ministerial offices,

- Religious field: Strong ties to clerical authorities, both in Iraq (Najaf) and Iran (Qom),
- Cultural field: Dominance in martyrdom imagery, Shia rituals, and media narratives,
- Economic field: Access to reconstruction contracts, state salaries, and smuggling networks.

The alignment of these positions across fields is not coincidental but reflects a structured homology, the parallel consolidation of symbolic, political, and material capital around sectarian-military identity (Bourdieu 1991).

Security Governance and the Fragmentation of Sovereignty

One of the most essential features of the hybridization process is that the monopoly on violence is weakened. In our view, Weber's definition of the modern state as holding a monopoly on the legitimate use of violence is no longer applicable to Iraq. The following factors, like the multiplicity of armed actors, their partial incorporation into the state, and their independent command structures, suggest that the state's sovereignty is fragmented and conditional (d'Avray 2023; Viviani 2024). This fragmentation is not only because of the existence of the PMF, but the tribal militias, Kurdish Peshmerga, and Sunni mobilization units also further push Iraq's sovereignty into a more disintegrated way. Even though the PMF remains institutionally integrated in a way that makes it an identical pillar of governance, and, in parallel, performs the governance jobs.

Since the Iraqi society is considered clientelism, the governance is by consent and coercion. The PMF has two sides of the government's style, not solely by force, but by creating the networks of services, patronage, and symbolic power. For example, in cities like Basra or Diyala, PMF-allied organizations distribute aid, settle disputes, and provide security. It results in the creation of parallel sovereignty structures that rival the central state and increase dependency on factional loyalty over national citizenship. The second side is that the PMF is willing to use force to get the Iraqi Shia majority's consent and acceptance. The PMF used the election and electoral system to penetrate politics, which was one of their most successful tools in their struggle to provide a legal base. Then and since the post-ISIS era, the PMF transitioned into formal politics. Their first step in integrating into politics was in 2018. They participated in the 2018 parliamentary elections under the umbrella, the Fatah Alliance, composed of PMF-aligned factions, and secured significant parliamentary representation. That transformation and adaptation of PMF into politics exemplifies a classic case of electoral authoritarianism within a hybrid regime, where armed actors turn into electoral competitors without losing or changing their coercive power (Skaaning 2025; Levitsky and Way 2010; Mako and McCulloch 2024). This turning point of PMF and its factions does not mean they are involved in politics because they believe in democratic principles, and they are participating to gain power to form a government or in the name of democratic consolidation. In contrast, they still maintain their military wings and can use them at any time; instead, it legalizes and normalizes the role of armed factions in democratic processes, emphasizing what Schedler (2002) would describe as a manipulated pluralism.

Post-Conflict Era and the New Social Contract in 2019

The post-2019 period will be called one of the most terrible times for Iraqi society and also for the Iraqi state. We suppose that two sides of the story are vital to mention here. First, the ending of 2018 and the beginning of 2019 witnessed the birthing of the protest movements, the so-called (Thawrat Tishreen). Tishreen is described as a Shia middle-class protester against the Shia warlords, who, after ISIS dominated the society via religion and by sanctification themself as protectors of religious sites and as protector of the Shia societal security. The October 2019 protest movement not only challenged the sectarian-militia order, but it also demanded reforms in the different sections, like in the judicial organ and parliament establishment, and encouraged the government to protect the national sovereignty by refusing the unstoppable Iranian involvement in Iraq. But the protesters were answered with violence, which led the PMF and its factions to clash with their own people and killing many of them. This confrontation changed the heroic picture of PMF and the Shia protector to be a tool in the hands of the corrupted politicians who had brought more and more problems to the Iraqi people. It portrayed the resistance of hybrid actors to state reform, particularly when such reforms threaten their political and material interests (Yoshioka 2026; Mansour 2021; Mansour and Salisbury 2019).

The second point is that the post-ISIS Iraqi state’s efforts to contain the PMF. The Iraqi state's efforts to restructure, redesign, or demobilize PMF units have been largely unsuccessful. The state has attempted to bring the PMF fully under the command of the Iraqi Armed Forces, and has also tried to reduce their budget allocations, and both efforts have been met with resistance within parliament and on the ground. In conclusion from these two points, we can say that Iraq’s post-2003 political system has gradually evolved into a deeply hybrid regime. It has divided the country's sovereignty and authority so that formal institutions coexist with informal centers of coercive and symbolic power. The PMF is no longer just a transitional, contemporary security actor providing protection to the Shia community; instead, it has assumed a role similar to a structural pillar of this hybrid order. Their integration into state structures without full subordination, their political entrenchment, and their symbolic influence over sectarian narratives all contribute to a system that is neither fully democratic nor entirely authoritarian but remains a durable hybrid.

The Repercussions of Including Shia Armed Groups in the Government's Machinery.

In the following part, we will identify and explore the implications that these armed groups will create for the Iraqi state's institutions in the post-ISIS era. We will also examine how the hybrid regime model affects important aspects of governance, from service delivery and accountability to reform prospects and public trust.

Firstly, the hybridization process of Iraq’s political system, which resulted in, especially by taking the Shia armed groups involved into state and quasi-state structures, has created implications for state-building, governance, and reform. Even though the initial intent behind the PMF was to create a responsive force to combat ISIS, the long-term entrenchment of these militias has reshaped the logic of political

authority and legitimacy in Iraq. Institutional Fragility and Parallel Governance Secondly, the state's institutional authority has fragmented in such a way that its one and only authority has now transformed into a multipolar system. This is the key factor that distinguishes our case—the hybridization of the Iraqi state—from previous studies. Beyond earlier theories and models about hybridization, we consider the complex and spiderweb-like structure of Shia armed groups in Iraq. These groups, by their nature, will grow and develop within a hybridized and multipolar authority system. We believe this is a crucial point in understanding our paper: the regional and international political environment is very important for interpreting and analyzing these groups. Gradually, through a well-structured plan, these armed groups have pushed the Iraqi state into a hybridized form.

In this context, we suggest that institutional incoherence is among the most obvious effects of hybridization. Despite being officially a unitary state, the Iraqi state has several centers of authority. Although ministries are subject to legislative requirements, state troops, local players, and militias make up the security environment. As a result, the state becomes less cohesive and its administrative and territorial sovereignty becomes fractured (Yoshioka 2026; Dodge 2012). The political environment of Iraq is not a party-free system; in contrast, many different parties participate in elections and compete for a seat in parliament. As it is highlighted by Levitsky and Way (2010) that one of the most attractive features of the competitive authoritarianism structure leads regimes to adopt democratic forms without democratic substance. We can conclude that the end effect is a type of state mimicry in which power is distributed through unofficial routes while maintaining the outward characteristics of a contemporary state, such as bureaucracies and elections (Levitsky and Way 2010). Despite their legal standing, the PMF frequently has more authority than the official military, establishing alternate governing domains and setting their own objectives.

In their struggle to renew their social/political bond with the community, the PMF, by applying the basic services to these areas where they control, acts like shadow governance. For example, in areas such as southern Iraq and contested Sunni regions like Musel, Salahadin, and Anbar, PMF-affiliated groups engage in basic service delivery, including food distribution, infrastructure repair, and dispute mediation. The aim of these functions will improve the PMF's local legitimacy, especially when state institutions are perceived as corrupt or absent. According to Mampilly (2011), this is similar to rebel governance patterns seen in other hybrid environments. The PMF, however, functions both inside and alongside the state, making it difficult to distinguish between insurgency and official authority, in contrast to traditional rebel governance. Another tool in the hands of armed groups is the card of sectarianism and highlighting sectarian identity with the aim of strengthening the political legitimacy among the Iraqi Shia community. The PMF has, since its rise, adopted sect-centric nationalism rhetoric. The base for the PMF’s legitimacy often comes not from national institutions but it derives from sectarian stories that underline Shia martyrdom, resistance, and historical injustice. At the expense of inclusive governance, this sect-centric nationalism strengthens in-group favoritism and widens identity gaps (Haddad 2020). In such a system, sectarian affiliation and allegiance to networks connected to

militias are used to distribute legitimacy rather than equal citizenship. These unofficial structures frequently manage political appointments, contracts, and access to public resources, supporting what Bourdieu (1991) may refer to as symbolic domination—the capacity to normalize unequal power distributions through cultural or moral discourses.

Another feature that is gradually starting the hybridization of the Iraqi political system is the political clientelism that benefits the political parties to capture the country's resources. Political parties with ties to the militia have used their access to government agencies to extract rent and engage in patronage. Party quotas, rather than meritocratic standards, are frequently used to award ministries and public contracts, which allows partisan interests to acquire bureaucratic power. This strengthens the neopatrimonialism system (Hasan 2023; Bratton and van de Walle 1997) in which holding public office is viewed as a means of accumulating riches for oneself and one's faction. It further alienates marginalized groups, especially Sunnis and secular Shia, and erodes public trust.

The Crisis of Reform: Resistance from Within

The post-2019 era is a starting point for a new wave and circles of conflict and violence. The conflict is no longer between these two sects: Shia and Sunni, but it goes beyond them. Intra-Shia community conflict, which came to the political stage in Iraq since 2019, by fought among the different factions for gaining more control over natural resources and dominance among Shia populations, complicating the process of disarming these militias and reintegrating them into the official army. Mass disenchantment with the sectarian-militia state was reflected in the October 2019 protest movement, also known as the Tishrin uprising. In addition to jobs and services, protesters called for an end to sectarian politics, militia bloodshed, and foreign meddling. More than 600 civilians were killed in the ruthless response, many of them by snipers connected to militias or security personnel (Amnesty International 2020). This militaristic reaction to democratic demands highlights how hybrid regimes may be both open on the surface and extremely repressive, particularly when change jeopardizes the informal players' base of power. Since the Thishrin uprising, the image of armed groups has changed, and public opinion about them has also altered. Then all the requests and hopes for the reform were blocked because of the factional interests. Real structural change has proven indefinable despite repeated appeals for reform from international funders, religious leaders, and civil society. Parliament has thwarted or softened attempts to enact anti-corruption laws, break up militia networks, or restrict party influence over ministries (Mansour 2021; Mansour and Salisbury 2019). This highlights the fundamental contradiction of hybrid regimes: those most able to implement reform are frequently those who stand to lose the most. As a result, reform efforts are either completely shelved or used for partisan advantage.

All these events resulted in declining public trust, erosion of citizenship, and a decline in confidence in state institutions. Many years of sectarian clientelism, economic stagnation, and militia impunity have declined public trust in state institutions, as it has been shown by surveys and field interviews (UNDP 2025; WHO 2023), a growing perception that political elites, including militia-affiliated parties, govern in their own interest rather than that of the people. This eroding and

deterioration of the state's vertical legitimacy is in parallel with a weakening of horizontal trust between Iraqis themselves, particularly between sectarian communities. It leads to trends that pose a long-term risk to the viability of national cohesion and institutional stability. Another feature that is highly revealing and radical in our paper is the crisis of representation and political estrangement. The hybrid system in Iraq has led to the development of political elite increasingly unaccountable to the electorate. The level of participation of voters in the voting system has steadily declined since 2005, and Iraqi younger generations, especially those involved in protest movements during 2018 and 2019, express deep pessimism toward formal politics (Haddad 2020). As militias establish themselves as both governors and guardians, the space for democratic alternatives diminishes. This crisis of representation may not cause immediate regime collapse, but it weakens the prospects for democratic deepening.

Caught between re-entrenchment and reform

We Suggest Three Scenarios for the Future of these Armed Groups:

1. Re-entrenchment: The hybrid order persists, with militias continuing to operate in and around state institutions, suppressing dissent and reproducing factional governance.
2. Gradual Reform: External and domestic pressure led to incremental change, integration of PMF under one national command, technocratic reforms, and limited anti-corruption measures.
3. Collapse and Realignment: Prolonged economic crisis or regional war triggers a collapse of the hybrid consensus, leading to either renewed conflict or a forced renegotiation of Iraq's political order.

Prerequisites for Reform:

- Demilitarization of political life
- Strengthening of national institutions
- Rebuilding cross-sectarian coalitions
- Legal and constitutional limits on militia activity

International actors can play a role, but change must ultimately come from within Iraqi society through civic engagement, elite defection from the status quo, and sustained public pressure. Iraq's hybrid regime has created a political system that is simultaneously adaptive and obstructive. While militias have contributed to territorial defense and local governance, their entrenchment in state structures poses a fundamental challenge to the rule of law, national sovereignty, and democratic accountability. Understanding these dynamics is essential for crafting realistic strategies for state-building in Iraq and similar post-conflict settings.

Conclusion and discussion

Iraq's hybrid regime has created a political system that is both adaptable and obstructive. While militias have helped with territorial defense and local governance, their deep integration into state institutions challenges the rule of law, national sovereignty, and democratic accountability. Understanding these dynamics is crucial

for developing practical strategies for state-building in Iraq and similar post-conflict environments.

This study has discovered the hybrid nature of the Iraqi political system, focusing particularly on the role of Shia armed groups, especially the PMF, in shaping governance, legitimacy, and security after 2003 up to the present time. Using a multidimensional theoretical approach that combines Hybrid regime theory, Social identity theory, and Bourdieu's theory of homology, the researcher identifies/suggests how Iraq's political order has evolved into a highly hybrid system where formal democratic institutions coexist but are often undermined by informal, identity-driven, and militarized power centers. Iraq exemplifies a form of deep hybridity, where this combination goes beyond electoral manipulation and institutional decline to include the security sector, identity formation, and governance practices.

The PMF is not an anomaly but an integral part of this hybrid structure. Their dual role as both state actors and independent power brokers reveals the contradictions within Iraq's post-conflict reconstruction (Levitsky and Way 2010; Schedler 2002). Rather than existing outside the state, Shia militias, especially those part of the PMF, function within a militia-state continuum, where the lines between formal and informal, legal and extra-legal, are intentionally blurred. This continuum allows militias to access state resources and legitimacy while maintaining independence (Mansour 2021). Applying Social identity theory, the study demonstrates how Shia militias mobilize in-group narratives to reinforce legitimacy. This identity-building is not only psychological but also shaped by broader social and political fields, as Bourdieu's theory of homology shows. The convergence of political, religious, and symbolic capital around Shia martyrdom and resistance deepens sectarian divisions and establishes durable power bases (Haddad 2020; Bourdieu 1991). Iran's support and influence over the PMF further complicate Iraq's sovereignty. The study shows that hybrid regimes are not just domestic phenomena; they are also shaped by transnational patronage, regional rivalries, and identity-based solidarity networks. In this context, Iraq exemplifies embedded sovereignty, a state whose authority is partially delegated to foreign-aligned actors.

The topic of this article has great prospects for further development, which is why many researchers are increasingly traveling to countries in the region, particularly Iraq, to participate in academic events. This provides an opportunity to conduct interviews with Iraqi politicians in order to use the information gathered during these visits in academic work. It is also important to establish cooperation between different academic institutions and those involved in the development of Iraqi policy. Given the importance of developing political and economic cooperation with Iraq, conducting applied academic research on the country becomes vital.

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Ethical standards
The authors affirm this research did not involve human subjects.

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