



The Challenges of Federalism as Ethno-Sectarian Conflict Regulation Model in Iraq

ID No. 1450
(PP 78 - 101)

<https://doi.org/10.21271/ZJIP.22.36.4>

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Received : 28/07/2023
Accepted : 23/11/2023
Published : 02/06/2023

Abstract

The regulation of ethnic and sectarian conflicts has been one of the primary challenges faced by the Iraqi state since its creation in 1921. The 2005 constitution adopted federalism as a model to tackle the question of identity as well as ethnic and sectarian conflicts; nevertheless, federalism has not yet been able to resolve these skirmishes. This article looks at the reasons behind the ineffectiveness of Iraqi federalism. It also attempts to investigate the people's perceptions toward this model. Scholars have discussed proposals for federal configuration in its various forms. However, the views and perceptions of various Iraqi communities involved in the conflicts have hardly been taken into consideration. This article aims to fill this gap in the literature by presenting, discussing and analyzing the Iraqi perspectives. It finds out that based on the cultural background, Iraqis have different perspectives toward suitable models for Iraq but federalism can be still considered as a compromise model between them.

Keywords: Federalism, Ethnic Conflict Regulation, Iraqi politics.



1. Introduction

For decades, Iraqi authorities have failed in producing and/or implementing policies acknowledging and recognizing diversity and respecting human rights including group rights. Instead it rigorously implemented policies aimed at assimilating and suppressing peripheral groups to the extent of ethnic cleansing, collective punishment and genocide. Eighty years, Arab Sunnis were the dominant group and they forcefully recreated Iraq in their image, imposing Arabism on Iraqi identity.

In 2005, the approval of a new constitution paved the way for the establishment of a new regime; however, the new Iraqi political elite failed similarly in the creation of an overarching national identity as it marginalized major segments of Iraqi society, including the Kurds as they had been during previous decades, and the Arab Sunnis since 2003 (Haddad, 2016). The Shiite Arabs this time became the dominant group replacing the Sunni Arabs. Post-Saddam Iraq is certainly different than the previous situation in the country as elections have been held on a regular basis but no significant change in the ruling group's mentality. Indeed, the post-Saddam civil war and ethnic tensions further distanced Iraqi communities and strengthened ethnic and sectarian identity. In short, Iraq was ruled and created according to the Arab Sunni vision from 1921 until 2003 (Doge, 2007), and what has changed since then has been the recreation of Iraq in line with the Shiite vision.

The removal of Saddam Hussein's regime from power as a result of the United States (US) invasion led many to believe for the formation of a new political system that would account for the various ethnic and sectarian components of Iraq*. In 2005, two years after the invasion, a new constitution was approved by Iraqis that recognized the ethnic and religious diversity of Iraqi society. However, the United States significantly

* According to the World Factbook, Iraq's population in 2021 was estimated to be 39,650,145 (CIA, 2021). Around three-quarters of Iraq's total population are Arabs; Kurds comprise 15-20% of the national population, mostly concentrated in the Kurdistan Region as well as the disputed areas between the Kurdistan Regional Government (KRG) and the Iraqi federal government. Other ethnic groups such as Turkmen, Assyrians and Shabaks constitute 3%, 2% and 3%, respectively. Islam is the major religion of the country, followed by 97% of the population, while the remaining 3% are Christians and other religions. Arabs are the largest ethnic group comprising 77% of the overall Iraqi population. Shiite-Arab Muslims make up nearly 60% of the total Iraqi population. Though predominantly located in the south, the Shiite Arabs are the majority group in the capital, Baghdad. Sunni-Arab Muslims account for nearly 20% of Iraq's total population and, geographically, are concentrated in the Midwest and Northwest of the country.



influenced the drafting of the 2005 constitution (Jawad, 2013). This document was hastily assembled and clearly did not reflect a consensus or agreements of the Iraqis about what was best model for their country (Ottaway, 2023). There were significant ambiguities and flaws within this final document which resulted in an interpretation of the articles of the constitution from different perspectives which, in turn, created more tension and conflict between Iraqi communities. Circumstances were further complicated when the Shiite-led federal government, headed by Nuri al-Maliki, has gradually started his tendency to embark on centralization policies instead of decentralization. Instead of allowing the formation of a federal region, al-Maliki restricted any attempt coming out of provinces to form federal regions, thus reinforcing his grip on power (O'Driscoll, 2016; Romano, 2014; Dodge, 2013). Some scholars believe that even if a country's constitution recognizes diversity, failure in establishing appropriate institutional measures to manage cultural diversity may lead to the eruption of ethnic and sectarian conflicts (Reynal-Querol, 2002; Sambanis, 2001; Ellingsen, 2000).

Iraq has been engulfed by ethnic and sectarian conflicts to different degrees since its creation in 1921. However, the ethnic and sectarian conflict that emerged after the US invasion in 2003 was unprecedented, in particular if we take into consideration the 2006-2007 civil war (Fearon, 2007). After 2008, for a few years, the conflict dampened and the tensions lessened; however, with the emergence of Islamic State in Iraq and Syria (ISIS) in 2014, which overwhelmed the Iraqi army in the Sunni populated areas, the sectarian conflict increased once again. Although by late 2017, the Iraqi Army and Kurdish Peshmerga Forces were able to regain control over the areas lost to ISIS, the cloud of civil war still hangs overhead. The tensions between Kurds and Iraqi government have been raised, especially after October 2017, when Iraqi military forces attacked Kurdish Peshmarga forces in Kirkuk and other disputed areas as a result of 25th September 2017 Kurd's referendum for independence. Thus, the patterns of conflicts between groups toward territorial boundaries, oil resources, power and identity have grown steadily more complicated with time, whereas they have failed to find a mutually acceptable formula for long-term solution. Perhaps the only development that happened is in addition to ongoing intergroup conflicts, intragroup tensions in terms of political, personal interests have escalated as it is noted in the aftermath of October 2021 election between Shiite forces (Twaij, 2022).

Managing ethnic and sectarian diversity is seen as the main reasons behind the conflicts that have been engulfing Iraq (Osman, 2014; Kirmanj, 2013; Haddad, 2011).



Therefore, the primary aim of this article is to evaluate current federal system as a model of ethnic conflict regulation based on the views of Iraqis. It also to find out a compromise solution that may converge Iraq's ethnic and sectarian components, taking into consideration the view of Iraqis who participated in several focus group discussions.

Although the views of scholars on the sources of the conflicts, the solutions and models they propose(d) to address the ethnic and sectarian conflicts are important, the perceptions of Iraqis are of central consideration in this study. It is imperative to know what Iraqis think about the various proposed solutions and what they suggest as a solution. Accordingly, this research employed focus group interviews to attain perspectives and views of Iraqis from different ethnic and sectarian backgrounds¹. Ten focus group interviews, in two phases, were conducted in late 2016 and 2020. The reason behind choosing focus group interview rather than other qualitative data collection techniques was to understand the participants' interaction toward each other as well as getting their responses. The participants were put into groups of six to nine respondents. In total, eighty-four individuals engaged in the focus group discussion meetings. They comprised of Shiite Arabs, Sunni Arabs, Kurds, Turkmen and Assyrians who are residents of different Iraqi provinces.

Participants of the first seven groups were mixed in terms of ethnic and religious background but the other five groups were designed to consist of people from one single ethnic and/or religious/sectarian group. The focus groups included local residents,

¹ In terms of the questions, semi-structured interviews have been employed in which the list of questions as following are presented, allowing for emergent areas and issues of interests to be explored;

- Do you believe that the current political system is appropriate for addressing ethnic conflicts?
- What do you think about Iraqi government's policy in protecting ethnic groups?
- After all events that occurred in Iraq, do you think it is possible for different ethnic groups to live together?
- What is the best governance model to be implemented in ethnically divided countries such as Iraq?
- What do you think about partitioning of the country into three independence states for Arab Shiites, Arab Sunnis and Kurds?
- Do you think if Kurds separated from Iraq, Shia and Sunni Arabs would live together peacefully within Iraq?
- What are the main causes of ethnic conflicts in Iraq?
- Do you think the government policies are serving a specific group or all groups equally?
- Is federalism still a valid solution for Iraq?
- What are the limitations of a present federal governance model in Iraq?



internally displaced persons IDPs, politicians and university students. In terms of cultural background, efforts were made to reasonably balance the number of participants per ethnic and sectarian group. Additionally, diversity in terms of age and gender were also taken into account for the purpose of heterogeneity and representativeness. Different techniques have been employed to recruit participants such as direct recruiting through visiting to the IDP's camps, offices and universities and contacting some friends.

However, it is acknowledged that the feedback from the focus groups cannot be considered fully representative of the respective communities as most focus groups were held in the Kurdistan Region and Kirkuk. The main reason for not conducting the focus groups in the southern and central parts of Iraq was due to security concerns.

In contrast to other studies on Iraq (e.g. Khalilzad & Pollack, 2014; Eland, 2009; Williams & Simpson, 2008; Brancati 2004), this research through a thematic analysis framework initiates data analysis and the results are obtained from qualitative focus group interview data, although the literature on ethnic and sectarian conflict are going to be surveyed.

2. Political and Institutional Regulation of Ethnic Conflict

There is no consensus on how ethnic diversity should be managed in the current literature. It can be safely argued that cultural misunderstandings and social stereotypes, resulting from immigration, are not difficult to address as they can be dealt with through integration and/or multicultural policy measurements (Wrench, 2007). Liberal multiculturalism is suggested as a model for managing cultural diversity in Europe and other western countries. As pointed out by Kymlicka (2007: 65) “[the] state must be seen as belonging equally to all citizens...a multicultural state repudiates any nation-building policies that assimilate or exclude members of minority or non-dominant groups.” However, liberal multiculturalism addresses the question of regionally concentrated groups through “multination and multilingual federalism that is creating a federal or quasi-federal subunit in which the minority group forms a local majority, and can thereby exercise meaningful forms of self-government” (Kymlicka, 2007: 9). This approach has not been appreciated in the Middle East.

The management of cultural diversity is more complicated where ethnic and/or sectarian groups are concentrated within specific geographical areas that have



traditionally sought cultural recognition or self-determination. Horowitz (1985) argues that in these kinds of societies ethnic conflict is at the center of politics and presents challenges to the cohesion of the state to the extent of maintaining peaceful relations between the ethnic and sectarian components of one state. Similarly, Elbadawi (1999) asserts that ethnically polarized societies are more vulnerable to civil war onset than ethnically homogenous societies. Other research suggests a strong correlation between conflict and territorially concentrated groups. For example, Hoeffler (2012) found that the concentration of ethnic groups in a specific territory increases the chance of claims for self-determination. Nonetheless, societies may polarize because of ongoing violent conflicts, even though ethnic groups may not have their own historically claimed territories, as civil war may create new realities on the ground such as occurred in the Bosnia-Herzegovina conflict in 1992-1995.

In extreme cases, some scholars propose “complete partition”, such as dividing states along ethnic and/or sectarian lines, as better solution (Eland, 2009; Downes, 2001; Kaufmann, 1996). On the contrary, in less extreme cases, scholars favour a “partial partition” to address ethnic and/or sectarian conflicts without dividing the state (Joseph & O’Hanlon, 2007; Biden & Gelb, 2006).

To resolve conflicts, scholars have presented different models. Nordlinger (1972: 20) suggested six constitutional and institutional measures to regulate ethnic conflict, namely: a stable governing coalition, proportional representation, mutual veto, purposive depoliticization, compromise and concessions. Likewise, Lijphart (1977) suggested “consociational democracy”, where different groups of the society participate in a grand coalition government. Accordingly, each group has a proportional representation in the government and the parliament with the right of mutual veto and ethnic autonomy. However, Horowitz (1985: 588) suggests that if it is not possible for various groups to share and live in one state, perhaps it is “better for them to live apart in more than one homogeneous country”. Kaufmann (1996: 151) alludes to four possible solutions to ethnic conflict: suppression, reconstruction of ethnic identities, power-sharing, and state-building. However, he asserts that when violence is intense, separation will be the only option. Kaufmann (1996) calls for the international community to abandon attempts of restoring war-torn multi-ethnic states. Instead, he suggests population movements to create true national homelands.



It appears from the above discussion that, in deeply divided societies where violent conflicts have polarized the communities, the model that favours integration is unlikely and rather partition and/or separation seem more plausible, through federal arrangements (Lijphart, 1977, 2004, Reynal-Querol, 2002). To this end, Lijphart (2007) reasserted that the federal system is undoubtedly an excellent model to attain autonomy for geographically concentrated communal groups. Despite the variation of governance models for managing cultural diversity, ethnofederalism is preferred by scholars, particularly where full partition is not possible. Indeed, full partition has only been materialized in a handful of cases in the twenty-first century, given existing international reservations over political boundaries. As Jackson (1993: 24) states, “The rules of sovereign statehood have changed in the direction of far greater international toleration and accommodation of marginal governments than has been the case since the emergence of western-dominated universal international society in the mid nineteenth century”. However, critics of ethnofederalism see it as a recipe for more schism that keeps the existing conflicts alive (Roeder, 2009) and others see it as a formula for secessionist demands and instability of the political system (Kefale, 2013; Nordlinger, 1972).

The Iraqi 2005 Constitution postulated federalism as a political system, yet ethnic and sectarian conflict escalated. A civil war was erupted in 2005 and continued to 2007 out of an insurgency that started soon after the US invasion. This civil war reached its peak in 2014 when ISIS seized Mosul and other Sunni-populated areas from the fleeing Iraqi Army. According to Iraqi Body Count (2021), about 209,000 civilians have been killed from violent conflicts since 2003, mostly as the result of sectarian- or identity-based animosity. Thus, it is important to assess the validity of the current system in Iraq and the reasons behind its flaws.

3. The Challenges of Iraqi Federalism

Iraq has been a fragile country since its creation and the strategies pursued by successive regimes in Baghdad did not help in treating it. The state combined three groups with distinct elements and the regimes have not succeeded in constituting a national identity that can embrace them all. Although scholars have proposed different models of federal arrangements as a solution for Iraq’s ethnic and sectarian dilemma, the debates have been largely between advocates of ethnofederalism on one hand and



supporters of non-ethnofederalism on the other hand. Williams and Simpson (2008) and Yavuz (2004) argue that Iraq requires a broad federal structure with eighteen regions, corresponding to the eighteen administratively organized provinces existing prior to 2003. They suggest that the division of Iraq into three ethnic and/or sectarian regions would not reduce violence but rather would escalate it.

Similarly, Wimmer (2003), Dodge (2007), Makiya (2005) and Visser (2007, 2008) favour some sort of territorial non-ethnofederalism, as Doge (2007) claims that a strong, central, and non-sectarian government can defeat insurgency. Visser (2007, 2008) even denies the existence of ethno-sectarian divisions, arguing that ethnic and sectarian based proposals are irrelevant to Iraq, whereas conflicts over territory have almost been non-sectarian in the old Iraq. Conversely, supporters of ethnofederalism propose the creation of three or more federal regions, somehow reflecting the territory of the three major ethnic (Kurds) and sectarian (Sunni or Shiite) groups. Supporters of this view maintain that Iraqi communities evidently have not integrated. The partition of Iraq in a federal or confederal context is an expedient solution to prevent further escalation of violence (Brancati, 2004; Galbraith, 2006; Eland, 2009; Joseph & O'Hanlon, 2007; O'Leary, 2015; Khan & Kirmanj, 2015; Khalilzad & Pollack, 2014).

Most of these scholars have presented their arguments to justify partitioning Iraq on ethnofederal basis as a reasonable solution. Even some of them were going further to propose confederal context for the country (Eland, 2009; Khan & Kirmanj, 2015). They presented ten points to convince readers that creation of three confederations along the Sunni-Shiite-Kurdish ethno-sectarian divides would be the best solution of Iraq (Khan & Kirmanj, 2015). However their proposal is not a different vision from other ethnofederal context. Thus, the question is what kind of solutions and/or models do Iraqi groups envisage overcoming the ethnic and sectarian conflicts in their country? This and other related topics will be discussed, analyzed and assessed in the following sections.

4. Iraqis' Perceptions of Different Proposed Models

During the focus group discussion, several themes have emerged that are discussed in this article. Participants suggested that the current governance and administration approach in Iraq has failed in addressing ethnic and sectarian conflicts and, therefore, they recommended reforms. The respondents discussed and assessed two different governance models, namely complete partition (e.g. creating new states), partial



partition (e.g. creating new federal regions). The lack and weaknesses of current Iraqi federalism has been discussed as well:

4.1. Complete Partition

Generally, two models have been discussed by the scholars toward Iraq either an entire division to create two or three independent states or a partially divided country into three or four federal regions. During the focus group discussions, full partition was presented as dividing Iraq into three new independent states. Except for the Kurds, participants showed strong resistance to the idea of dividing Iraq into independent entities. They were rather sensitive whenever the term partition came across. Non-Kurdish participants saw partition as a plot by foreign powers against Iraq. A Shiite participant asserted that, “partition is the worst solution for Iraq; we’ll never accept the country being divided into three states” (FG9-Sh)². Another Shiite respondent stressed that, “[the Kurds] want Iraq to be partitioned. We [Shiites] will never support the division [of Iraq] or let the Kurds secede. I believe even the Sunnis don’t support it” (FG9-Sh).

Similar to the Shiites, Sunnis clearly rejected hard partition, claiming that, “the unity of Iraq is not under dispute” (FG10-Su), but some Sunni participants supported some form of federalism. A Sunni respondent suggested, we should consider “real” federalism not partition, “I prefer federalism but not division” (FG10-Su). Iraq has to be divided into three regions, a Sunni participant maintained, because, “we cannot live together any more, this is the reality”, establishing that federal regions as the best “solution as every region will be responsible for protecting its constituents and the security [of the region] similar to the Kurdistan Region” (FG4-Su). It can safely be argued that the overwhelming majority of Sunni and Shiite participants rejected partition as a solution. On the contrary, Kurdish respondents insisted that they have a right to create their own state. As one Kurdish participant stressed, “in Iraq’s modern history, we have never had an opportunity like we have today to establish our own state.” (FG8-Ku). In short, some Sunni Arabs have lately become federalists after exhausting all their options (i.e. boycott, insurgency, mass-participation and mass-

² Focus groups and participants are represented by codes with numbers applied to identify focus group categories, while letters conceal respondents’ identity for the purpose of confidentiality. For instance, the code (FG9-sh) means participant is Shiite in the focus group of nine.



terrorism). But, by the time they became federalists, most Kurds were intent on independence.

Ironically, regardless of ethnic or sectarian backgrounds, all participants believe that the country is divided on the ground into three geographical entities; Shiite, Sunni and Kurdish. A Kurdish participant stated that, "Iraq realistically is divided: Kurds cannot go into Sunni or Shiite areas, and Shiites cannot go into the Sunni areas" (FG5-Ku). A Shiite Arab criticized the Kurdish authorities for creating too many hurdles for Arabs entering the Kurdistan Region stating that "we have to wait four to six hours at the check points." (FG9-Sh).

From these statements, it appears that Iraq is divided demographically and geographically. This phenomenon became more apparent in the aftermath of the civil war that started after the US invasion which peaked in 2006. It was also evidenced in the formation of ethnic and sectarian based coalitions before the 2005, 2010, 2014, 2018 and 2021 elections as well as parliamentary blocs after the elections. Basically, elections and the nascent democratization process further reinforced sectarian and ethnic affiliation as most Iraqis continued to vote according to sectarian or ethnic identity in the general elections since 2005. Despite this most participants, Kurds excluded, in the discussion groups rejected dividing Iraq into three states.

4.2. Partial Partition as Ethnofederal Context

Shortly after the US withdrawal and the consolidation of the power by Shiites, the attitudes of Arab Sunnis shifted significantly towards federalism. As they were further marginalized and their demands for political reform and power sharing were ignored, calls for decentralization and federalism by Sunnis became louder (Haddad, 2014; Shafaq News, 2014, Evans, 2015). However, the participants of the focus groups from different Iraqi communities accepted that some kind of federalism was necessary as a solution for ethnic and sectarian conflict and also as a model for power sharing.

The Sunnis partially suggested the creation of a grand federal region in the Sunni populated areas. Nonetheless, it cannot be said that all Sunnis preferred federalism, as some still favoured the creation of a strong central government. One Sunni participant pointed out "we cannot live with this kind of authority. That's why the best alternative for us [Sunnis] is to create our own federal region in our areas (FG10-Su). Another



blamed the Shiite-dominated government in Baghdad for not abiding by the constitution which stipulates the formation of federal regions stating that, “federalism is a good option for the current Sunni dilemma” (FG10-Su). Another Sunni respondent praised federalism for the “successes” the Kurds had achieved in their region (FG4-Su).

The main reasons behind the shift in perception of the Arab Sunnis on federalism is the failure of the Iraqiya List, which was overwhelmingly supported by Sunnis in 2010, to form a government as the Shiite lists formed a grand coalition denying the Iraqiya List the right to form the government. This has caused the Sunnis to believe that neither boycotting the political process, as they generally did from 2003 to 2010, nor participating in the process and winning the elections can shift the power in their favour. Taking up arms as resistance groups as well as their support for terrorist groups, such Al-Qaeda and ISIS, brought devastation to the Sunni Arab populated areas and further marginalized them. Consequently, since 2010 a large contingent of Arab Sunnis favour a kind of federalism similar to the Kurdistan Region. This is in line with the findings of this research which shows that the Sunnis overwhelmingly support some kind of federalism.

Not surprisingly, the results of this study show that the Kurds’ desire for more autonomy shifted their objective from federalism to independence. As one Kurdish participant asserted, “we [Kurds] have right to an independent state” (FG8-Ku). It can be claimed that Kurds are usually advocating independence for Kurdistan. This was reflected in the KRG’s move towards independence in a referendum that was held in September, 2017. Even when some Kurdish forces did not support independence, not because they did not favour it but because they believed the Kurds are not yet ready for such a major step. They maintained that the KRG’s policies have failed in building consensus among the Kurds, and the KRG has been unsuccessful in assembling the building blocks of a state. Hence, the Kurds must stay within Iraq until the time is right. It should be noted that after 16 October 2017 when Kurds encountered an attack by Iraqi militias, they came to the persuasion that remaining in Iraq as federal region might be safer for them, although it is not cast their aspiration for a sovereign status.

It can be argued that supporters of KRG’s referendum were “grossly misjudging its strength and the degree of international support it could receive. Internal support for independence was overwhelming: seventy-two percent of voters turned out and ninety-two percent of them voted for independence. The reaction of Baghdad and the entire



international community was completely negative. Although the president of Kurdistan argued that the referendum was consultative only and that it would simply mark the beginning of a lengthy process of negotiations with Baghdad, the response in Iraq and abroad was universal condemnation of Kurdistan and rejection of the Kurds' long-standing claims that they had a right to independence" (Ottaway, 2023). Furthermore, some articles claim that the referendum has been utilised as a nationalistic rhetoric by elites to maintain power rather than gaining independence (O'Driscoll & Baser, 2019). Nevertheless, Kurdish participants' voices in our focus groups were in favour of the right for independence, nonetheless consequences of the referendum affected their views. According to the recent Kurdish policymaker's viewpoints, federalism is a good option for multicultural Iraq (Aziz, 2023).

In contrast, the majority of Shiite participants rejected federalism, despite the fact that they were not against the Kurdistan Region maintaining its federal status within Iraq. However, they rejected the creation of new regions in the Shiite or Sunni areas. It is possible for Kurds to have a federal region, a Shiite participant suggested, because the "[Kurds] have a unique case but other parts [of Iraq] do not need a federal region, current arrangements are fine but they need some reform" (FG9-Sh). Ironically, the Shiite Arabs overwhelmingly approved the 2005 Iraqi constitution which identified Iraq as a federal state and allowed provinces to organize into federal regions. However, their supports of federalism were connected to the Shiite's unsure about their future and their lacked confidence in the new state, while they now restrict any federal attempt in order to preserve their central position (Aziz, 2023). This position seems to be not the case since the Shiites consolidated power after the departure of the Americans from Iraq in 2011.

Reluctance to federalism might relate to the view that it would lead to division of the country, these concerns were reinforced by the Kurdish 25th September 2017 referendum for independence which was held in deputed territories as well (Hadad, 2023). Nevertheless, according to the findings of this study, returning Iraq to a unitary central state is not a viable option as non-Shiite participants mostly endorse federalism. According to the new qualitative research which has been conducted in Basra, Mosul and Suleymaniah in 2022, both Shiite and Sunni cities of Basra and Mosul desire for federalism have increased, although they do not advocate division (Hadad, 2022).



The question is, if a large number of Iraqis endorsed federalism in 2005, and if it is a valid solution, why has this structure not been able to tackle the ethno-sectarian conflicts in Iraq?

The participants argued that the ongoing ethnic and sectarian conflicts are not the outcome of federal arrangements per se but rather they are rooted in the government policies that led to the failure of the model. They blamed the government that would not represent all Iraqi communities but it works in favour of a dominant group (FG6-Tu). Most participants argued that federalism had not been given a chance to be implemented. An Assyrian participant mentioned that while federalism is a good model, there needs to be a genuine national armed forces and equal distribution of resources to safeguard the system. In the absence of this, federalism cannot work (FG7-As). It appears, then, that participants think Iraq's federalism is superficial (FG8-Ku). Indeed, with the exception of the Kurdistan federal region, Iraq is as centralized as it was during the previous eras (O'Driscoll, 2016; Dodge, 2014). In short, it is obvious that Iraqis are divided on the subject of federalism as the Shiites rejects the idea, the Kurds prefer more than federalism, but the Sunnis see federalism as a way forward and a way to being removed from Shiite domination.

5. The Shortcomings of Iraqi Federalism

During the discussions within the focus groups, the participants identified several shortcomings and loopholes in the Iraqi federal system. The primary issue raised was that the current Arab Shiites political elite do not believe in federalism. To be more precise, as argued by the participants, they are against decentralization and sharing power and authority with the federal regions and/or provinces. Scholars have come to similar conclusions; for example, O'Leary (2015) suggests that the Iraqi government has violated its constitution by not implementing the articles related to federalism and power sharing mechanism. Nuri al-Maliki's (2006-2014) authoritarian tendencies reached unprecedented levels, in particular during his second term office (2010-2014), as he persistently rejected calls for decentralization (O'Driscoll, 2016; 2015; 2014; Dodge & Wasser, 2014; Dodge, 2013; 2014; Romano, 2014). Balanced, proper and clear distribution of power and authority are the cornerstones of federalism. Appropriate measurements also need to be in place in order to prevent federal governments from being exposed to abuse of power by a central government. There is ample evidence that



the lack of the rule of law and the gap between constitutional principle and practice led to the collapse of many federal countries (Adeghe, 2009: 50). In fact, as pointed out by Seroka (1994: 208), “lack of rule of law was one of the key factors that contributed to the collapse of federations in the former Eastern Bloc.”

Another shortcoming of Iraqi federalism as identified by the participants is that the Iraqi government did not take any practical steps to implement the constitutional articles related to federalism. The Kurdistan Region was recognized as a federal region out of *de facto* circumstances, not out of the central government’s will (FG7-Ku). Article 115 of the Iraqi Constitution stipulates that “one or more provinces shall have the right to organize into a [federal] region based on [its] request to be voted on in a referendum.” Yet, after more than eighteen years not only other regions have not been formed but several requests for creating new regions have been swiftly rejected by the central government. Indeed, the Sunni’s attempts to form a federal region in each of the Salahaldin, Anbar and Diyala provinces, as well as Shiites efforts in Basra province were all swiftly rejected by the federal government (O’Driscoll, 2016).

The other serious issue is that the borders of the only recognized federal region are yet to be settled. A large strip of land stretching from Sinjar in the far north to Khanaqin in the east is still under dispute by the KRG and the Iraqi federal government. Article 140 of the Iraqi Constitution establishes a mechanism to settle such an issue but, again, the Iraqi federal government has not taken concrete measures to implement the article or to resolve the dispute. The settling of the disputed areas does seem to have been purposely ignored by the Iraqi federal government (O’Driscoll, 2015: 6). In 2014, an Iraqi Shiite parliamentarian who was a member of the Article 140 Committee admitted that she deliberately stopped the implementation of the Article (Iraqi News Network, 2014). However, settling disputes over territory is vital to lessen clashes between ethnic and sectarian groups because, “demographic separation dampens ethnic conflicts even without separate sovereignty” (Kaufmann, 1996: 162).

The failure to create an upper legislative council, namely a “Federation Council,” as stipulated in the 2005 Constitution to represent the regions and the governorates is another shortcoming of federalism in Iraq. The Federation Council was meant to be a platform for exercising group rights and to prevent monopoly of the central government and/or domination of a single cultural group. A bicameral instead of a unicameral legislature is the basic principle of a federal system that gives special representation to different regional groups (Lijphart, 1999: 39). Perhaps, the Iraqi federal system is the



only unicameral federal system in the world. The Iraqi federal system did not fail simply because of the absence of an upper house but it certainly would have facilitated relations between the Kurdistan Region and the central government and it might have paved the way for the creation of other regions in the middle and southern parts of the country.

Therefore, it appears that most of the essential characteristics of a viable federal system are either absent or have been violated by the authorities in Baghdad. Even Baghdad's efforts to reduce the Kurdistan region's power have accelerated in recent years. In February 2022, the Iraqi Federal Supreme Court issued a decision that Kurdistan natural resource law is unconstitutional for violating articles 110, 112, 115, 121, and 130 of the Iraqi Constitution and mandated that the KRG must hand over all its oil production to SOMO for the purpose of commercialization. However, KRG has rejected to give effect to the FSC decision and continue its independent oil operations (Florian and Dahlia, 2022). Eventually, in early 2023, KRG accepted the conditions set by Baghdad to permit the resumption of oil exports. However, oil exports have not resumed due to Turkey's refusal to reopen the pipeline. Turkey's stance is based on its insistence that Baghdad withdraw its demand for compensation, which arose from a previous ruling by the International Chamber of Commerce that held Turkey responsible for enabling Kurdistan's past oil exports (Ottaway, 2023). The issue of oil and gas management right is always considered as one of the open predicaments between the two sides.

Thus, these do not mean that the KRG has not misused the powers allocated to it by the Iraqi constitution. The KRG conducts its foreign policy and, in many ways, deals with foreign authorities as a sovereign state not as a federal region. Also, the Kurdistan Parliament issued its own natural resource law in 2007 and started signing contracts with international companies, bypassing the federal government (O'Driscoll, 2015: 9; Bishop & Shah, 2008: 10). This made the authorities in Baghdad hesitant in releasing powers to the provinces and has created hurdles for any attempt to establish other autonomous federal regions.

Hence, it can be safely argued that Iraq is only, theoretically, a federal country. On the ground, the central government acts as an authoritarian centralized system (Dodge & Wasser, 2014: 30; Dodge, 2013). Therefore, the existing Iraqi federal model as such should not be blamed for the prevailing crises in the country but rather the authoritarian tendencies of the Shiite political elites, the lack of willingness for power sharing, the failure to implement the articles of the Constitution related to the creation



of a Federal Council, the ongoing tensions and conflicts between Iraqi groups that has led to mistrust, and the maximalist tendencies of the Kurdish political elite. This implies that there is still a possibility of creating a federal system with proper distribution of power.

As Kaufmann (1996) asserts, ethnic conflicts that occur due to a security dilemma cannot be addressed until that security dilemma is reduced by physical separation. By the same token, it is argued here that any solutions that do not consider physical separation of the Iraqi communities might be more problematic with dire consequences. Thereby, this article supports ethnofederalism where each community enjoys autonomy in their populated areas. This is because, as proposed by Bakke and Wibbels (2006: 4), “in combining regional self-rule and shared governance, federalism may represent a compromise between regional groups that seek self-determination and/or protection of their rights and the central leadership of the state, which is reluctant to give up territory and power.”. This compromise may be necessary where separation is not desirable, as argued by focus group participants, and where group identities have an ethnical base.

Furthermore, despite of the critics that presented against ethnofederalism as the way to more instability and cleavage (Kefale, 2013; Roeder, 2009), in the case of Iraq, there is no evidence that it leads to more instability. In contrast, ethnofederalism might be more viable model for casting group’s aspirations for their identities. As it investigates from the history that “whenever the central governments adopted an ethnic form of autonomy, political stability prevailed and, conversely, whenever the central government rescinded such autonomy arrangements political instability followed” (Mistaffa, 2016). Thus, it can be considered that federalism especially ethnofederal configuration would remain as one of the viable alternatives for the ethnically divided societies.

6. Conclusion

This study aimed at acquiring the views of mainstream Iraqis, from different religious/sectarian and/or ethnic backgrounds, on the future of Iraq and assesses its federal governance in order to tackle the protracted ethnic and sectarian conflict that has engulfed the country for decades. The findings of the study show that just as Iraqis are divided along ethnic and sectarian line their views are also divided and to a large extent in line with their community backgrounds.



Almost all of the Kurdish participants believed that they deserve to gain rights more than current federal status in protecting their interests. However, the international, regional and Iraq's local power players' were against the Kurdish 25th September independence referendum in 2017, and its consequences proves that this ambition is not possible.

The Sunni Arab position was vague. Most of the participants believed that the system should not be blamed for the failures Iraq is facing but rather this is the fault of political elites who rule the country. This group of Sunnis argues that if Iraq is ruled by a national government, then all segments of Iraqi society can live together peacefully. Nonetheless, some of them believe that they cannot live under the Shiite central government in Baghdad. That is why they suggested the creation of a grand Sunni federal region for the Sunni populated provinces.

The Shiite Arabs' perspective on federalism was straightforward. They strongly rejected dividing Iraq and they were generally not in favour of federalism. The Shiite Arab participants mostly favor a strong centralized government to rule from Baghdad.

Taking the views and proposals into account, it can be considered that federalism is still a compromised solution. The rationale behind this model is that federalism keeps Iraq's territory intact, something that the Shiite and Sunni Arabs, as well as other non-Kurdish minority groups, insist on. At the same time, the Sunnis and Kurds' concern for their safety can be met by improving current Iraqi federal system through solving its lacks that mentioned in this study.

Thus, federalism particularly in its ethnofederal arrangement would remain as an institutional choice for the societies where have already been divided on the ethno-sectarian basis. It can help to avoid the common country to be more disintegration.

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ئالەنگارییه‌کانی فیدرالیزم وهک مۆدیلیکی به‌ریوه‌بردنی مملاتی نه‌ته‌وه‌یی و تائیفی له عێراق

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پوخته

چاره‌سه‌رکردنی کێشه‌ی ناکۆکیه نه‌ته‌وه‌یی و تائیفیه‌کان یه‌ک له ئالەنگارییه سه‌ره‌کییه‌کانی ده‌وله‌تی عێراق بووه هه‌ر له سه‌ره‌تای دامه‌زراندنیه‌وه له سا‌لی ۱۹۲۱. ده‌ستوری نوێی سا‌لی ۲۰۰۵ سیستمی فیدرالیزمی وه‌ک مۆدیلیک بۆ چاره‌سه‌ری پرسى شوناس و ناکۆکیه تائیفی و نه‌ته‌وه‌یه‌کان ته‌به‌نی کردووه. به‌لام فیدرالیزم تا ئیستا نه‌یتوانیوه ئه‌م کێشه‌یه چاره‌سه‌ر بکات. ئه‌م لی‌کۆلینه‌وه‌یه ده‌گه‌ریت به‌دوای هۆکاره‌کانی پشت نا‌کارایی فیدرالیزمی عێراقی. هه‌روه‌ها هه‌ولده‌دات بۆ ئاشکراکردنی دیدی خه‌لک به‌رامبه‌ر به‌م مۆدیله. شاره‌زایان شروقه‌ی پرۆپۆزه‌ل و جو‌ره جیا‌وازه‌کانی فیدرالیزمیان کردووه، به‌لام زۆر به‌ که‌می هه‌ولیان داوه له توێژینه‌وه‌کانیان گۆشه‌نی‌گای خودی پیکهاته جیا‌وازه‌کانی عێراق له‌به‌رچاوبگرن. ئه‌م لی‌کۆلینه‌وه ئامانجی ئه‌وه‌یه ئه‌م بۆشاییه له ئه‌ده‌بیاتی سیاسی ئه‌م بواره له رێگای شروقه‌کردن و ده‌رده‌شه‌کردنی دیدی عێراقیه‌کان خوێان پرېکاته‌وه. لی‌کۆلینه‌که ئه‌وه‌ی دۆزیوه‌ته‌وه که به پێی با‌کگراوندی نه‌ته‌وه‌یی و تائیفییان، عێراقیه‌کان بۆچوونی جیا‌وازیان ده‌رباره‌ی مۆدیلیکی گونجاو بۆ وڵاته‌که‌یان هه‌یه. له‌گه‌ل ئه‌وه‌شدا هه‌شتا فیدرالیزم ده‌کرێ وه‌ک مۆدیلیکی چاره‌سه‌ری ناوه‌ند له نێوان پیکهاته‌کان هه‌ژمار بکری‌ت.

ووشه سه‌ره‌تاییه‌کان: فیدرالیزم، به‌ریوه‌بردنی مملاتی نه‌ته‌وه‌یی، سیاسه‌تی عێراقی.



تحديات الفدرالية كتنظيم للنزاع العرقي- الطائفي في العراق

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ملخص

كان تنظيم النزاعات العرقية والطائفية أحد التحديات الأساسية التي واجهتها الدولة العراقية منذ إنشائها في عام 1921. اعتمد دستور 2005 الفيدرالية كنموذج لمعالجة مسألة الهوية وكذلك النزاعات العرقية والطائفية. ومع ذلك ، لم تتمكن الفيدرالية بعد من حل هذه المناوشات. تبحث هذه الورقة البحثية في أسباب عدم فعالية الفيدرالية العراقية. تحاول أيضاً التحقيق في تصورات الناس تجاه هذا النموذج. ناقش الدارسون مقترحات للتكوين الفيدرالي بأشكاله المختلفة. ومع ذلك ، قليلاً ما تم أخذ وجهات نظر وتصورات مختلف قطاعات المجتمع المحلي العراقي الذي ساهم في تلك النزاعات بنظر الإعتبار. تهدف هذه الورقة إلى سد هذه الفجوة الموجودة في الأدبيات التي تخص هذه المسألة من خلال تقديم ومناقشة وتحليل وجهات النظر العراقية. توصلت الورقة إلى أنه بناءً على الخلفية الثقافية ، فإن للعراقيين وجهات نظر مختلفة تجاه النماذج المناسبة للعراق ، لكن لا يزال من الممكن اعتبار الفيدرالية نموذجاً للتسوية بينهم.

الكلمات المفتاحية: الفدرالية، ادارة النزاعات القومية، السياسة العراقية