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The “Non-State” State in Iraqi Political Discourse and Action

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For several years, the concept of “Iraq as a ‘non-state’” (*Iraq al-ladawla*) has been circulating within the Iraqi political sphere. This concept became the focus of heated debate among politicians, intellectuals, and journalists across the entire Iraqi political spectrum since the outbreak of the popular uprising in Iraq in October 2019. What is the meaning of this term? What were the circumstances that led to the development of the debate in Iraq? What political and socio-economic problems does it reflect?

“Non-state actors” is a term used in the field of International Relations that means individuals or groups operating independently of the state framework. With the end of the Cold War, there was a significant increase in the number of non-state actors challenging the state and its institutions and eroding its status.¹ The most dangerous of these non-state actors were armed organizations that used force in their attempts to change the political map of the country or countries in which they operated. In Iraq, a unique situation has developed. Not only have various non-state actors such as *al-Qa’ida*, the Islamic State (IS), and militias belonging to the Popular Mobilization Units (PMU) threatened the state’s existence, but the state itself paradoxically has also functioned, according to its critics, as a non-state entity. In other words, as an actor driven by particularist or supra-state, rather than national, interests.²

In a July 2016 article entitled “Iraq ... a return to a ‘non-state’?” Akram Hawas, an Iraqi academic, writes that there are signs that Iraq is returning to “Bremer’s project” from

¹ Bas Arts, “Non-state actors in global governance: Three faces of power,” *Preprints aus der Max-Planck-Projektgruppe Recht der Gemeinschaftsgüter*, No. 2003/4 (2003).

² Aziz Sardar, “[On the Non-state \(Ladawla\) in Iraq](#),” Fikra Forum, The Washington Institute for Near East Policy (WINEP), September 25, 2020.

2003, alluding to Paul Bremer, the American diplomat who administrated the Coalition Provisional Authority (CPA) in Iraq, following the U.S.-led invasion to topple Saddam Hussein in 2003. Hawas' reference to "Bremer's project" referred to American decisions that undermined the state's foundations and led to the collapse of the Ba'athist regime and all of its institutions, including the army, the party and other means of state control.³ However, according to Hawas, the difference between 2003 and 2016 is that those who seek to dismantle the country, and sow chaos more than a decade after the American-led invasion, are precisely those who are responsible for its existence and well-being, including secular and progressive, as well as reactionary and religious, forces. Hawas argues that there is a consensus among Iraqis that the government does not really govern. Moreover, the state's leaders have invented new and varied methods to control the states' assets and use them in service of what Hawas cryptically refers to as the "oligarchs'" families. At the same time, they have failed to deliver a reformed and functioning government.⁴

In 2019, Iraqi sociologist Faleh 'Abd al-Jabbar's *The Non-State Book (Kitab al-ladawla)* was published, in which he analyzes Iraq's pathologies and finds their roots in the late stages of the Ba'athist regime under President Saddam Hussein. Jabbar argued that this period prepared the ground for the development of the "non-state" after 2003, which led to the politicization of religion and the flourishing of sectarianism among both Sunnis and Shi'is. The result was that these factions "adopted the theology of the state without being able to achieve the state [envisioned by] theology,"⁵ meaning neglecting the idea of statism.

The popular demonstrations that erupted on October 1, 2019, encompassing large parts of Iraq from Baghdad in the north to Basra in the south and lasting for many months, provided fertile ground for the continued debate on the idea of the "non-state". The demonstrations took place in all the majority Shi'i provinces (but not Sunni and Kurdish majority provinces), and were directed against a government controlled by a Shi'i majority. One of the protesters' slogans was "no to politicians, no to the turban wearers," a pejorative allusion to Iraq's religiously observant Shi'i population. Their demands included far-reaching economic, political and social reforms, the replacement of state and district leaders, the eradication of corruption, the equitable distribution of resources, the establishment of a just and reformed

³ Paul Bremer was the U.S. Presidential Envoy and then top civilian administrator of the Coalition Provisional Authority (CPA) in Iraq following the 2003 invasion and occupation of the country.

⁴ Akram Hawas, "[Iraq ... a return to a non-state?](#)" *al-Hiwar al-Mutamaddin*, July 9, 2016.

⁵ [al-'Arabi al-Jadid](#), December 26, 2019.

government, and the holding of immediate elections.⁶ In their anger and despair, the protesters destroyed government buildings, party branch offices, and religious centers. Ten months of continuous demonstrations left some 700 people killed and 25,000 more injured.⁷ Prime Minister Mustafa al-Kadhimi described the situation in vivid language, saying that the number of victims was so large that it "makes [even] the mountain cry."⁸ Indeed, the severe violence used against the demonstrators by the entire state apparatus earned it the "non-state" moniker in the first place.⁹ In other words, the violent repression of the protests were carried out by a combination of state and non-state forces, blurring the distinction between illegitimate and legitimate use of force, and reinforcing the sense of chaos referred to as *al-ladawla*.

One of the protesters' main targets was the former Prime Minister 'Adel 'Abd al-Mahdi, who was also the first to appear before them and raise the "non-state" issue in public, saying: "Today we are faced with two choices: state or non-state." Of course, as prime minister, he was the state, while the "non-state" was comprised of the illegal demonstrators, as well as non-state organizations that had gotten out of control, like the PMU militias.¹⁰ In an attempt to calm the street, 'Abd al-Mahdi made far-reaching promises, including fighting corruption, restructuring the system of government, and providing a monthly salary to every low-income family.¹¹ But these attempts at appeasement were unsuccessful, and he was forced to resign after two months of tumultuous demonstrations, the likes of which the state had not known since 2003. Al-Mahdi continued to serve as interim prime minister until May 2020, when he was replaced by al-Kadhimi.

The new prime minister has promised to restore "*Haybat al-Dawla*," that is, the authority of the state and the fear of it; to hold early elections; and to fight corruption and non-state forces. Despite raising expectations, he has not yet been able to deliver on his promises. In an ironic article on al-Kadhimi's performance, 'Abd al-Latif al-Sa'dun writes that the prime minister was quick to compromise with PMU militias that got what they wanted, then they continued to belittle and provoke him. As for the forces that control Iraq, al-Sa'dun likened them to "Ali Baba and the Forty Thieves" of

⁶ Azhar Al-Rubaie, "[The price of corruption in Iraq: Kadhimi faces the challenge of systemic reform](#)," Fikra Forum, The Washington Institute of Near East Policy (WINEP), November 10, 2020.

⁷ Iyad al-Dulaymi, "[Iraq ... The State and the Non-State Conflict](#) [Arabic]," *Al-Jazeera*, July 1, 2020.

⁸ "Al-Kadhimi: Non-state forces work to destroy the country they are unable to live in [Arabic]," *Zagros*, October 3, 2020.

⁹ 'Umar al-Jafal, "[Young Iraq... unarmed in the face of the 'non-state'](#) [Arabic]," *al-Safir*, October 22, 2019.

¹⁰ Sharp criticism of al-Mahdi as an opportunist who changes colors and positions like a chameleon has been voiced against him long before. See 'Alwan al-Sharifi, "[Hypocrisy of Political Islam: 'Adel 'Abd al-Mahdi as an Example](#) [Arabic]," *al-Badil al-'Iraqi*, October 7, 2009.

¹¹ "['Abd al-Mahdi: Iraq before the choice of state or non-state](#) [Arabic]," *al-'Arabiya*, October 3, 2019.

the famous *One Thousand and One Nights* story, who robbed Iraq of all its treasures. These "forty groups" try to present an image of patriotism and purity, but in practice, they strengthen the power of the "deep state," which is how al-Saʿdun characterizes the militias.¹²

The reasons that have led to the rise of the "non-state," which emerge from the analysis of commentators in Iraq, are diverse, and reflect the wider worldview of these pundits and scholars. The first factor, as noted by al-Jabbar, is the chaos that prevailed in the late Baʿthist period that worsened due to the economic sanctions imposed by the international community on Iraq after the 1991 Gulf War. Second, the U.S. and its allies, which after the conquest of Iraq in 2003, dismantled the army and the various government institutions, leaving a void that was filled for about two decades by various non-governmental organizations. This eroded the power of the central government and undermined it. Many of the analysts point to Iran and the Tehran-backed Shiʿi militias of the PMU as the main factor that undermines the functioning of the state, including the Iraqi army and its security forces. They talk of the development of a "state within a state" and of Iran's intention to take over Iraq. In the eyes of some critics, the Peshmerga-controlled Kurdish region is also part of this trend of degrading the power and status of the central government, and hence of the state.¹³

These analysts also point to a series of socio-political factors that have eroded the cohesion of the state: the rise of sectarianism, religiosity, and tribalism, which led each group to pursue only its own narrow interests, and undermined the state's status. One critic described the situation as follows: "The non-state is the clergy, the militia commanders, and the tribal leaders, who are immersed in corruption and divide the resources of the state among themselves."¹⁴ Another critical article stated: "The Kurd wants a state, the Arab Shiʿi wants a homeland, and the Sunni wants to rule."¹⁵ Other critics place the blame on the leaders of the state and the numerous parties that have emerged in place of the Baʿth party, but embraced the abhorrent Baʿthi practices, such as corruption, repression and nepotism. On the one hand, they reflect an ostensibly more democratic trend; but on the other hand, the corruption that has prevailed for the most part undermines the proper management of the distribution of resources, and leads the country into chaos. Hence, the "titles" given by the critics to Iraq are of a "monstrous entity"; "a country ruled by the law of the

¹² ʿAbd al-Latif Saʿdun, "[Iraq... The search for a lost country](#) [Arabic]," *al-ʿArabi al-Jadid*, July 8, 2020.

¹³ "[Iraq - The Non-State State](#) [Arabic]," *al-Sumaria*, September 25, 2020.

¹⁴ "[Iraq - The Non-State State](#) [Arabic]," *al-ʿArab*, August 25, 2020.

¹⁵ Sajad Taqi Qasim, "[The Kurd wants a state, the Arab Shiʿi wants a homeland...](#)[Arabic]," *Sawt al-ʿArab*, December 15, 2019.

jungle;" the "state of the armed *latifundia*;" an "empty framework," and "statelets within one state."¹⁶

Harsh criticism has also been directed at "political Islam." 'Ala' al-Khatib, an Iraqi intellectual living in London, wrote that Prime Minister al-Mahdi's resignation in December 2019 symbolized the end of the era of political Islam in Iraq. He said this period was characterized by "corruption, weakness, the absence of law, the collapse of the state and the loss of its 'hayba'." In his opinion, the Islamists provided the worst possible model of rule for Iraq, because they did not have a vision for establishing a state, they did not prepare a suitable cadre to run it, and they lacked minimal preparedness to assume power.¹⁷

Meanwhile, politicians and party leaders have joined the heated debate, blaming each other; their words reflecting more helplessness than the ability to solve urgent problems. For example, 'Ammar al-Hakim, the head of the *al-Hikmah* movement, described the serious challenges facing the state and blamed its various governments for its current plight. Ironically, Hakim and his party were a part of past governments. Hakim argued that change would take place "only when the Iraqis decide to turn their country into a state," but warned against expecting quick results, arguing "party and sectarian interests would lead to the growth of statelets with numerous loyalties and goals."¹⁸

Similar helplessness is evident in the remarks of Prime Minister al-Kadhimi, who explained that "the anarchy that prevailed in Iraq is a reflection of poor governance," and that the corrupt actors took advantage of the anarchy to "break the country's hayba." It does not appear from his remarks, made six months after he became premier, that he has succeeded in dealing with these problems or in providing a vision of how to overcome them.¹⁹ Al-Kadhimi repeated similar ideas one year after his assumption of power, contending that there "is strong competition between the state and the non-state." The former, he said is represented by forces that adhere to laws and values and are committed to the project of the country's empowerment, while

¹⁶ "[Iraq... The campaign to restore state's Authority](#) [Arabic]," *al-Sharq al-Awsat*, July 4, 2020.

¹⁷ 'Ala al-Khatib, "[The fall of 'Adel 'Abd al-Mahdi and the defeat of political Islam](#)," *MEO*, December 3, 2019.

¹⁸ Ahmad al-'Amid, "[Ammar al-Hakim on the situation in Iraq: either state or non-state](#) [Arabic]," *al-Watan*, July 20, 2020.

¹⁹ "[Al-Kadhimi: Non-state forces work to destroy the country they are unable to live in](#) [Arabic]," *Zagros*, October 3, 2020.

the latter seeks to marginalize it and break its hayba. However, he emphasized that great deal of effort is being invested in "the project of the return of the state."²⁰

One such move was al-Kadhimi's March 2021 call for "a national dialogue" among all the political, religious and social forces so as to buttress "the logic of the state vis-à-vis the non-state" and prepare the ground for the general elections scheduled for October 2021. However, the October 2019 demonstrators, who were the main target for this dialogue, were skeptical about the move saying that they did not want to sit with the "militant groups," who were "their killers," nor with the government, "which is powerless or unwilling to grant any guarantees to the activists."²¹

For all of this skepticism, al-Khadhimi continued to pin great hopes to the national dialogue and the forthcoming elections. Still, it is doubtful that the elections alone will be the panacea for all of Iraq's ills. As the above debate on the state and non-state demonstrates, post-Ba'athist Iraq is in the throes of a multi-systemic crisis: a social, economic, political, and ideological crisis; a crisis of orientation and identity; and an ongoing crisis of confidence in the state's leaders and their ability to rescue Iraq from the swamp of their own making. Thus, the jury is still out on whether Iraq will follow the example of democratization in Tunisia or degenerate into a failed Arab state, such as Syria or Yemen.

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²⁰ "[Al-Kadhimi: No country has the right to use Iraqi land to send missile and terrorist messages](#) [Arabic]," *Rudaw*, March 1, 2021.

²¹ "[Al-Kadhimi's call for a national dialogue is a mirage amidst the Iraqi storms](#) [Arabic]," *al-Quds al-Arabi*, March 13, 2021.