

Construction of Party Identity by the Islamic Dawa Party in Iraq after 2003

Hassan Ali al-Asadey

PhD candidate/SGIA/ Durham University

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Abstract

Islamist parties, like many other parties, face recurrent changes. A significant manifestation of such change is the transition from Islamism to post-Islamism, although the underlying drivers of this transition vary across cases. This paper examines ideological change within the Islamist Dawa Party in Iraq following 2003. The paper argues that two environmental shifts—the inclusive character of the post-2003 constitutional order and the rising prominence of the marja‘iyya—enabled the party to cultivate a national identity while retaining its core Islamist ideology. Therefore, the Dawa’s transformation is better understood as an adaptive process situated within Islamism rather than a movement towards post-Islamism. Theoretically, the analysis draws on party-change theory to illuminate how an Islamist party may modify its strategic repertoire while preserving its fundamental ideological objectives.

1. Introduction

The Islamic Dawa Party in Iraq is a rare Islamist party because it has maintained influence for two decades since the 2003 democratic transition. Despite this influence, the evolution of the party’s identity remains understudied, especially in the English-language literature on Islamist parties. This paper examines the Dawa Party’s identity change in Iraq after 2003. It thereby contributes to the literature on identity change among Islamist parties generally and Shia Islamist parties specifically. Its theoretical contribution is to examine an Islamist party beyond post-Islamism and inclusion-moderation approaches. While Shia Islamists share with Sunni Islamists similar views on the role of Islam in politics, Shia Islamists also have distinct characteristics, the most important of which is the existence of the religious leadership, the marja‘iyya. The marja‘iyya is the ultimate religious authority over individuals and parties, and its influence can shape Shia public opinion.

A further characteristic of Shia Islamism in Iraq is the inclusivity of the Iraqi political system. Since 2005, Iraq has established a democratic system with regular elections. This inclusivity has allowed Islamists to participate in and adapt to the system's political conditions.

Against this background, the paper asks how environmental change in Iraq after 2003, which fostered inclusivity and the emergence of the marja'iyya, facilitated the Islamist the Dawa Party's construction of a national identity while adhering to Islamist ideology. The paper draws on original elite interviews with the Dawa's figures, alongside textual data. It uses a qualitative approach to data analysis. The analysis begins by reviewing the literature on Islamist parties and key literature on the Dawa before explaining and justifying the theoretical framework. The methodology section describes how the data were collected and analysed, followed by the findings and discussion.

2. Literature Review: Change Within Islamist Parties

This section focuses on accounts that study change within Islamism, specifically to identify the reasons for and directions of change among Islamist parties in the MENA region. The paper adopts Bayat's definition of Islamism: "those ideologies and movements that strive to establish some kind of an "Islamic order" a religious state, shari'a law, and moral codes in Muslim societies and communities" (Bayat 2013, 2)

Change is a common feature of Islamist movements regardless of their nature, whether they are a state, as in Iran; parties in a democratic system, such as the Islamists in Turkey; revolutionary movements, such as Hezbollah in Lebanon; or post-dictator movements, such as the Muslim Brotherhood. This change is driven by a move from Islamism to greater moderation. The causes of change vary across national contexts. Elites failed to address people's needs, as in the case of Iran. Others adapted to meet the realities of their countries, as in the adaptation of Islamists in Turkey, which was affected by Turkey's policy toward the EU. Other Islamist

movements changed because of geopolitical realities in their countries, such as Hezbollah and the Muslim Brotherhood (Bayat 2013).

Some Islamist movements changed by abandoning their main principles and adopting post-Islamism, abandoning the idea of an Islamic state to participate in democracy. For instance, after the democratic transition in Tunisia Ennahda explicitly called to separate political activities from religious activities; the party argued that clerics should not be involved in politics (Ahmad 2018). Zemni (2013) studied Morocco's post-Islamist shift in the PJD; he argues that the party adopted democratic principles such as elections, the rule of law, and popular sovereignty. However, he questions the PJD's ability to put these principles into practice rather than merely using them as rhetoric.

Hezbollah provides another example of change in an Islamist party's policy or approach. The party began as a revolutionary movement calling for an Islamic state in Lebanon despite the country's ethno-sectarian system, and it gradually moved toward democracy by participating in elections after 1990 and even joining the government after 2000 (Alagha 2013).

Most accounts of change and transformation within the Dawa Party link its evolution to environmental change. The party was founded in response to environmental change, represented by the emergence of communism in Iraqi society in the late 1950s. This ideological challenge prompted a group of clerics to establish an Islamist party to counter communism and protect their social environment by spreading Islamic awareness (Nakash 1994; Aziz 1991; Alaaldin 2017; Thabit 2013; Al-Snbsy 2021; Bernhard 2016). During its founding era, the Dawa's objective resembled that of other Islamist movements in the region: to spread Islam within the society and create an Islamic society ready to accept an Islamic state. This mirrored the main objective of the Muslim Brotherhood and Ennahda ('Anānī, 2016; McCarthy, 2016

Another environmental change in the late 1970s, namely Saddam's seizure of power in Iraq and the establishment of the Islamic Republic in Iran, drove the party to become a revolutionary movement aimed at establishing an Islamic state. This period also witnessed the emergence of revolutionary Shia groups inspired by the Islamic Revolution and Ayatollah Khomeini, such as Hizballah in Lebanon (Alagha 2011).

A third change followed the Second Gulf War, which weakened the Iraqi regime and coincided with international efforts to remove Saddam. The Dawa responded by shifting from an Islamist revolutionary agenda to a more Iraqi one (Yamao 2008; Hasan 2020; Dawisha and Diamond 2006). After the 2003 regime change, the party maintained this orientation, but as a leading party rather than merely an opposition party (Liam and Stansfield 2005; Younis 2011; Al-Husayni 2019).

While this literature provides an overview of change among Islamist parties and valuable insights into policy change within the Dawa Party and its historical transformation, a gap remains regarding the post-2003 era. The literature reveals that change among Islamist parties is a common feature and is influenced by the political conditions surrounding each party. Nevertheless, the limited scholarship on the Dawa Party leaves a gap that this paper addresses.

Studies of the Dawa are mainly concerned with its opposition and diaspora eras. The paper addresses this second gap by examining identity change after 2003, when the Dawa became both a participant in and an influential actor within Iraq's political system. Furthermore, the inclusivity of the Iraqi political system and freedom of political activity provide a rich body of the Dawa campaign material and parliamentary speeches, enabling a methodological contribution to the study of Islamism.

3. THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

3.1 Party Identity

Party identity refers to “the image that citizens have in mind when they think about that party.” (Janda et al. 1995, 1) Janda argues that party policies are one source shaping the party’s image in the public mind. What parties want, or what they seek to do, becomes part of party identity. Parties present these policies through manifestos and campaigns. This paper adopts this definition of party identity and examines how the Dawa Party’s identity has been shaped by party discourse, elite positions, and documents after 2003.

3.2 Party Change

Harmel and Janda (1994, 275) define party change as “any variation, alteration, or modification in how parties are organised, what human and material resources they can draw upon, what they stand for, and what they do.” However, their theory focuses on aspects of change that are within the party’s control, including party rules, organisational structures, policies, strategies, and tactics. This paper agrees with this understanding of party change. Therefore, it focuses on changes in the Dawa Party’s strategies rather than assuming that the party abandoned its ideological identity. More specifically, the paper examines changes in the Dawa’s discursive strategies, including how the party changed the language, priorities, and political boundaries through which it presented its identity after 2003.

3.3. The theory of party change

This paper builds on Harmel and Janda’s (1994) *An Integrated Theory of Party Goals and Party Change*. The theory treats parties as conservative organisations that change only in response to a stimulus. (Harmel and Janda 1994). The theory identifies three reasons for party change. First, leadership change can produce party change, as parties may change when leadership changes (Saban 2003, Akdağ, and Yazgan 2023, Çelikoğlu 2023). Second, change in the dominant faction can also generate party change (Bashirov and Lancaster 2018). Third,

external stimuli can drive party change (Calca and Gross 2019). The likelihood of change increases when an external shock or environmental stimulus affects the core of the party's goals. For instance, electoral losses will stimulate change in vote-seeking parties. Ideological change, such as the fall of communism in the 1990s, stimulated change in communist parties (Harmel and Janda 1994). Using this framework, the paper examines changes in the Dawa Party's identity in the context of environmental change in Iraq after 2003.

3.3.1 Environmental change in Iraq after 2003

After 2003, Iraq moved from a one-party dictatorship to a multi-party democratic system. In addition, ethno-sectarian power-sharing emerged as a political formula for governing the state (Haddad 2018; Dodge 2020, 2021). Within this formula, Shia political actors became dominant in Iraq after decades of exclusion. Within this transformed setting, Dawa Islamists moved from diaspora parties with no power to become one of the most influential political actors (Fantappie 2023; Majid 2023).

Given the breadth of change in Iraq after 2003, this paper focuses on two environmental changes that shaped the Dawa's identity: the constitutional shift towards inclusion and the emergence of the marja'yya as a major political actor. The following section explains how these changes provided a basis for the Dawa's identity change.

3.3.1.1 Constitutional change

In 2005, Iraq became a democratic parliamentary state. "The Republic of Iraq is a single federal, independent and fully sovereign state in which the system of government is republican, representative, parliamentary, and democratic" (Republic of Iraq 2005, Art. 1). This new democratic system has two features. First, it guarantees freedom to form and join parties. "The freedom to form and join associations and political parties shall be guaranteed" (Republic of Iraq 2005, Art. 39). In addition, the Iraqi Constitution recognised Islam as a source of

legislation and banned any law that contradicted Islamic principles (Republic of Iraq 2005, Art. 2(1)). Considering Islamic principles as determinants of legislation in Iraq gives Islamist parties a legislative basis for inclusion within the political system.

Second, inclusivity is a key feature of the Political Parties Law. The law promotes inclusivity by emphasising citizenship as the basis for establishing political parties: “A political party shall be established based on citizenship and in a manner that does not conflict with the provisions of the Constitution” (Republic of Iraq 2015, Art. 5(1)). Furthermore, the law affirms inclusion: “No political party may be established based on racism, terrorism, takfir, or sectarian, ethnic, or nationalist intolerance” (Republic of Iraq 2015, Art. 5(2)).

The political system’s inclusivity benefits Islamists by allowing them to integrate and participate in the political process without having to abandon their ideology.

3.3.1.2 The emergence of the Al-Marja’iyya

The *Al-Marja’iyya*, meaning “source of emulation,” is a concept in Shia jurisprudence. It means that all adults must emulate a jurist *mujtahid* in their religious practice “It is obligatory for those who are not mujtahids and cannot act on precaution to follow a mujtahid, a jurist. Following a jurist in Islamic law means acting according to the instructions of a mujtahid” (Sistani 2023, 2). Emulation of a mujtahid applies to both individuals and institutions, such as political parties. Party emulation entails acceptance of the marja’iyya’s opinions and directives.

The Dawa’s internal regulations reflect its obligation to follow the Marja’iyya. The party considered “The Directives of the Religious Marja’iyya” a principle of the party’s work (Islamic Dawa Party 2007, Art. 6(2), cited in Kharsan 2019, 700). Furthermore, in another party document, the party explicitly obligated itself to Ayatollah Sistani: “Commitment to the directives and vision of the Supreme Religious Authority (al-Marja’iyya al-‘Ulyā), represented

by Grand Ayatollah Sayyid Ali al-Sistani." (Islamic Dawa Party, Internal Memorandum 2022, 18).

The party's conduct provides practical evidence of this formal commitment to Ayatollah Sistani. During the government-formation crisis following the ISIS invasion in 2014, the Dawa sent a message to Ayatollah Sistani asking for advice (Majid 2023). The party then changed its candidate from Nouri al-Maliki to Haider al-Abadi upon Sistani's recommendation: "I consider it necessary to expedite the selection of a new Prime Minister who enjoys broad national acceptance and is capable of working jointly with the political leaders of the country's other communities to safeguard Iraq from the dangers of terrorism, sectarian conflict, and division." (Sistani, quoted in Al-Khaffaf 2015, 228) This documentary and empirical evidence demonstrates the influence of the marja'yya in party politics. The following discussion explains how the marja'yya influenced the Dawa Party's identity change.

As a supreme religious authority, the marja'yya determines the scope of religious interference in politics. This means that Shia Islamist parties lack the religious legitimacy to adopt a position different from that of the marja'yya. For example, Ayatollah Sistani's endorsement of popular sovereignty through elections enabled Islamists to adopt democracy.

"The form of government in Iraq is to be determined by the Iraqi people. This is accomplished through general elections in which every Iraqi selects representatives to a constituent assembly charged with drafting the constitution. The constitution approved by this assembly is then presented to the people for ratification by vote. The marja'yya does not play a role in political authority or government". (Sistani, quoted in Al-Khaffaf 2015, 22). Therefore, Ayatollah Sistani considered voting a religious duty. He adopted this position in 2005 and adhered to it until 2018, when he considered voting a citizen's right and continued to advise people to participate in elections.

Ayatollah Sistani's religious legitimization of elections altered the behaviour and adaptation of Islamist parties. In this view, Islamist participation in elections and the democratic process is considered part of their religious duty. Therefore, Islamist adoption of democracy becomes a religious obligation under the authority of the marja'iyya.

Together, these two environmental changes provide a theoretical basis for changes in the Dawa's identity. Inclusivity gave the Dawa a constitutional guarantee of participation in the democratic process. The position of the marja'iyya also provided religious legitimacy for identity change.

4. Methodology

4.1 Data collection

The study combines fieldwork interviews with textual sources. Semi-structured, in-person elite interviews provided the first dataset. The interviews included several senior figures in the al-Da'wah Party, namely Dr Abbas Al-Bayati, Dr Muayad Al-Obaidi, and Kamal Al Saadi. These interviewees included the head and members of the Dawa Party's Political Office*. The fourth interviewee was Sayyid Muhammad al-Madhkūr, a cleric and head of the Dawa Party branch in the holy city of Najaf. Interviewees were selected because of their senior rank and longstanding membership.

* The political office of the Dawa party is: The Political office is a specialised body formed by and affiliated with the party leadership. Under the party's internal regulations, it is entrusted with several political responsibilities, including defining the party's positions on domestic and international developments and supervising its electoral campaigns. The Political Office consists of seven members (the Dawa internal regulation (2007) cited in: Al Kharsan, 2019)

The interviews provided direct access to Dawa decision-makers. They were conducted during fieldwork in Baghdad and Najaf between 21 August and 30 September 2025. Each interview lasted approximately one hour. Interviewees consented to being identified.

They explored the Dawa Party elites' perceptions of identity change. The interviews covered changes in the Dawa's identity before and after 2003. They traced the shift from an opposition- and diaspora-based political environment to one shaped by an influential ruling party. They also enabled the analysis of tensions between Dawa documents and actual discourse.

The second dataset consists of textual material collected by the researcher. These data include a corpus of 14 electoral campaigns and public speeches between 2006 and 2021, two media interviews conducted in 2021. They comprise speeches from both campaigns and interviews featuring Nouri al-Maliki. The corpus was collected by the researcher during a visit to Afaq, the official media channel of the Dawa. The campaign speeches and media interviews featured Nouri Al-Maliki. This choice reflects his role as the principal speaker of the campaigns and the most influential and well-known figure within the party, as he has been the head of Al-Da'wah since 2006 and was Iraq's prime minister from 2006 to 2014.

Together, the interview and textual datasets provide greater insight into the Dawa's identity change after 2003. The textual data capture the Dawa's public presentation of party identity, while the interviews identify elite ideological perspectives and address gaps in the discourse analysis. Combining these datasets provides a fuller account of Dawa Party identity.

4.2 Data analysis

The interview data were examined using qualitative thematic analysis. Thematic analysis was used because the semi-structured interviews were structured around pre-established themes discussed with the interviewees. In addition, the data volume is better suited to thematic analysis than content analysis. It also aligns with the paper's qualitative nature. The analysis

began with transcribing the interview recordings; the resulting textual data were then coded manually.

The textual material was examined using Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA). The Discourse-Historical Approach (DHA), as developed by Reisigl and Wodak (2016), was also used. This is because DHA seeks to identify different discursive strategies in the discourse under investigation (Table 1). The discourse analysis was conducted in two stages. In the first stage, the overall textual data were coded. This stage produced multiple themes that reflect al-Da'wah's party identity, including *political vision*, *elections*, *'we-ness'*, *'otherness'*, and *international relations*. Second, the analysis examined the extracted text for each theme using DHA strategies.

Several software packages supported the research. For transcription, both Good Tape and TurboScribe were used; for qualitative analysis, ATLAS.ti was used. This software was used because it supports Arabic. Translation from Arabic was conducted using generative AI (Microsoft 365 Copilot) and then reviewed by the researcher for accuracy in relation to the speech context.

5. Findings

5.1 Dawa Elites' Understanding of Party Change

This section examines Dawa elites' perspectives on the party's identity change. Dawa elites argue that change in party identity reflects Islamic flexibility and adaptation. In this understanding, change balances objectives, priorities, and strategies. The discussion below develops this elite perspective on party change.

The Dawa recognises the importance of change for political parties Al-Bayati stated: "change in the work and methods of political parties is necessary, vital, and existential. This does not affect their message or objectives, but rather their methods and ways of working" (interview

by the author, August 25, 2025). This statement indicates that the Dawa is open to changes that do not affect its main objective and considers such changes necessary. From this perspective, which views party change as necessary, the paper outlines a framework that reflects the Dawa's understanding of it. This framework consists of two pillars: first, maintaining objectives, and second, adapting strategies to achieve them.

This framework of change implies that the Dawa is a pragmatic party. Nevertheless, party elites rejected being described as pragmatic. This rejection stems from two sources. First, pragmatism is often used as a synonym for opportunism or an ends-justify-the-means approach. For a party that remains committed to its Islamist ideology, being characterised as opportunistic would contradict its ideological commitment. As Al-Saadi explained: "The Western interpretation of pragmatism differs from our understanding of Islam and its capacity to adapt. I have studied pragmatism carefully, and it means that the end justifies the means, meaning that one may do anything." (interview by the author, September 2, 2025)

A second objection to pragmatism concerns its purpose and scope. As al-Madhkūr noted: "If interest-based politics, or pragmatism, serves the party itself or individuals within the party, then it is rejected. However, if it serves the public interest, then it is acceptable... Thus, the party seeks to distance itself from self-interest and to focus on public interest work." (interview by the author, September 10, 2025). This rejection of self-interested pragmatism suggests the Dawa does not accept changes that extend to its core principles as an Islamist party. Instead, the Dawa seeks to root change within Islamic flexibility.

"However, we call it realism: recognising a reality that one cannot change while preserving one's religious commitment and goals without harming them. What benefit is there in an Islamic party believing in an Islamic theory if it abandons its religion? In that case, it should

change its name, doctrine, and culture, become a secular party, and stop using an Islamic label. Realism is different from pragmatism.” Al-Saadi (interview by the author, September 2, 2025)

Here, realism means recognising political realities while balancing priorities and strategies. Party elites argue that priorities determine strategy and that shifts in priorities require corresponding strategic adjustments. Thus, the party’s priorities during its founding period differed from those during the diaspora period. Consequently, the party moved away from revolutionary politics and toward a focus on regime change. Similarly, post-2003 priorities differ from those that existed before 2003.

Within this understanding of the relationship between priorities and strategy, the Dawa evaluates strategies by how effectively they advance the party’s priorities. As Al-Bayati argued, “For a political party, the calculation of winning and losing should be considered. In this regard, it would be unwise to be attached to a discourse that does not fit the current challenges.” (interview by the author, August 25, 2025) Therefore, the Dawa treats change as a means to the party’s priorities. However, change is not unconstrained; it remains limited by the party’s commitment to its Islamic identity. In this regard, Al-Saadi states that Islamic jurisprudence justifies adaptation:

“Islam, by its very nature, determines the appropriate position in different circumstances. At certain stages, one may confront an oppressor, and there is a jurisprudence of jihad. When governing a state, there is a state's jurisprudence. ... Thus, whatever period or stage of life one lives in, Islam has specified the legitimate mechanisms and legal-religious positions that should be adopted.”

(interview by the author, September 2, 2025)

Party elites argue that the flexibility of Islamic jurisprudence provides a religious foundation for changing or adapting policies and political positions. As an Islamist party, the Dawa

required religious legitimacy to participate in government. As al-Madhkūr explained: “We worked to adapt to participating in government, even though this was a new idea for us: participating in government with non-Islamists and secular parties. However, through discussions with influential religious authorities, we were able to obtain full legitimacy for participation in government, in the hope of preventing harm and bringing benefits to our community and our people.” (interview by the author, September 10, 2025)

The Dawa’s decision of participation in the governments reflects the party’s commitment to its ideological foundations by maintaining consultation with religious authorities and emphasising the public interest. This adaptation demonstrates that the Dawa views Shia jurisprudence as a legitimate basis for responding to new political realities. Participation in government therefore illustrates adaptation in practice.

In sum, this section has identified the Dawa's framework of identity change. While the Dawa elites recognise the importance of change, they restrict its scope through the Islamic principles of flexibility and adaptation. On this basis, the paper identifies a framework of change followed by the Dawa: preserving objectives while adapting strategies. The next section examines the extent to which al-Da’wah adhered to this framework while constructing its identity after 2003.

5.2 What Is Dawa’s Identity after 2003?

The previous section demonstrated that the Dawa accepted change without altering the party’s objectives. The Dawa’s primary objective is to establish an Islamic state. As Al-Bayati noted about founding an Islamic state: “Its strategic objective is the Islamic state, and it has neither abandoned nor will abandon this objective” (interview by the author, August 25, 2025). Nevertheless, the Dawa has adjusted its priorities and strategies in pursuit of this objective. One clear change in the Dawa identity occurred in the party constitution or internal regulations that was adopted in 2007.

The new regulations show that the Dawa adapted its definition and objectives to better fit the Iraqi environment after 2003. The new definition: "The Islamic Dawa Party is an Islamic political organisation that participates in Iraqi political life and operates according to the principles and objectives defined in this system." (the Dawa Internal Regulation (2007), cited in Al Kharsan, 2019, p. 698). The table lists the party's new objectives. A comparison with the old objective provides more insight into the Dawa adaptation after 2003.

<u>"Goals and Means: <i>After 2003</i></u>	<u><i>Before 2003</i></u>
1. Spreading and deepening the concepts and values of Islam in justice, benevolence, and tolerance to ensure the building of the individual and the awareness and transformation of society. 2. Reviving the original Islamic thought and purifying it from foreign ideas and concepts that have been attached to it. 3. Building a humane society where everyone enjoys full citizenship rights without discrimination based on nationality, race, religion, sect, gender, class, region, thought, or political affiliation. 4. Activating the role of women socially, culturally, and politically, and presenting Islamic civilizational social projects to rebuild society in a way that preserves women's roles and status. 5. <i>Building an independent, unified Iraq with a constitutional, parliamentary, and federal system where power is transferred peacefully and democratically, relying on Islamic principles and values to achieve political, economic, and social security, ensuring progress, growth, prosperity, development, and social</i>	"The goal of Islamic Al Da'wah is to transform the reality of human society into an Islamic reality by changing concepts, behaviours, customs, and relationships at all levels based on Islamic creed and moral bonds. This includes replacing secular laws with Islamic Sharia to fulfil the will of Allah Almighty in His servants and to seek His approval, exalted be His status, by: 1. Transforming the individual and preparing and building a conscious, faithful vanguard capable of bringing about comprehensive Islamic change in the self and society through organized Islamic preparation. 2. Preparing and mobilizing the Islamic nation intellectually, spiritually, and behaviourally until the features of society gradually change and the Islamic society is realised in all its components. 3. Reviving the original Islamic thought and purifying it from foreign ideas and concepts that have been attached to it. 4. Building and supporting the Islamic State. 5. Liberating Islamic countries from infidel colonial control and annexing them to the unified great Islamic state. Just as Allah has blessed Muslims with establishing divine rule in Iran, it is incumbent upon us to support it to be the nucleus of the Islamic state.

<i>justice_ (al Da 'wah Internal Regulation (2007): Al Kharsan, 2019. PP700-701)</i>	6. Inviting the world to Islam(the Dawa internal regulation (1981) cited in: Al Kharsan, 2019. Pp 461-462)
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The party's 2007 definition and objectives indicate a shift from Islam-centric objectives to more political objectives guided by Islamic principles. The new objectives show commitment to democracy, the Iraqi Constitution, and human and women's rights. However, the definition and objectives do not mention founding an Islamic state, as asserted in the interviews. This distance between the elite assertion of founding an Islamic state and the party document indicates that founding an Islamic state is a long-term objective that goes beyond the Dawa's current practical objectives. In addition, the Dawa shows flexibility in its understanding of the Islamic state by not limiting it solely to the implementation of Sharia law. Rather, it emphasises the outcomes that such a state should achieve. As al-Bayati explained: "The significance of the Islamic state lies not in its identity alone, but in what it provides people in terms of prosperity and well-being, causing them to embrace Islam and religion with conviction and reassurance, rather than through coercion or compulsion." (interview by the author, August 25, 2025)

In addition, the party adopts a gradual, bottom-up approach to establishing the Islamic state. As Al-Bayati argued: "It does not impose this strategic goal on others. Rather, this strategic objective requires stages and preparation. Secondly, any step toward truth, justice, the removal of oppression, and efforts to meet the needs of the people is a step toward this state." (interview by the author, August 25, 2025)

Furthermore, the Dawa recognises that establishing an Islamic state under current Iraqi conditions is not a feasible short-term objective. As al-Bayati stated, "The Islamic Da'wa Party has not abandoned its goal, but does not set a timetable to achieve it, recognising the

complexities of the Iraqi arena and the plurality of its identities and components.” (interview by the author, August 25, 2025)

Al-Da’wah’s position on the founding of an Islamic state confirms the party’s framework for identity change. The following section examines the Dawa’s shift toward popular sovereignty.

5.2.1 Popular Sovereignty as a Source of Legitimacy

After 2003, Iraq became a democracy. As a result, popular sovereignty became Iraq’s source of political legitimacy. In response, the Dawa accepted this new form of legitimacy. As Al-Saadi explained: “After 2003, the party embraced democratic pluralism and the peaceful transfer of power. It presented itself to the public and, through elections, sought to help build a modern Iraqi state founded on pluralism. Its identity is Islamic, according to the Iraqi Constitution, which states that Islam is the official religion of the state.” (interview by the author, September 2, 2025)

Another interviewee confirms the Dawa’s support for democracy. Al-Obaidi states: “We can say that the Dawa Party resembles a civil political party that seeks to establish the state on civil and democratic foundations. It accepts the ballot box, believes in electoral competition, and abides by election results, provided that the elections are conducted to a high standard”. (interview by the author, August 28, 2025)

Through this position towards democracy, the Dawa aligned itself with both religious authorities’ support for popular participation and the democratic framework established by the Iraqi Constitution. It justified this adaptation by arguing that it served the public interest. As Al-Saadi stated: “As a party, the Dawa embraced Islam as its ideological foundation and, at the political level, accepted pluralism, maintaining that the people are the ones who choose. This, simply, is what the Islamic Dawa Party says: its identity is Islamic, but its practice of politics

within the framework of the state is based on the freedom of the Iraqi people to choose.”
(interview by the author, September 2, 2025)

The Dawa’s acceptance of democracy as a mechanism for the peaceful transfer of power reflects its belief that Islam and democracy are compatible. Al-Saadi argued: “We do not believe that there is any incompatibility between commitment to an Islamic identity and democracy. Democracy is not an ideology; rather, it is a mechanism for the transfer of power through elections.” (interview by the author, September 2, 2025) This statement suggests that the party does not view democracy as a source of legitimacy that replaces religious legitimacy. Instead, jurisprudential approval remains a necessary guide for adaptation, shaping the party’s response to political change and new realities. Al-Saadi stated:

“You are dealing with secular and Kurdish political forces, and you want to determine the form of the state. What does Islamic jurisprudence say? It defines for you what is permissible and what is not... My religion is the dividing line between me and others. This is what we believe.”
(interview by the author, September 2, 2025)

In sum, the preceding discussion shows that the Dawa Party accepted identity change and considered it vital for political parties. At the same time, the party limited changes in identity to what Islamic principles and jurisprudence permit. On this basis, the paper formulates Dawa’s framework of change. The party’s acceptance of popular sovereignty and participation in government demonstrates this paradigm. The following section examines the extent to which the Dawa applied it in public discourse.

5.2.2 The Dawa Identity: Discourse Analysis

The preceding section identified Dawa’s understanding of identity change amid Iraq’s new realities. The Dawa adopted a moderate democratic position while adhering to Islamic principles. This framework of identity change is facilitated by Shia juridical precedent, which

grants religious leadership authority over individuals and parties. Yet interviews and the party constitution alone cannot fully explain Dawa's identity after 2003. In Iraq's democratic system of competitive elections, understanding party identity requires examining party discourse. Campaign speeches and media interviews reflect what the party leadership actively and deliberately wants the public to see. This public dimension of party identity captures how the Dawa presents itself.

Accordingly, this section examines how the Dawa constructed its identity through public discourse. It assesses whether the Dawa's framework of identity change is reflected in the party's public discourse. The section draws on several discourse sources, including campaign, public conference delivered by the Dawa's senior leadership. The speeches span 2006 to 2024. As a leading political party, Dawa's leadership addresses a wide range of political issues for Iraqi voters, such as we-ness and otherness, the importance of elections, the party's political vision, its stance toward other parties, and its foreign policy. This paper focuses on the first dimension of party identity: we-ness and otherness.

The Discourse-Historical Approach is used because it analyses discourse through five strategies: nomination, predication, argumentation, mitigation and intensification, and perspectivation (Reisigl and Wodak 2016). This division helps explain how identity is constructed. It asks whether religion is the defining boundary between the Dawa and others and to what extent the Dawa treats Islam as a line of cleavage. The full DHA analysis appears in Appendix 1.

The strategy	The object
Nomination	Discursive construction of social actors, objects, phenomena, events, processes, and actions

Predication	discursive qualification of social actors, objects, phenomena and actions positively or negatively
Argument	Justification and questioning of claims to truth and normative rightness
Perspectivation	Positioning the speaker's point of view and expressing involvement or distance
Intensification or mitigation	Modifying (intensifying or mitigating) the illocutionary force and thus the epistemic or deontic status of utterances.

5.2.2.1 Nomination Strategies for the Dawa's We-ness and Otherness

The Dawa leaders used the party's explicit name, the Dawa, or the name of its electoral list, the State of Law, and, in most cases, the pronoun we to refer to themselves. By contrast, Maliki employed the pronouns they, those, and other, alongside the phrase "our partner", as unspecified nominations for other political actors.

Notably, the Dawa leaders did not use ideological nominations for either the party or others; they did not mention Islamists versus secularists or religion versus nonreligion. In addition, the party referred to the Iraqi people by sectarian affiliation, "Sunni, Shia and Christian." The Dawa described political activity as "a religious and national duty."

Another nomination strategy concerns political change in Iraq. Al-Jafari (2007) calls it "democratic change". This nomination is contextually significant because it occurred at the first open conference that the Dawa had held since its foundation. Thus, framing the change in Iraq as democratic demonstrates the party's commitment to democracy and suggests that it does not view democracy as contrary to its Islamic ideology.

These nominations incorporated both Islamist and nationalist dimensions into its identity. Nevertheless, the nomination strategy suggests that the Dawa favoured a more national image over an explicitly Islamist one. In addition, the Dawa's nomination of otherness remains

somewhat ambiguous because the party did not specify who constituted the other. It mainly used the pronoun "they" to refer to others. The emphasis on political and national nomination strategies suggests a deviation from the Dawa's framework of identity adaptation. The predication strategies considered below provide further insight into the Dawa's identity in public discourse.

5.2.2.2 Predication strategies for the Dawa's We-ness and Otherness

This section examines how the Dawa's discourse predicates itself on the one hand and others on the other. It considers whether the Dawa followed its framework of change by maintaining Islamism while presenting a national agenda.

The Dawa emphasises the political nature of Islam. Al-Maliki (2021a) stated, "We do not have political Islam and non-political Islam. Islam is, by nature, a set of beliefs, thoughts, and faith and at the same time has a political aspect. This statement was made in 2021, after two decades of change in Iraq, and indicates that the Dawa continued to regard political activity as part of Islam. Nevertheless, in the same speech, he emphasised the Dawa's adoption of democracy: "We want a state that is based on democratic principles". (Al-Maliki 2020). also said, "We are a new Iraq based on democracy, elections, equal opportunities, and equality of human beings for the Iraqi people." (al Maliki, 2020). Together, these statements suggest that the Dawa remains committed to both political Islam and democratic principles. This dual attachment indicates that the party continued its post-2003 construction of identity based on religious and national forms of legitimacy.

Alongside these ideological and national foundations, the Dawa incorporates its struggle against dictatorship and its sacrifices into its identity: "The Islamic Dawa Party is the party of youth, the party of martyrs, the party of prisoners, and the party of groans and pains" (Al-Maliki 2018c).

This statement suggests that the Dawa remains attached to its history, demonstrating the continuing importance of solidarity rooted in its past struggle. In its predication, the party does not rely solely on politics as a source of identity; its history and sacrifices also form part of that identity.

The Dawa's predication strategy suggests that the party retained its original Islamic identity while adopting a national agenda as a source of legitimacy and motivation for political activities. It also reaffirmed its history as part of its sense of we-ness. A further dimension of predication concerns party activities and projects. In this domain, the Dawa was clearer about itself and other parties. The following paragraphs examine how the Dawa predicates itself in political practice and how it predicates the activities of other parties. It asks what boundaries distinguish the Dawa from other parties.

In its public discourse, the Dawa predicates its project as a national one (Al-Maliki 2014c): "Party that stands, defends, and fights for people's interest, and the party that defends the unity of Iraq, and seeks to build Iraq based on brotherhood and national identity". This passage suggests that, in practice, the Dawa seeks to advance national interests, with particular emphasis on unity. Iraqi unity is presented in terms of both shared interests and a common identity. The party does not mention ideological goals, promote an Islamist identity, or use Islam as the basis of a shared national identity. Dawa repeatedly emphasises national interest and unity, for instance Al-Maliki (2020) asserted: "We do not differentiate between Muslims and Christians, Sunnis and Shiites". "It is one Iraq; it is one people. Our dignity is one, our sanctities are one, our future is one, and our position is one." Furthermore, advocating Iraqi unity is embedded in pursuing the interests of all Iraqis across all provinces. Al-Maliki (2020) stated, "We do not differentiate between one region and another, one governorate and another", and "We want to develop Iraq because all Iraqis share every single inch of every drop of oil and water on Iraqi soil" (Al-Maliki 2020).

Taken together, these statements indicate that, in its political practice, the Dawa constructed its identity as a party pursuing a national project and seeking to protect Iraqi unity. At the same time, ideological or explicitly Islamic projects receive little attention. The party did not mention projects related to Islamic awareness or culture, countering non-Islamic agendas, cultural visions, or other themes associated with Islamic, non-Islamic, or secular competition in Iraq.

By contrast, the Dawa's discourse placed other parties in opposition to Iraqi unity and the national interest: "the main goal of most of the others' projects is to create conflicts between us over issues that do not deserve conflict" (Al-Maliki 2018c). The Dawa leaders applied this predication to other parties, for instance: "those who took the path of division and fragmentation of this nation's unity" (Al-Maliki, 2014c) "Those who wanted to tear Iraq apart on sectarian or ethnic grounds." (Al-Maliki, 2014c) . In many references to other actors, Maliki's discourse focused on political issues and criticised others for positions that did not align with the Dawa's. For instance, he accused others of boycotting elections because they disregarded Iraq's interests and were insufficiently loyal to the Iraqi national army. In addition, Maliki portrayed other parties as lacking national aspirations because they opposed the Iraqi national army: "who withhold a word of support for our army and its members" (Al-Maliki, 2014c). "those who stab the army, stab the security forces." (Al-Maliki, 2014c).

The Dawa's predication strategy toward other parties is characterised by ambiguity. Because The party did not specify who constituted the Dawa's other Within Iraq's party system includes a spectrum of parties divided along religious-secular, Shia-Sunni, and Arab-Kurdish lines; within each category are numerous parties. However, the Dawa's predication of otherness remains general and unspecified. Alongside this generalisation of we-ness and otherness, the Dawa's discourse did not use ideological criteria to distinguish itself from others. The party focused on general political issues and, at times, specific issues such as election boycotts. The

Dawa's discourse omits Islamic culture, the Islamic project, and similar ideological positions when establishing boundaries between Dawa and others.

Overall, this section assessed whether the Dawa's discourse followed the change framework articulated by party leaders and documents, which combines Islamic ideology with democratic principles. The Dawa's discourse shows a stronger tendency towards the second dimension of this framework. Islamic ideology is evident in the party's construction of we-ness but is absent as a determinant of otherness. Its discourse therefore focuses mainly on political rather than ideological issues.

5.2.2.3 intensification, argumentation and perspectivation

Much of Al-Maliki's discourse relates to nomination and predication strategies. Nevertheless, it also includes intensification, as shown in Al-Maliki's statement about the importance of Islamist parties in the political process: "Islamist power is the backbone of the Iraqi political arena" (Al-Maliki 2021). This statement indicates the Dawa's continued attachment to its Islamist ideology. In addition, the Dawa's discourse intensifies its criticism of others: "the main goal of most of the others' projects is to create conflicts between us over issues that do not deserve conflict" (Al-Maliki 2018c). This negative position towards others suggests that the Dawa leadership seeks to maximise the differences between the party and others to gain greater support among Iraqi voters.

Some arguments advanced by the Dawa are directed towards criticising others: "if they adhered to the constitution, its provisions and laws, and if they put the people's interests before their eyes, we would not feel today that a family needs housing, and we would not have a shortage

in schools, nor a shortage in wealth, nor an unemployed person, nor any of these resources in hospitals and factories, and in every field” (Al-Maliki 2014b). In this statement, Al-Maliki argues that other parties are not responsible towards Iraqi citizens or committed to the national interest. Such a statement, made during an election period, suggests that the Dawa seeks to gain voters’ support by constructing others as unqualified to govern the country.

Finally, through these strategies, the Dawa presents itself as a national party that seeks to protect the national interest, while presenting others as non-national actors who are not interested in advancing Iraq’s national interest within the Iraqi political system.

6. Discussion

This paper has examined how the Islamist Dawa Party constructed its identity after 2003. It finds that the Dawa sought to maintain its ideological background while adapting to Iraq’s new realities. This process of identity change followed a framework articulated by the Dawa elites. This framework was facilitated by Shia jurisprudence and the positions of Shia religious leaders, which allowed Islamists to adopt democracy while retaining their ideology. The inclusivity established by the Iraqi Constitution also helped the Dawa maintain its ideology while pursuing political advancement.

The interview evidence reveals that the party remains committed to its ideological principles. Some interviewees insisted that founding an Islamic state remains an objective of the Dawa. This position indicates that the Dawa did not abandon its ideology but instead reaffirmed it. Within this framework, the Dawa benefited from a religious framework that enabled it to participate in government and to recognise popular sovereignty as a source of legitimacy, while

retaining its ideological position. The discourse analysis likewise shows that the party adhered to its framework of change. Party discourse focused mainly on political issues when constructing we-ness and otherness. The party constructed its identity as a national political party pursuing a national agenda. The distinction between the Dawa and others is not primarily based on ideology or Islamist affiliation. Instead, it concerns competing claims to national and non-national priorities.

Taken together, the two datasets reveal a tension in the Dawa's identity construction after 2003. The tension arises from the different emphasis placed on ideology and political objectives across the two datasets. The interviews emphasise ideology, whereas public discourse emphasises political objectives. This tension between elite accounts and public discourse can be attributed to three factors:

First, after 2003, the central objective of political actors in Iraq, including Iraqi political parties and the religious leadership, was to establish a democratic system following the overthrow of Saddam's regime. These objectives encouraged political parties to abandon overt ideological positions and focus on a political agenda that facilitated their integration into the new system. This was particularly important for Shia Islamists, who had spent decades seeking to remove Saddam and attain power. Second, the rise of sectarianism after 2003, including the bloody sectarian conflict of 2005–2007, generated a negative reaction toward sectarian discourse and agendas. This resulted from the overlap and confusion between Islamist and sectarian discourses and agendas. In this context, any Islamist project could easily be interpreted as a sectarian project. For parties prioritising electoral gains, avoiding classification as a sectarian party became important. A national agenda and discourse appealed even to parties representing specific sectarian or ethnic groups.

Third, the Dawa is an office-seeking party. Since 2005, it has participated in all elections and is the only party to have produced three prime ministers. This orientation means that the party is concerned with maximising votes, providing a significant reason to favour national over ideological discourse. This also relates to the priorities mentioned by party elites. Since 2005, Iraq has experienced urgent issues requiring attention: the sectarian civil war of 2006–2008, ISIS between 2014 and 2017, and protests and demands for reform. Moreover, between 2006 and 2014, Maliki served as prime minister; politically, he had to present himself as a national leader pursuing a national agenda rather than advocating an ideological discourse.

7. Conclusion

The paper has shown that two environmental changes in Iraq after 2003, the inclusivity of the political system and Shia jurisprudence as represented by the religious leadership, enabled the Dawa Party to adopt a framework for identity change. As articulated by Dawa elites, this framework consisted of two pillars: commitment to the party's Islamic principles, on the one hand, and support for democracy, on the other.

This framework of identity adaptation was evident in party elites' positions towards Iraq's new political reality, including participation in elections and government, as well as in party documents. However, it was less evident in the party's public discourse. The party's public discourse tended to focus more on political and national agendas than on balancing an Islamist ideological agenda with a political one. These discursive strategies aligned with the Dawa's position as a vote-seeking and office-seeking party.

The Dawa case demonstrates that Islamist party change does not necessarily require a transition towards post-Islamism. An Islamist party can preserve its ideological objectives while adapting its discursive and political strategies to a democratic and inclusive political environment. The

case therefore shows that general party-change theory can provide a useful framework for explaining the adaptation of Shia Islamist parties.

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Appendix 1

The Dawa's we-ness strategies

The strategy	
Nomination	democratic births, one people, democracy, Christians, Sunnis and Shiites, religious and national duty. all Iraqis, democratic principles.
	The democratic births. Parliamentary democratic birth, constitutional democratic birth, and governmental democratic birth (al Jafari, 2007).
	The Islamic Al Da'wah Party is the party of youth, the party of martyrs, the party of prisoners, and the party of groans and pains (al Maliki, 2018C).
Predication	• Shall we stand with those who stood by the people, defended them, fought for them, struggled, and persevered, or with those who merely watched from the sidelines? Shall we stand with those who acted with integrity and safeguarded public funds and the property of the people, or with those who manipulated such resources out of personal

	greed or for dubious political purposes? Shall we stand with those who defended the unity of Iraq, its territory, and its people, or with those who pursued division and fragmentation within this nation and this homeland? Shall we stand with those who sought to divide Iraq along sectarian or ethnic lines, or with those who sought to build Iraq on the basis of brotherhood, national identity, and cooperation in righteousness and virtue rather than in sin and aggression? (al Maliki, 2014c)
Predication	• We do not differentiate in fighting terrorism whether this terrorism is in Anbar or Basra or Karbala and Najaf or Nineveh. • we are ready to sacrifices to defend every single inch of this country and in any of its provinces. • It is one Iraq; it is one people. Our dignity is one, our sanctities are one, our future is one and our position is one. (al Maliki, 2014b)
Predication	• We are not Saddam Hussein, so we go and fight countries. • We are not conspirators against others. • We are a new Iraq based on democracy, elections, relations, equal opportunities, and equality of human beings for the Iraqi people. We do not differentiate between Muslims and Christians, Sunnis and Shiites. (al Maliki, 2020)
Predication	• we have a project, not a power advocator, we move according to religious and national duty.

	• we are the owners of a project and not seekers of power. We are moving inspired by legitimate and national responsibility. (al Maliki, 2014a)
	• We do not differentiate between one region and another, one governorate and another. • We want to develop Iraq because all Iraqis share every single inch of every drop of oil and water on Iraqi soil. • we don't have bias between one province and another, we want to build all of Iraq, the Iraqis are partners in each foot, and in each oil, water drop, (al Maliki, 2020)
	• Al Da'wah is a party that is established on strategy, and has a vision, and the party practice its role in the intellectual field, then changing field and political field. (al Maliki, 2021)
	• we do not have political Islam and non-political Islam. Islam is by nature beliefs, thoughts, and faith and at the same time has a political aspect. • We want a state that is based on democratic principles. (al Maliki, 2021)
Argumentation	
Perspectivation	the speakers' perspective is non-sectarian pro-national unity democratic.

Intensification mitigation	or	Islamist power is the backbone of the Iraqi political arena (al Maliki, 2021).

The Dawa's other-ness strategies

Nomination	Those, they, Our partners, others
Predication	• those who watched or stood on the sidelines? • those who manipulated this money with vile intentions or suspicious political goals? • those who took the path of division and fragmentation of this nation's unity? • those who wanted to tear Iraq apart on sectarian or ethnic grounds, • They have left us with a bad culture among many who have lost their guidance or the guidance they should have received. The culture of killing, militias, attacks on the state, attacks on citizens, and control by weapons has spread. • those who watch the army as it fights, those who sit on the sidelines, and those who withhold a word of support for our army and its members, • they have no zeal for Iraq and no concern for the lives of Iraqis. • If they were exposed to such terrorists and killers, there would be no place for spectators and • those who stab the army, stab the security forces, and the armed forces, and rejoice when a terrorist or suicide attack occurs, and rejoice when a soldier or policeman is martyred in the

	confrontation against Al-Qaeda and its formations? Can we say yes to them in the ballot box? •the political blocs that resort to methods of fraud, lies, and deception. (al Maliki, 2014 C)
Predication	• "I say to those who bet and outbid, you have the right to talk about what you have achieved and to conduct your election campaign. But tell me, what have you offered while in positions of responsibility so that we can tell you what we have offered and what the State of Law has offered? It is not enough to insult others; this is not a civilized approach. This electoral method based on defamation and abuse is a dangerous backward approach. If these people reach positions of responsibility, say, bring your proof, say, bring what you have offered, say, bring what you want to offer through the positions of responsibility you are in. It is not enough to insult, it is not enough to falsify, it is not enough to lie to others, even to the sacred sites, at the forefront of which is the religious authority. You want to reach through lies." (al Maliki, 2014 b)
	• those who promote a boycott want to clear the way for themselves so that we refrain from participating while they proceed. Here, I want to emphasize their armed conspiracies, terrorism, and support.

	• They have returned to sowing evil and malice in the paths of the political process, which includes obstructing Iraqi citizens from attending the polling stations. (al Maliki, 2018a)
	• They want to give to one region to provoke another region. • They want to develop this province to provoke the people of another province." (al Maliki, 2020)
	• They were with us, among us, in parliament, and in the government, but their other foot was also with terrorism. They managed to use the state's money, capabilities, and weapons with terrorism and terrorists. (al Maliki, 2018b)
	• they work with countries and extensions to keep Iraq wounded, unable to build itself, unify its word, and progress in the way other countries of the world are progressing. • They want us to remain in this whirlpool of problems and strife, in the whirlpool of sectarianism, in the whirlpool of terrorism, in the whirlpool of external interventions, in the whirlpool of the presence of foreign forces, with parts occupied here and there. • They do not want Iraq to remain or return strong. • They are still weaving these conspiracies and interfering in our affairs (al Maliki, 2018c)
Argumentation	• if they adhered to the constitution, its provisions and laws, and if they put the people's interests before their eyes, we would not feel

	today that a family needs housing, and we would not have a shortage in schools, nor a shortage in wealth, nor an unemployed person, nor any of these resources in hospitals and factories, and in every field, • if those who stand at the top of the responsibility dealt with this responsibility, everyone talks about the necessity of providing services, and no one can help but talk about this talk. • we observe them evading the approval and ratification of the budget. (al Maliki, 2014b) • Their aim is to prevent our participation so that they can proceed and, God forbid, one day come back and claim that they have returned through the gateway of elections." (al Maliki, 2018b) • "If we miss this opportunity, brothers, do not say later that we want to go back. If this opportunity passes in a negative direction and they achieve their goals and bring in those they want for the political process, we will be caught between two hammers: the hammer of elections and what it represents in terms of the legitimacy of the corrupt, which cannot remain and must be reformed. If we object, they will say it is the elections. We came to you not on the backs of tanks; we came to you through ballot boxes. (al Maliki, 2018c)
Perspectivation	The Dawa is a party of national interest and national unity.
Intensification or mitigation	• Our partners attacked us with fatwas of excommunication, and their slogan seemed to recall history: 'Kill them and leave none of this house remaining.

	• But, my brothers, as it is said, 'Know the truth, and you will know its people.' We do not say 'us' or 'others' to you. We say, 'Know the truth, and you will know its people.' (al Maliki, 2018e) • the main goal of most of the others' projects is to create conflicts between us over issues that do not deserve conflict. (al Maliki, 2018c)
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