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Iraq 20 years on

Insider reflections on
the war and its aftermath

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Preface

Renad Mansour and
Thanassis Cambanis

This Chatham House essay collection, published to mark 20 years since the 2003 US-led invasion of Iraq, brings together the observations and analysis of practitioners from a wide range of professional backgrounds who have lived and worked in Iraq over the past two decades. Contributors tell stories across the full spectrum of Iraqi life, and illustrate the inherent contradictions that hobbled democracy and state-building from the outset.

Several essays in the collection reveal the incoherent and paradoxical assumptions behind the initial US-led invasion and occupation and the design of Iraq's governing system. Zaid Al-Ali argues that Iraq's transitional authorities drafted a rushed constitution without adequate public consultation. Retired Iraqi national security official Safa al-Sheikh Hussein makes the point that Iraqis and Americans feared the creation of functional and strong Iraqi security institutions, believing that a powerful military could lead to a return to dictatorship. The lack of viable Iraqi armed forces has spawned cycles of insecurity that have hampered Iraq's progress on every other issue.

The collection of essays also reveals the contradictions at the heart of the struggle to build democracy and coherent state institutions in Iraq. Hayder Al Shakeri recalls how violence, instability and resurgent authoritarianism closed the space that had briefly opened for protest and accountability after the fall of Saddam. Belkis Wille of Human Rights Watch notes the occasions when Iraqi and international officials sidelined efforts to expose rights violations, apparently more concerned about short-term threats to the elite pact than long-term instability perpetuated by abuses. In each of these cases documented in the Chatham House collection, the Iraqi government and international actors purportedly invested in accountability and better governance, but instead adopted policies that undermined those very goals. Indeed, former US diplomat Ryan Crocker observes that Washington actively promoted the ethnic power-sharing settlement that caused so many of Iraq's troubles. Former Iraq correspondent Thanassis Cambanis suggests that independent media coverage was no match for official misinformation, doing little to stop the mendacious or misleading narratives that undergirded the many wrong policy turns since 2003.

Some contributors to the collection focus on the failures of elite Iraqi and international actors to reform the country during the past two decades. Ahmed Tabaqchali elaborates on the lessons he learned while drafting an Iraqi government white paper on the economy. Irresponsible leaders ignored or obstructed necessary reforms, he argues, relying on waves of oil revenue to bail out the government and buy goodwill with populist expenditures. Recalling her service with the UN, Mara Revkin argues that international officials isolated themselves in the Green Zone

because of their fears of violence – making them unable to play a leading role in sorely needed reforms. Disconnected from society because of an unchanging security posture, the international community has little to show for billions of dollars spent on aid and development. Renad Mansour highlights the mismatch between goals and incentives that hobbles the efforts of would-be state-builders from the international community. Deployed to Baghdad to buttress Iraqi capacity-building initiatives, many internationals doggedly repeat the same failed approaches, because their programmes have to meet the expectations of political constituencies in their home countries rather than achieve any tangible success in Iraq's complex state-building.

Iraq's most urgent societal crises never aligned with the short time horizons of international policymakers, who were usually more concerned with budget cycles, an upcoming election in Iraq or the perceptions of their home countries. One of this collection's most significant insights is its focus on structural factors that promoted quick but evanescent wins and short-term policy fixes at the expense of enduring stability and genuine efforts to address underlying societal problems.

For instance, both Yanar Mohammed and Choman Hardi document how Iraqi and international officials ignored the issue of gender in federal Iraq and the Kurdistan region. Although environmentalists sounded constant alarms, Azzam Alwash chronicles how short-termism doomed any effort to manage the nation's dwindling water resources and avert today's water emergency. Even on more obviously urgent security questions, Kawa Hassan argues that only late in the game, in the last few years, have Arab neighbours in the Gulf begun to consider Iraq a potential regional partner for diplomacy and cooperation. Maysoon al-Damluji zooms in on the cultural heritage sector, which she argues perpetually gets short shrift despite its vital resonance for Iraqis and its critical role in the establishment of shared identities.

Despite sometimes honourable intentions, the main decision-makers on Iraq never adopted policies that incorporated Iraqi public input or created viable security institutions that could protect the country. The new Iraqi government and its international backers should have insisted on mechanisms that held to account the new system and its elite; all fell short of their stated goals.

The case of Iraq painfully illustrates the perils of promoting democracy through war and of pursuing short-term political bargains at the expense of long-term stability. Iraq's last 20 years also underscore the importance of accountability as a founding principle for any new system of governance. Taken together, the personal stories and lessons learned in this collection offer insights for policymakers, analysts and others concerned with Iraq and other conflict and post-conflict zones.

Introduction

The promise of democracy

Renad Mansour

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I grew up in exile. Throughout the 1990s, I met many exiled Iraqi political leaders opposed to Saddam Hussein's rule in Iraq, including Ahmed Chalabi, who was one of the most influential and infamous voices that played a part in persuading the US to invade Iraq, and later became a president in the rotating Iraqi Governing Council. 'Anyone is better than Saddam', they would tell me, as they compared the Iraqi president with Hitler and Stalin. I would watch and read news reports and stories of Saddam's attacks on his own people, including his use of chemical weapons. The comparison resonated.

Every Iraqi I knew had a family member affected by Saddam Hussein's regime. My father was a political dissident, forced to flee Iraq under fake names and with forged passports; his family members were often visited and interrogated by Iraqi government officials. These stories were formative for me – terrifying tales of Saddam's depravity, dreams of Iraq's bright future and an end to exile if the regime was gone.

Still, in the process of forming my political consciousness, I listened to these opponents of Saddam, and I believed them. Like many, I thought that removing Saddam and establishing a democratic and representative state was best for Iraqis – and that it was possible for an outside power to bring about such a change, even the George W. Bush administration, regardless of what I thought of its specific policies and views. I had hope in Iraq's future.

Iraq has one of the highest national revenues in the world (\$115.7 billion in 2022) but one of the lowest relative life expectancies.

Twenty years ago, in 2003, Iraqis across their country and abroad anxiously celebrated the US decision to remove the Saddam Hussein regime, which had degraded the wealthy country of Iraq from a regional powerhouse to a pariah state. This optimism was certainly underlined by trepidation: many still did not know what would come next.

Very few observers would have imagined that the years following regime change would be marked by civil wars, the rise of genocidal groups like the Islamic State (ISIS), and the emergence and establishment of a political system defined

by endemic corruption that has gutted the country's basic public services. Iraq has one of the highest national revenues in the world (\$115.7 billion in 2022) but one of the lowest relative life expectancies (69 years) and human development index (HDI) scores.¹ This disparity is directly linked to the nature of the system set up 20 years ago.

Today, almost two-thirds of Iraqis are under 25,² and they are too young to recall anything other than their life after 2003. Although too young to remember a time before the invasion, many of them believe that their lives are worse off as a result.

Trapped in the Green Zone

After years away, my family started going back to Iraq. Over time, a new reality began to emerge, one far different from the rosy picture of life without Saddam that had been presented in exile. The US did not seem to have a coherent plan for the day after, for when it became the occupier. It allied with the exiled politicians, themselves rendered foreign after decades abroad, who were returning to a changed and relatively unfamiliar Iraq. Many of Baghdad's new political leaders were lost in the city – unable to find their way around, and disconnected from the people they sought to lead or represent.

To consolidate their power, the new rulers built a Green Zone – a fortified area in central Baghdad housing domestic authorities and foreign governments. They wanted themselves and the new government to be safe from the rest of the city and the country, which was under fire from a breakdown in law and order.

Iraq's new leaders and their foreign backers hid behind high blast walls. At first, aspiring local leaders remained in their homes or offices in the wider city. However, in short order, the entire collection of ruling elites – foreign and domestic, new and old – decamped to the fortified Green Zone. Iraqi politicians commandeered houses in areas under US protection and hired bodyguards to transport them around the country in armoured cars.

The Green Zone thus became more than a place of safety: it came to divide the rulers from the ruled. This governance gap would only increase over the next 20 years, as the elite took the country's immense wealth but failed to deliver basic public services – like electricity or water – to the people.

The Green Zone also housed Iraq's international state-builders. These diplomats and aid workers would spend hundreds of billions of dollars trying to support development and reform in Iraq. But again, the Green Zone limited their proximity to residents across the capital – to say nothing of the rest of the country. Most of these foreigners were new to Iraq and could not speak Arabic or Kurdish. This disconnect meant the money they spent did not translate

¹ Dourian, K. (2023), 'Iraq rakes in record \$115.7 billion in 2022 oil revenue', Iraq Oil Report, 16 January 2023, <https://www.iraqoilreport.com/news/iraq-rakes-in-record-115-5-billion-in-2022-oil-revenue-45393>; The World Bank (undated), 'Life Expectancy at birth, total (years) > Iraq', <https://data.worldbank.org/indicator/SP.DYN.LE00.IN?locations=IQ>; United Nations Development Programme (undated), 'Human Development Reports > Human Development Insights', <https://hdr.undp.org/data-center/country-insights#/ranks>.

² Al Shakeri, H. (2022), 'The aspirations and disillusionment of Iraq's youth', Chatham House Expert Comment, 27 July 2023, <https://www.chathamhouse.org/2022/07/aspirations-and-disillusionment-iraqs-youth>.

to sustainable initiatives, nor did it appear to result in concrete improvements. Most Iraqis began wondering what these external actors were doing and why they were there.

I, too, began to ask questions, namely of the opposition political leaders whom I came to know when I was younger: Why did some people who fought their whole lives against dictatorship turn into unrepresentative and corrupt leaders who distanced themselves from society? Thinking about this paradox at first overwhelmed me. But it pushed me to examine, enquire and study, and to eventually work towards a better understanding of the failures to rebuild Iraq.

‘Why are you here?’

Family visits to Iraq deepened my interest in studying the country. I eventually completed a doctoral dissertation and then worked for several policy research institutes, Iraqi and international. Some of my work has been academic, such as trying to understand the nature of the state or the mechanics of conflict economies. More of it has been policy related, trying to answer questions about corruption and conflict. Some of my experiences have been eye-opening, and they have greatly contributed to answering the questions that initially drove my research queries and the conundrums with which I have long grappled.

For instance, a few years ago, I was asked to conduct research to offer recommendations to an international organization looking to support security sector reform in Iraq. The organization wanted to train parts of the Iraqi military as a way to rebuild state institutions. My job was to look into the history and track record of security sector reform in Iraq, and then to examine the organization’s own strategic plan and make recommendations.

Between 2003 and 2011, almost \$20 billion was spent on efforts to rebuild Iraq’s armed forces through the Iraq Security Forces Fund,³ with the US as lead contributor. But only a few years later, in June 2014, that same military force fled when faced with only a couple of thousand ISIS fighters who went on to take over one-third of the country. My research revealed that the technical, capacity-building approach to security sector reform neglected vital political and economic realities. As a result, these efforts failed.

Yet, this international organization now had another mandate with more money to invest in repeating what amounted to the same programme. I presented a critique and recommendations, noting that their plan would not work as intended. The room of policymakers asked me a few follow-up questions and thanked me for my study. But it seemed their intention was to carry on with the same plan.

³ Special Inspector General for Iraq Reconstruction (2012), *Quarterly Report to the United States Congress*, Report, Arlington: Office of the Special Inspector General for Iraq Reconstruction, https://cybercemetery.unt.edu/archive/sigir/20131001090442/http://www.sigir.mil/files/quarterlyreports/April2012/Report_-_April_2012.pdf.

I later asked officials why they were still continuing with the plan when (very recent) history showed that it would be essentially impossible to successfully carry out their mandate.

‘You think we are only in Iraq for Iraqis,’ they replied matter-of-factly. ‘But our audience is also back home. [Our stakeholders] need a sense of purpose and for that reason we will continue this programme.’

I was taken aback, though it made sense. The comment made me think of the question, ‘why are you here?’, which so many Iraqis would ask rhetorically in regard to the foreign presence. One part of me had thought that international organizations were in Iraq to help rebuild the country. And while this may well have been true, they also had another audience: their home populations and governments. At times, these audiences appeared to be even more important than recipients of aid in Iraq. It seemed these organizations were content spending money even if the chance of success was practically zero, because reforming Iraq was only one part of their goals.

Dialogue of the deaf

Over the last two decades, Iraqis have grown accustomed to the idea of a national dialogue that brings together political leaders across the ethnic and sectarian spectrums. In any given year, multiple versions of national dialogues occur, each championed by a different foreign sponsor spending tens of millions of dollars and bringing together a similar cast of characters with a range of different political ideologies. Rather than working together on one single and comprehensive dialogue project, many foreign officials wanted to champion their own individual project. Ironically, Iraqi leaders were, and continue to be, constantly in touch with one another – a necessity to sustain an entire political system grounded in an elite bargain. But to further protect this pact, these elites also play along with the activities of foreign emissaries, who, while publicly announcing their concerns of the political system, have consistently failed to hold to account the elite whose corruption harms Iraqis every day.

A few years ago, I was advising an international organization on a dialogue effort. I wanted to move beyond tried and failed methods by bringing together Iraqis from outside the approved lists of participants maintained by foreign governments and organizations. Such lists are kept in order to avoid working with individuals and parties deemed too controversial. But my efforts failed. The explanation given was the ‘foreign media’ test. Foreign countries spending millions of taxpayer funds promoting dialogue efforts do not want to risk any blowback that could appear in the *Daily Mail*, *Der Spiegel*, *El Pais* or *Le Monde*. Engaging with problematic characters, such as individuals or groups seen as terrorists, was forbidden. While this seemed reasonable, I soon learned that this definition had too broad a scope. The organization I was advising seemed to be using simple Facebook and Google searches to learn about suggested participants. In one case, an influential medical doctor was disqualified from a local dialogue because he had a Facebook picture in which he was holding a gun. He had no links to terrorism or criminality.

The photo was enough for this international organization to exclude him despite other local participants arguing the man was an important figure to include.

It once again seemed that the foreign audience was more important to this international organization than the local Iraqi participants, those who would supposedly be most affected by the organization's efforts. This foreign donor spent millions. But what appeared to me to matter more than a sustainable result was that the endeavour be low risk, which meant carefully selecting who could and could not speak on behalf of Iraqis and take part in dialogues.

The lessons from the 2003 war

The biggest headlines of the 2003 Iraq War were about 'regime change'. The reality was something different, and more nuanced. The Coalition Provisional Authority (CPA), working with the new ruling elite, not only removed the former regime, they also fundamentally restructured the foundations of the Iraqi state. The most infamous instance of this came with the removal of the military and the top several layers of the civil service, stripping the country of the vast bureaucratic capital that had long existed.

Twenty-five million people lived in Iraq in 2003; 20 years later that number stands at 41 million, most of whom have only known a political system that has constantly failed to deliver on their basic needs.

These initial decisions amount to original sins in the governance of today's Iraq. But also consequential were countless decisions taken after those early weeks and months, political interventions masked as apolitical policy efforts, such as supporting and relying on individuals to reform the system instead of institutions that could potentially hold to account the entire elite. These efforts have contributed to building a political system that is a patchwork of public and private institutions, and a blurring of formal and informal sectors – this has created a murkiness that has proved massively lucrative to many of those controlling Iraq's levers of power. This system has grown resilient, with elites defending it against the sinister efforts of ISIS, but also against the hopeful and rightful demands of youth uprisings, such as the October 2019 protests. Elites have also learned to defend the system against internal destabilization. After winning the 2021 national election, Muqtada al-Sadr failed to form a majority government, which had attempted to exclude some powerful elites. Instead, the system ensured that any government would be based on the usual consensus, stifling Sadr's bid to disrupt politics.

Many of the same exiles that returned to Iraq in 2003 still hold positions of power. Iraq's demographics continue to raise new questions and challenges for these leaders, namely the booming population. Twenty-five million people lived in Iraq in 2003; 20 years later that number stands at 41 million, most of whom have only known a political system that has constantly failed to deliver on their basic needs.

The purpose of this collection of essays is to revisit the last 20 years in Iraq to understand what went wrong, what could have been done differently, and how to correct the current trajectory. Anyone who has worked in Iraq during this time can recount incidents that speak to the country's conditions – many horrific and others comical, and indeed sometimes both. The authors in this series have lived and worked in Iraq and are now willing to share some of their personal anecdotes and reflections to unpack the contradictions in state-building, and to offer advice to those tasked with the job in the future, in Iraq or similar contexts. These experiences can explain how and why one of the largest international state-building projects in recent memory did not achieve what those who instigated it claimed was their ultimate goal.

Iraqis are still left picking up the pieces. They are living under a repressive political system, albeit a very different one from that which existed before 2003. They need all the help they can get to overcome the wrongs they have been subjected to for several decades. But a new approach is needed. The aim of this collection is to hold Iraqi and international state-builders to account as well as to discuss what could have been done differently, the possible pathways forward, and ultimately to caution against similarly misguided interventions in the future.

Impunity is contagious

Human rights in Iraq 20 years after the fall of Saddam Hussein

Belkis Wille

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I remember the day in 2016 when I became certain that Iraqi governments had no interest in advancing accountability for victims of human rights abuses. Since 2003, Iraqi authorities had refused to engage appropriately with Human Rights Watch (HRW). They hardly ever granted our meeting requests or even replied to our letters. Whenever HRW's reports on abuses in Iraq came out, the government at the time would invariably criticize our work as one-sided, often claiming wrongly that we had not given the authorities an opportunity to respond. We were not alone in this. The broader human rights community in Iraq was also being ignored.

By late 2016, following HRW's documentation⁴ of the disappearance in late May and early June that year of over 600 men – almost all Sunni Arabs – during the military operation to retake Fallujah, it felt more urgent than ever to find someone in the government willing to meet with us and engage with our findings and recommendations. I remember one woman from the al-Mahamda tribe telling me during the HRW investigation that she had gone from office to office trying to get news of her husband and son, who were both taken during military operations. She was exhausted when we spoke, worn down after being repeatedly ignored.

Following considerable external pressure, Prime Minister al-Abadi publicly stated on 4 June 2016 that he had created a committee to investigate the Fallujah operation.⁵ The establishment of such a committee was a rare opportunity and we were keen to seize it.

⁴ Human Rights Watch (2016), 'Iraq: Fallujah Abuses Test Control of Militias', 9 June 2016, <https://www.hrw.org/news/2016/06/09/iraq-fallujah-abuses-test-control-militias>.

⁵ Alhurra (2016), 'معركة الفلوجة.. لجان لمراقبة انتهاكات حقوق الإنسان' [Battle of Fallujah... Committees to monitor human rights violations], 6 June 2016, <https://www.alhurra.com/iraq/2016/06/06/%D9%85%D8%B9%D8%B1%D9%83%D8%A9-%D8%A7%D9%84%D9%81%D9%84%D9%88%D8%AC%D8%A9-%D9%84%D8%AC%D8%A7%D9%86-%D9%84%D9%85%D8%B1%D8%A7%D9%82%D8%A8%D8%A9-%D8%A7%D9%86%D8%AA%D9%87%D8%A7%D9%83%D8%A7%D8%AA-%D8%AD%D9%82%D9%88%D9%82-%D8%A7%D9%84%D8%A5%D9%86%D8%B3%D8%A7%D9%86>.

After calling in favours from influential Iraqi ambassadors abroad who were supportive of HRW, we were finally granted a meeting with a representative of the Prime Minister's Office. After lambasting our work for 15 minutes, the staff member who met with us agreed that we needed a point of contact on the government side.

And so, a week later, I found myself pulling up outside a building in the International Zone, excited by the prospect of finally meeting with a government official mandated to engage on human rights issues. I would be meeting a senior human rights expert, so I was told. But, within minutes of entering his office, I formed the view that neither he nor the government of which he was a part had any meaningful interest in concerning themselves with human rights. Not one bit.

The meeting, as I interpreted it, was a calculated snub and dismissal of human rights by the Iraqi government. The office we met in was the most dilapidated of all the Saddam Hussein era buildings I had seen in Iraq. The appearance of this crumbling structure – with an elevator that had apparently not functioned in years, chipped paint, deeply stained and loose carpeting, and walls that looked like they were about to give way – added to the impression of an institution that held no importance for those in power.

It seemed to me that the Iraqi government could not have sent a clearer signal that it had no interest in listening, much less responding, to suggestions from HRW or other human rights groups about how to better honour Iraq's commitments under its own laws and the international treaties it had ratified. My initial judgment was confirmed by the man I met. He made it clear within moments of my sitting down that he wielded no power whatsoever and would be unable to assist with any requests for information or engagement.

A few weeks later, I was back in the International Zone to meet the ambassador of a country that publicly pronounces, and is proud of, its commitment to human rights. Still struggling to regain my optimism after that desultory meeting with the Iraqi official, I raised concerns that months after the disappearances, there was no sign of any output from the Fallujah investigative committee.⁶ I asked this normally sympathetic ambassador whether he was continuing to press the government on accountability.

In brief, he responded, the answer was no. He told me that the priority of the international community was to empower the current prime minister and ensure that he remained in office. In his view, publicly highlighting and raising concerns about abuses attributed to the current government could undermine that goal. 'We will raise all of these human rights concerns with the prime minister', the ambassador promised, 'after the elections'. Procrastination was a common tactic among representatives of foreign governments working in Iraq.

Al-Abadi never made it to a second term in office. And, perhaps predictably, nothing ever came of the investigative committee he established. This was not the first time in Iraq's recent history that abuses on this scale had gone unpunished. But in this case, there seemed to be a widespread sense of disinterest about these specific abuses among government officials, the diplomatic community and parts

⁶ Human Rights Watch (2016), 'Iraq: Fallujah Abuses Inquiry Mired in Secrecy', 7 July 2016, <https://www.hrw.org/news/2016/07/07/iraq-fallujah-abuses-inquiry-mired-secrecy>.

of Iraqi civil society. Because the victims of those abuses were men who had lived under – and therefore perhaps had even been linked to – Islamic State, to many who claimed to be concerned with human rights, these seemed not to be victims worthy of much attention.

In late 2016 and early 2017, the battle for Mosul unfolded. Both Islamic State and Iraqi forces committed war crimes,⁷ but members of the Iraqi authorities and some foreign diplomats alike told me the crimes were not worth raising because of the ‘unsavoury’ nature of the victims. Evidence of such crimes was quietly left alone. In the months after the battle, a new class of victims of wide-ranging state abuses began to emerge – families tainted by their alleged links to men who had joined Islamic State. These victims were seen as more deserving, because they were predominantly women and children. The diplomatic community, along with some members of the government, did advocate an end to many collective punishment measures.⁸ But those practices continued, and accountability again proved elusive.

I was back in the International Zone in late 2019 to meet the successor to the Western ambassador mentioned earlier. The new ambassador expressed his shock at the acts of excessive force that were killing hundreds of protesters in the streets of Baghdad and other cities in the centre and south of the country.⁹ He was astounded that such acts could go unpunished. After all, ‘we are talking about Shia youth being shot at and killed’, he said. This view was shared by many people I spoke to in the International Zone, who had assumed that, while some communities were more likely to be victimized by the authorities in an ethno-sectarian political system, the Shia majority would be spared.

I was less surprised, though, that patterns of abuse had become ingrained – and that abuses no longer seemed to discriminate by religious belief. I was alarmed by the ways in which impunity appeared to have metastasized throughout Iraq’s political order. A different prime minister created another committee to investigate violence and killings, which this time had been directed at peaceful protesters. This committee has also failed to produce any meaningful results.

Pushing for accountability

HRW is in the business of meticulously documenting human rights abuses, making the findings public and presenting those findings directly to the people responsible for the abuses. This approach is based on the idea that by publicizing governments’ human rights and laws-of-war abuses, we raise the cost of continuing such abuses. We also publish recommendations with our findings, the aim of which is to get governments – whether out of conviction, embarrassment or other motivations – to cease their abuses and hold those responsible accountable.

⁷ Human Rights Watch (2017), ‘Iraq: US-Trained Forces Linked to Mosul War Crimes’, 27 July 2017, <https://www.hrw.org/news/2017/07/27/iraq-us-trained-forces-linked-mosul-war-crimes>.

⁸ Wille, B. (2019), ‘Iraq: Not a Homecoming’, Human Rights Watch, 14 June 2019, <https://www.hrw.org/news/2019/06/14/iraq-not-homecoming>.

⁹ Human Rights Watch (2019), ‘Iraq: State Appears Complicit in Massacre of Protesters’, 16 December 2019, <https://www.hrw.org/news/2019/12/16/iraq-state-appears-complicit-massacre-protesters>.

If a government is unwilling to act, we turn to allies including civil society partners and other governments that have influence. Meetings with diplomats can form a major part of the human rights ecosystem – groups like HRW document abuses and suggest reforms, and then brief sympathetic members of the international community on their findings and recommendations. Diplomats from countries with important bilateral relationships or multilateral influence often share our concerns and join quiet, but sometimes effective, campaigns to persuade a government to change its behaviour.

Too many Iraqi and international representatives were willing to overlook crimes committed by state security forces in the interests of achieving, as they saw it, ‘stability’ in the short term.

Although my meetings over the years with civil society partners were invaluable to HRW’s work, and our ability to support the human rights community within Iraq, my interactions with the government and ambassadors in Baghdad reported above demonstrate clearly that, in Iraq at least, the system of engagement has been broken for years due to a lack of adequate political will. Victims seeking accountability for abuses have suffered the consequences.

Now what?

It appears that once the precedent for a lack of accountability for human rights abuses has been established, it becomes acceptable – and even expected – over time, across many spheres and settings. A short-term political bargain can escalate into a general way of doing business. Impunity can then be perpetuated and the idea of enforcing any semblance of law drifts ever further out of reach.

In Iraq, plenty of stakeholders have tried to hold government accountable post-2003. Iraqi activists and victims continue to document abuses and are willing, at considerable risk to themselves, to testify in public. Watchdogs like the Iraqi High Commission for Human Rights try to use their limited powers to check government abuses. At times, some government officials – from members of parliament to executive branch staff and, occasionally, a powerful figure like a minister or even the president – will act to affirm human rights. One example is the choice that former Iraqi president Barham Salih made to delay signing off on a number of death sentences, citing concerns about the standard of the trials that had led to the death penalty being imposed in those cases.

But such gestures have not changed the overall trend away from accountability. In my experience, too many Iraqi and international representatives were willing to overlook crimes committed by state security forces in the interests of achieving, as they saw it, ‘stability’ in the short term. Even backers of human rights in different settings and situations, both in the Middle East and elsewhere, ignored crimes committed against communities in Iraq they ultimately considered undesirable.

By 2019, this turning of ‘blind eyes’ had helped to ingrain patterns of impunity into Iraqi governance structures. Some Iraqi authorities could and did target anyone they chose to, including peaceful demonstrators, without fear of consequence.

Iraq may not be exceptional in this regard. But Iraqi authorities have been able to behave in such ways for so long in part because of inconsistent scrutiny by the international community, members of which appear to be advancing competing interests. This failure to promote and protect human rights comes at the expense of the interests of the Iraqi people – including the al-Mahamda woman, who, more than six years after our first meeting, still has no news of whether her husband and son are alive.

The self-fulfilling prophecy of ‘perpetual’ war in Iraq

Mara Revkin

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When I first came to Baghdad in 2016 as a PhD student, I stretched my limited research budget as far as I could, staying at a hotel in the neighbourhood of Bataween, Baghdad’s now-decaying historically Jewish neighbourhood. My hotel had no armed guards but, at \$60 a night, cost less than one-fifth of the price of the supposedly safer five-star hotels in and around the International Zone.

To meet with United Nations officials, I had to navigate the bewildering layers of permissions and checkpoints that control access to the International Zone – referring to an approximately 10 square kilometre heavily fortified area where the UN compound, US embassy and other major embassies and Iraqi government buildings are located. Officials inside were horrified at my living arrangements.

Years later when I returned to Baghdad to work and live in the UN compound, I was grateful for the time I had previously spent in what internationals often call the ‘Red Zone’ – the area known to Iraqis simply as ‘Baghdad’. In my new role, I only occasionally caught glimpses of Baghdad through tinted windows of armoured vehicles.

The international community’s continuing perception of Iraq as either a war zone or perpetually on the brink of war is both outdated and counterproductive to the objective of building sustainable peace. This essay is informed by my first-hand observations of this gap between perceptions and reality over the past seven years, which I have spent studying the causes of conflict in Iraq as an academic and working on stabilization and development efforts as a consultant and adviser to UN agencies.

‘Green’ and ‘Red’ zones

Iraqis perceive the terms ‘Green Zone’ (officially the ‘International Zone’) and the ‘Red Zone’ as outdated holdovers from the 2003 US-led invasion that signal the international community’s continuing fear and distrust of Iraq’s population. Some have pointed out that Baghdad’s murder rate is lower than Chicago’s.¹⁰ Even though security incidents involving diplomatic or humanitarian personnel are now extremely rare, the UN was traumatized by a 2003 bomb attack on the UN headquarters in Baghdad that killed 22 people¹¹ and prompted the temporary withdrawal of nearly all international staff.¹² Proponents of strict security procedures argue that such incidents are only rare *because* of the continuation of these measures. Most of the UN’s international staff rarely leave the compound, if ever, and many would like to get out of what they describe as a ‘bubble’ more often.¹³

The persistence of the international perception of Iraq as a perpetually war-torn state since 2003 is problematic but understandable, given the regular outbreaks of violence over the last 20 years.

Statistically, most post-conflict reconstruction and peacebuilding efforts fail – in what political scientists have described as ‘the conflict trap’, 57 per cent of countries that emerge from civil war will relapse into conflict again. The Iraq War, which continued until 2011, was immediately followed by a wave of Arab Spring protests that were violently repressed by the government. By 2013, Al-Qaeda in Iraq had resurged not only with violent attacks but also attempts at social control, taxation and governance in Mosul, foreshadowing the city’s capture by its successor, the Islamic State (ISIS), in June 2014.¹⁴ Since the US-led invasion in 2003, Iraq has been embroiled in a series of conflicts that experts often describe as ‘cyclical’,¹⁵ ‘intractable’¹⁶ and ‘self-perpetuating’.¹⁷ Despite being an upper middle-income democracy, Iraq is still regularly described as a ‘failed state’,¹⁸ a ‘fragmented state’¹⁹ and even a ‘chaos state’.²⁰

¹⁰ Arabian Business (2019), ‘Baghdad is safer than Chicago, says Zain Iraq CEO Ali Al Zahid’, 19 August 2019, <https://www.arabianbusiness.com/industries/technology/425806-baghdad-is-safer-than-chicago-zain-iraq-ceo-ali-al-zahid>.

¹¹ United Nations (2013), ‘In Memoriam: Baghdad, 19 August 2003’, 19 September 2003, <https://www.un.org/en/memorial/baghdad2003.shtml>.

¹² Voice of America (2009), ‘UN Temporarily Pulls Out International Staff From Baghdad – 2003-10-30’, 27 October 2009, <https://www.voanews.com/a/a-13-a-2003-10-30-37-un-66836647/375045.html>.

¹³ Voice of America (2009), ‘UN Staff Marks Baghdad Bomb Anniversary with Security Demand – 2004-08-19’, 29 October 2009, <https://www.voanews.com/a/a-13-a-2004-08-19-9-1-67506377/283254.html>.

¹⁴ Revkin, M. R. (2021), ‘Competitive Governance and Displacement Decisions Under Rebel Rule: Evidence from the Islamic State in Iraq’, *Journal of Conflict Resolution*, 65 (1), pp. 46–80, <https://journals.sagepub.com/doi/10.1177/0022002720951864>.

¹⁵ Fathallah, H. (2020), ‘Iraq’s Governance Crisis and Food Insecurity’, Carnegie Endowment For International Peace, 4 June 2020, <https://carnegieendowment.org/sada/81976>.

¹⁶ Holden, S. E. (2015), ‘The Secular Roots of a Religious Divide in Contemporary Iraq’, *Origins*, September 2015, https://origins.osu.edu/article/secular-roots-religious-divide-contemporary-iraq?language_content_entity=en#page-content.

¹⁷ Byman, D. L. (2013), ‘The Resurgence of al Qaeda in Iraq’, Brookings Institute, 12 December 2013, <https://www.brookings.edu/testimonies/the-resurgence-of-al-qaeda-in-iraq>.

¹⁸ Arraf, J. (2022), ‘With Government Paralyzed and Militias Fighting, Iraq’s Instability Deepens’, *The New York Times*, 8 September 2022, <https://www.nytimes.com/2022/09/08/world/middleeast/iraq-failed-state-militias.html>.

¹⁹ Jalabi, R. (2022), ‘Iraq paralysed by government stand-off as Moqtada al-Sadr unleashes protest’, *Financial Times*, 29 July 2022, <https://www.ft.com/content/6ea3bb5a-e154-4cae-bae9-1b82ee561d71>.

²⁰ Mansour, R. and Salisbury, P. (2019), *Between Order and Chaos*, Research Paper, London: Royal Institute of International Affairs, <https://www.chathamhouse.org/2019/09/between-order-and-chaos>.

Iraq's conflicts are to some extent cyclical, and I am one of many who have argued that unresolved grievances from previous conflicts are among the root causes of new waves of violence and unrest.²¹ But I worry that the continuing characterization of Iraq as a country that has been trapped in an unbreakable cycle of violence for the past 20 years is empirically inaccurate, and runs the risk of becoming a self-fulfilling prophecy. Furthermore, some of this rhetoric can appear reminiscent of old orientalist tropes portraying Arab and Muslim societies as inherently violent, uncivilized and incapable of democracy.

To be clear, Iraq has experienced extremely high levels of conflict and violence since 2003 – with an estimated death toll of more than 200,000 civilians²² – but overall, the country has been on an upward trajectory of stabilization.

The international assistance community, by always preparing for the worst-case scenario, has continued to invest heavily in security at the expense of what are actually much more urgent priorities, including education, public services, healthcare and infrastructure. For example, 55 per cent of the \$454 million in foreign aid received by Iraq in 2020 was designated for military assistance.²³

Mistakes in the early years of post-2003 reconstruction are insufficient to explain why Iraq has remained so unstable for so long despite high levels of foreign assistance. Another important factor is the narrative of perpetual war, which has undermined the effectiveness of international assistance by justifying the continued prioritization of military and security assistance over support for anti-corruption reforms, strengthening rule of law without compromising human rights, and improving the quality of infrastructure and essential services such as public education and healthcare.

The international assistance community, by always preparing for the worst-case scenario, has continued to invest heavily in security at the expense of what are actually much more urgent priorities, including education, public services, healthcare and infrastructure.

This link between fears of instability and the concentration of aid in military and security assistance, rather than in the necessary building blocks of sustainable peace and development, became particularly clear to me during the most recent US–Iran crisis in January 2020. At around 1:30 a.m. Erbil time, on 8 January, I heard the sound of a distant explosion followed by a flurry of WhatsApp messages from family, friends and colleagues in the US and Iraq. These messages confirmed the bad news that we had been waiting for since the assassination of Iranian major general Qassim Soleimani by an American drone strike five days earlier. Iran had followed through on its threat to retaliate with 'proportionate measures' by firing

²¹ Revkin, M. R. (2021), 'Competitive Governance and Displacement Decisions Under Rebel Rule'.

²² Conflict Casualties Monitor (undated), 'Iraq Body Count', <https://www.iraqbodycount.org>.

²³ Concern Worldwide USA (2022), 'Foreign Aid by Country: Who is Getting the Most – And How Much', 7 February 2022, <https://www.concernusa.org/story/foreign-aid-by-country>.

at least 16 ballistic missiles, in two waves, at US military bases in Anbar and Erbil.²⁴ I was already wide awake after receiving a concerning message from a friend of a friend at the State Department in Washington a few hours earlier: 'It might be a long night'. And it was.

I had been living in Erbil for the year prior to these events, working on a research partnership²⁵ between my university and the International Organization for Migration to study a community policing programme that aimed to improve trust and cooperation between Iraqi civilian and state security actors. We had just completed data collection in December and I was scheduled to fly home to the US later that week, but my flight was soon cancelled. Erbil's airport remained closed for much of the next few days over concerns about the possibility of another wave of missiles. Two of my similarly sleepless American friends came over to my apartment to wait for sunrise and news. We opened our laptops to look for updates on Twitter, but it was almost impossible to find any actual information in between hot takes by Washington-based analysts and bad jokes about #WorldWar3 – the hashtag had been trending for days. It almost felt like the world was watching Iraq's downward spiral, yet again, like some kind of spectator sport in which Iraq is always expected to lose badly.

Crisis mentality

Although particularly prevalent in emergencies, the crisis mentality permeates the international aid community's operations in Iraq on a day-to-day basis. After years of navigating Iraq alone on foot and in taxis as a roving PhD student able to work in Arabic, I took a leave of absence from academia and returned to Baghdad in 2021 to work full-time as an adviser to the UN on issues related to the reintegration of Iraqis with perceived or actual ties to ISIS. Early on, I made the mistake of scheduling a meeting at a popular coworking space and café in Baghdad that I incorrectly believed was solidly within the UN's operational zone, sometimes referred to as the 'Orange Zone', only to find that I would need to be accompanied by two armoured vehicles. Too late to change plans, I was mortified by what felt like unnecessary security measures that were not only expensive, but also alienating to the café's customers and pedestrians outside. I assured the drivers and armed security officers that I felt perfectly safe and asked if they could go back to the UN compound for a break or get lunch until my meeting was over, but they explained that they were required to stay with me the entire time.

The UN's many rules made me appreciate how much easier it had been in my previous role as a student to learn about Iraq from Iraqis themselves. Knowledge of the local context is essential for the design and implementation of assistance programmes, but wartime-like security protocols make it very difficult for international staff of the UN and embassies of the US and other important

²⁴ Lopez, C. T. (2020), 'Chairman: Defensive Measures Prevented Casualties in Iranian Attack', U.S. Department of Defense, 8 January 2020, <https://www.defense.gov/News/Feature-Stories/Story/Article/2052919/chairman-defensive-measures-prevented-casualties-in-iranian-attack>.

²⁵ Revkin, M. R. and Aymerich, O. (2020), *Perceptions of Police, Security and Governance in Iraq*, IOM: UN Migration, <https://reliefweb.int/report/iraq/perceptions-police-security-and-governance-iraq>.

donor countries to acquire the necessary expertise. Iraqi nationals play a crucial role in the informal education of international staff, but they are primarily hired for administrative and logistical roles where their skills are underutilized. Iraqi nationals are under-represented or altogether absent from the higher ranks of international organizations, and they are not sufficiently consulted in the design and implementation of programmes that are too often based on generic international templates. There are many Iraqis who meet all of the academic, professional and language requirements for positions within international organizations but are nonetheless ineligible to apply because positions are often designated for expatriate workers. Donors' due diligence and vetting requirements, designed to prevent foreign aid from inadvertently benefiting terrorist organizations or other sanctioned entities by imposing strict background checks,²⁶ are another barrier to hiring local staff and partnering with local non-governmental organizations.

There are positive indications that the UN and other international aid actors are trying to update their operating procedures to reflect the significant improvements in security that Iraq has seen in recent years. Erbil's status as a 'hardship' duty station was recently downgraded, meaning cuts in hazard pay for international employees but also fewer restrictions on movement. Although Baghdad is unlikely to see a similar hardship downgrade in the near future, the International Zone was partially reopened to public traffic in 2019 for the first time in 16 years in a welcome step towards de-securitization.²⁷

Analysts have been repeating slightly different versions of the same dire predictions since 2003 including the collapse of the political system,²⁸ relapse into civil war,²⁹ and the resurgence of Al-Qaeda³⁰ and then ISIS.³¹ Some of these predictions have materialized, but others turned out to be overly pessimistic. For example, the political deadlock following Iraq's most recent elections in 2021 was widely expected to lead to major street violence, but ultimately the crisis was defused, and a new government was formed after more than a year of negotiations. It was a close call and might have ended in violence had Grand Ayatollah Ali Al-Sistani not intervened³² to urge protesters and security forces to remain peaceful. The fact that it did not end violently is an important reminder that not every political crisis is the beginning of Iraq's next civil war.

²⁶ United States Agency for International Development (2015), 'Partner Vetting in USAID Assistance', 26 June 2015, <https://www.govinfo.gov/content/pkg/FR-2015-06-26/pdf/2015-15017.pdf>.

²⁷ AP News (2019), 'Baghdad's Green Zone reopens to the public after 16 years', 4 June 2019, <https://apnews.com/article/721ba7f8a63c488986168a0f44b9e0e0>.

²⁸ Mohammed, D. S. (2022), 'The political situation in Iraq is on the verge of collapse: Barbra Leaf', *Kurdistan 24*, 5 September 2022, <https://www.kurdistan24.net/en/story/29412-%E2%80%98The-political-situation-in-Iraq-is-on-the-verge-of-collapse%E2%80%99--Barbara-Leaf>.

²⁹ Slim, R. (2022), 'Is Iraq on the brink of a new civil war?', *Middle East Institute*, 8 September 2022, <https://www.mei.edu/publications/iraq-brink-new-civil-war>.

³⁰ McCants, W. and Watts, C. (2016), 'Experts weigh in (part 2): What is the future of al-Qaida and the Islamic State?', *Brookings Institute*, 28 January 2016, <https://www.brookings.edu/blog/markaz/2016/01/28/experts-weigh-in-part-2-what-is-the-future-of-al-qaida-and-the-islamic-state>.

³¹ Lister, C. (2020), 'ISIS's dramatic escalation in Syria and Iraq', *Middle East Institute*, 4 May 2020, <https://www.mei.edu/blog/isiss-dramatic-escalation-syria-and-iraq>.

³² Davison, J., Hafezi, P. and Bassam, L. (2022), 'How a 92-year-old cleric silently halted Iraq's slide back into war', *Reuters*, 3 September 2022, <https://www.reuters.com/world/middle-east/how-92-year-old-cleric-silently-halted-iraqs-slide-back-into-war-2022-09-03>.

When I was in Washington during a different political crisis – the 6 January attack on the US Capitol – Iraqi friends texted to ask if I was okay because it looked like the beginning of a coup. The US tends to view its own crises as exceptional while treating instability in Iraq as normal, inevitable and cyclical. But one could also describe the US's history of conflict and political violence as cyclical. After the Civil War, the remnants of the Confederacy refused to accept defeat and evolved into the Ku Klux Klan and other white supremacist groups that have continued to wage a violent insurgency against black Americans and other minorities ever since.

What if, instead of assuming the inevitability of Iraq's next crisis, the international aid community could begin to view Iraq more optimistically as a country that is capable of stability? This might enable a much-needed reprioritization of longer-term development assistance over short-term security concerns.

‘Careful in, careful out’

Hard lessons from America’s war in Iraq

Ryan Crocker

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For many in the West, especially the US, Iraq didn’t really exist before 2003. Perhaps a dim recollection of armed conflict with Iran many years before, Desert Storm, and some issue with chemical weapons. But Iraq has a past, recent and ancient. And I have a past in it.

My first visit was in July 1978, driving overland from Jordan to begin a two-year assignment at the United States Interest Section of the embassy of Belgium. Iraq had broken diplomatic relations with the US during the 1967 war with Israel and, alone among major Arab states, had not resumed them. Those two years had left me with an indelible impression of the savagery of the Saddam Hussein regime against its own people. It was, as an Iraqi writer put it, a ‘republic of fear’. It also left me with the conviction that we understood very little about Saddam’s decision-making. I left Iraq in August 1980, just a month before Saddam launched the Iran–Iraq war. I did not see it coming. None of us in the US government did.

It was almost 20 years before I was back, in 1998, as the US diplomatic representative on a special UN weapons inspection team. Much had changed since 1980, none of it for the better. Saddam had since invaded two countries, Iran and Kuwait. In 1990 he precipitated a devastating US-led military intervention to expel him from lands he had conquered in Kuwait. He had used chemical weapons against Iran and against his Kurdish population. He had murdered tens of thousands of his own people in the aftermath of the expulsion of his forces from Kuwait. Baghdad, like the rest of the country, was in a state of disrepair and dilapidation, reflecting the impact of UN sanctions and the government’s economic mismanagement.

There was one constant: fear. This time, fear had a name: Abid Hamid Mahmud, Saddam’s personal secretary and the former head of the Special Security Organization, the most ruthless of the many elements Saddam used to control and terrorize his population. Mahmud sought me out twice to say the US and Iraq should put their differences aside to focus on common enemies like Iran, and to show me the house of a Saddam relative who had defected and then

returned, only to be torn apart by a mob sent by Mahmud. Looking at the ashen faces of my military escorts, hardened veterans of the wars with Iran and Kuwait, I knew I was in the presence of evil.

Early occupation

Three years later, just before 9/11, I began the toughest job of my career: an assignment to Washington as deputy assistant secretary for Near East affairs, with specific responsibility for Iraq. The bureaucratic wars within the US government were intense. The debate after 9/11, during the build-up to the 2003 invasion, was not whether the US policy on Iraq should be regime change; President Bill Clinton had established US policy when he signed the Iraq Liberation Act in 1998. Instead, whether to do so via a massive US military attack was the question up for discussion. Some of us saw that as a hugely risky commitment whose consequences could not be predicted, let alone shaped. Some proponents saw this as less a policy debate but more a matter of moral righteousness. Opposition was apostasy. The levels above me at the State Department never took a clear position, for or against. That made life at the working level uniquely awful.

No one doubted that we could overthrow Saddam by military force very quickly. But then what? For the so-called neoconservatives, there was no issue. Once the tyrant's boot had been removed from the neck of the Iraqi people, they would naturally tend towards truth, light and democracy – led by émigré politicians like Ahmad Chalabi. I did not know what post-invasion Iraq would look like, but I knew it wouldn't be that. We had no coherent plan for what would happen after hostilities ceased. I also knew that once the war was on, I would be the one headed to the front, not the true believers in Washington who showed no interest in going somewhere dirty, difficult and dangerous. I had the language, area knowledge and direct experience in Iraq. It would be me.

There were no political parties, organizations or societies outside the Ba'ath Party structures. Even tribal hierarchies had been dismantled. When the Ba'ath Party came down, everything came down.

When those orders came in April 2003, it was almost a relief – at least I was out of Washington. I joined the Coalition Provisional Authority (CPA) as the head of governance. Translated, that meant an effort to facilitate some form of Iraqi governing structure. In July that structure literally took the stage in Baghdad, in the form of a 25-member Iraqi Governing Council. That moment was the culmination of weeks of effort on my part to identify and assess individual abilities, power relationships, regional attitudes and political orientation. One example: thirteen of the 25 members were Shia. They reflected a wide spectrum of beliefs, from Islamist to secular to atheist (the head of the Iraq Communist Party). Why 13? Iraq had a Shia majority. In choosing the political, ethnic and sectarian make-up of the governing council, I was guided in part by the British experience after the

First World War. Attempting to manage their Iraq mandate on the cheap, the British had preserved the Ottoman structures of civilian and military authority. These, of course, were dominated by Sunnis. The Grand Ayatollah of the time issued an anti-British fatwa, sparking a Shia revolt that took the British a decade to put down.

It was not an element of history I wished to repeat. It was clear from the outset that for Iraq's three principal communities, Arab Shia, Arab Sunnis and Kurds, it would not be possible to devise structures all three would support. We could count on the Kurds – they didn't have a choice. And if it came to violent opposition, a Shia rebellion would be worse than one from the Sunnis. In Lebanon, I had experienced at first hand the damage Iranian-backed Hezbollah could do. This would be several orders of magnitude greater. Did I think that distributing political power along ethnic and sectarian lines was a good idea? I had spent six years in Lebanon, three of them as US ambassador. I knew it wasn't. But there wasn't another choice. Saddam had completely deconstructed Iraqi society. There were no political parties, organizations or societies outside the Ba'ath Party structures. Even tribal hierarchies had been dismantled. When the Ba'ath Party came down, everything came down. It was a situation that demonstrates an axiom of Middle East diplomacy: it is rarely a choice between good options and bad; it is between bad options and worse. The one hope I had was that, unlike Lebanon, Iraq had no history of sectarian strife. But as they say, hope makes poor policy.

One element of the governing council's formation gave me real hope. On stage that day in July, there was only one person who was not Iraqi. It wasn't me, and it wasn't Paul Bremer, the head of the CPA. It was Sergio de Mello, the special representative of UN Secretary-General Kofi Annan. Sergio and I had been friends and colleagues since the early 1980s in Lebanon, where he was the political adviser to the United Nations Interim Force in Lebanon (UNIFIL) and I was political counsellor at the US embassy in Beirut. His presence gave the governing council international legitimacy, a huge step in the process of creating a newly independent Iraq. A month later he was dead, killed in the bombing of the UN headquarters in Baghdad along with 21 others. With him died an activist UN role in Iraq. It was the first major operation by Al-Qaeda in Iraq.

I stepped away from Iraq and the Middle East for several years, serving as ambassador to Pakistan from 2004 to 2007. There was nothing easy about Pakistan, but it was a welcome change. Still, Iraq has a way of pulling those it has touched back into its orbit. In the autumn of 2006, President George W. Bush asked me to return to Iraq as ambassador. It was the worst of times. Sunni–Shia tensions had exploded into a sectarian civil war. The president had doubled down on his Iraq gamble, ordering a surge of US forces and a change of military and civilian commanders. General David Petraeus and I were the new team.

A civil–military surge

When the announcement was made, General Petraeus was at Fort Leavenworth in the US and I was in Islamabad, Pakistan. We connected by secure phone and quickly concluded that tight coordination between us was critical. There was no guarantee of success if we worked closely together; if we did not, there

was a certainty of failure. To that end, we formed a Joint Strategy Assessment Team (JSAT), co-chaired by a military officer and a civilian, Colonel (later Lieutenant General) H. R. McMaster and David Pearce (later Ambassador) respectively. Military and civilian personnel were paired throughout the JSAT chain of command. They were tasked with preparing an assessment of our predecessors' campaign plan and recommendations for our own. But the structure was its own message: every aspect of our mission would be joint. The team was up and running before either of us arrived in Baghdad. Civilian–military cooperation was critical to our efforts in Iraq and remains so today in a world often characterized by complex, messy political–military conflicts. Unfortunately, there is still no field manual on the institutionalization of civilian–military cooperation, and coordination remains personality-dependent.

The tumult of my two years as ambassador to Iraq would take volumes to describe. I certainly had ample opportunity during that time to think back about the concerns I had raised prior to the policy decision to invade Iraq in 2003. That was precisely the point: at the time, I had had no idea what would follow our overthrow of the Saddam regime, and that had scared me. It should have scared all of us. In no way could I claim to have foreseen how events would subsequently unfold, nor had I identified other options for ending Saddam's reign of terror in Iraq and in the region. I had only known that we would be setting in motion forces that we could neither identify nor shape. Consequences not of the third or fourth order, but of the 30th and 40th.

Distilled to its simplest form, the first big lesson of the US experience in Iraq is therefore to be careful what you get into. It was not so much that we did not have adequate plans for the way forward after hostilities had ceased (we didn't), but that the weight of the unknown was so great that such plans were impossible.

The surge, under the inspired leadership of General Petraeus and General Raymond Odierno, did bring security to much of the population, starting in the second half of 2007. As violence lessened, political leaders had more space to manoeuvre. Prime Minister Nouri al-Maliki, for example, was able to provide a \$250 million supplemental budget to the Sunni province of Anbar, a hotbed of Al-Qaeda violence. This concrete support from a Shia-led government was a significant factor in turning the population against Al-Qaeda. And as Iraq's Shia saw their erstwhile Sunni enemies now fighting a common foe, they no longer felt dependent on Shia militia to protect them. In turn, this produced a political climate in which Maliki in April 2008 could launch large-scale military operations against militias supported by Iran – from Baghdad south to Basra – and prevail. After so much viciousness, a virtuous cycle was in motion.

The Awakening, or *Sahwa*, was brilliantly conceived and executed. The one significant error, perhaps, was that it was our conception and execution, especially on the critical issue of salaries. We paid them. It should have been Maliki from the start. He never overcame his suspicion of something that had been created outside his control. But if we had gone to Maliki at the beginning, it would certainly have delayed the initiative and might have resulted in conditions and stipulations that could have caused the entire project to fail. The main point here, I think, is that 'if only' thinking doesn't really work in the Iraqi context – if only we had done this and not that, all would have been well. The incredible complexities

of post-invasion Iraq meant that there were no clear good choices and that the law of unintended consequences was in full force. And yet, it almost worked. My last visit outside Baghdad was in Ramadi in February 2009. The atmosphere was so calm that Ahmad Abu Risha, the leader of the *Sahwa* after the assassination of his brother, and I could take a stroll through the bustling market, sipping tea and chatting with shopkeepers.

It was not so much that we did not have adequate plans for the way forward after hostilities had ceased (we didn't), but that the weight of the unknown was so great that such plans were impossible.

This brings me to the second great lesson of Iraq, as simple as the first: be careful what you get out of. The consequences of disengagement can be even greater than those of engagement, especially if the means is military force. Once you're in, you're in. You cannot 'uninvade' or rewind the film. Lasting political change takes time and patience; but strategic patience is something America is not particularly good at. Iraq wasn't the first place where our strategic patience was tested and found to fail, nor was it the last. Perhaps by design, we failed to get an achievable agreement on the long-term presence of US forces in Iraq, and all US forces were withdrawn by the end of 2011. You don't end a war by pulling your forces off the battlefield. You simply cede the space to your enemies, in this case, Islamic State in the west and Iran in the east.

It's simple: careful in, careful out. In Iraq we were neither.

Suppressed voices

20 years of civil society in Iraq

Hayder Al Shakeri

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Before 2003: ‘Walking along the wall’

In the 1990s, my family, like most people living in Iraq, were afraid of the Ba’ath regime and wanted to make themselves invisible. They would ‘walk along the wall’ – an Iraqi expression³³ similar in meaning to keeping one’s head below the parapet – as much as possible and not engage in politics or civil society activities. My family’s fears were well placed, as our distant relatives who had been vocal in opposing Saddam Hussein’s dictatorship had been arrested, forced to flee Iraq or killed.

While I was sheltered from the details of the horrors inflicted upon my family as a child, at the beginning of every school day, my peers and I were required to chant, ‘With our soul and our blood, we will sacrifice ourselves for Saddam.’ I would often recite this pledge to my family when I returned home; it was my earnest attempt to fit in. I was unsure what I was supposed to do and what my parents believed. They seemed uneasy but did not explain why, as they were afraid that at school I might repeat what they said, putting us in danger. And so we went on walking along the wall.

Throughout the sanctions period, which lasted my entire childhood, relatives would sometimes visit from abroad and would bring treats that had been denied to us – bananas or chocolate bars that my grandma would ration and split between me and my three brothers. Our visitors would also speak in hushed tones about the possibility of war and weapons of mass destruction. I was not usually allowed to listen; and if I did, then I was told not to repeat what I had heard. This was the norm for most people living in Iraq before 2003. We survived by staying silent.

After 2003: The false hope of freedom

After 2003, we hoped that the space to speak up would expand. Instead, new walls were built across Baghdad, preventing our voices from being heard by various politicians hiding in the fortified Green Zone.

³³ Al-Baroodi, A. (2020), ‘Walk by the Wall: A resident of Mosul recounts life under Saddam, the Americans, and ISIS’, *Newsline*, 21 October 2020, <https://newlinesmag.com/photo-essays/walk-by-the-wall/#:~:text=There's%20an%20Iraqi%20saying%20that,Keep%20out%20of%20trouble.>

By 2006, as I entered high school, the sectarian civil war had broken out. I had to change schools several times to avoid being attacked or caught in crossfire on my way to and from school. Against this backdrop, my family thought the youth group activities I had begun to participate in were reckless. While they appreciated my intense desire to contribute to the future of our country, my parents feared for my life. I slowly reduced my involvement in these activities, only occasionally attending meetings and participating in youth activities in Karada, one of Baghdad's civil society hubs.

At the time, the space to actively engage in civil society was limited. The concept of civil society was not fully understood or supported. Much of the international funding allocated to civil society initiatives was driven by donor priorities and did not necessarily reflect what Iraqis needed or wanted. In addition, many of the organizations that accepted international support had ties to the elite or the invasion, making participation in those organizations politically fraught. It could also be dangerous to be seen to criticize the new political elite and emerging armed groups.

Many of the organizations that accepted international support had ties to the elite or the invasion, making participation in those organizations politically fraught.

After finishing high school, I entered medical school. However, I felt increasingly dissatisfied with my choice, as I began to experience at first hand the issues that still plague the Iraqi higher education system today. The university was mismanaged, severely under-resourced and beset by concerns about corruption; many Iraqis perceived it as being under the control of a political party that frequently hired its supporters as staff and increasingly restricted student activities.

Much to my parents' disapproval, I applied for and won a scholarship on the Tomorrow's Leaders Programme. The scholarship took me to the American University of Beirut, where I would have the privilege of studying a module on civic engagement. My parents felt I was taking a huge risk when I decided to leave my secure future as a medical doctor to pursue a career in something that they knew nothing about. However, later, when I returned to Baghdad and became active in the protest movement, I learnt that formal civil society work has its limitations. It is powerless when faced with violence, lack of resources and constant attacks on its most prominent figures.

Post-2011: Developing a united Iraqi voice

In 2011, the Arab Spring started. With that, I began to realize that the problems we faced in Iraq were more widespread than I had thought. I started following events in the region and was quickly involved in the protests in Iraq myself. Protests

that were ignited by the lack of services, and by politically sanctioned corruption and elite capture of the state.

On 25 February 2011, known as the ‘day of rage’, there were protests all over Iraq. These protests were violently suppressed, and tens of protesters were killed. The government tried to portray protesters as either Ba’athists, Al-Qaeda members or traitors. In the face of these accusations, we appropriated a modified version of the Ba’athist mantra that we had been forced to recite in school, chanting at the top of our voices, ‘With our soul and blood, we will sacrifice ourselves for Iraq.’

Even when the 2011 protests ended, discontent with the actions of the political elite continued to boil over in certain cities across Iraq. This contributed to the emergence of Islamic State (ISIS). By the summer of 2015, ISIS controlled one-third of Iraq, pushing us on to the streets once again. Our grievances now were against the *muhhasasa*, an ethno-sectarian power-sharing system, and the corruption that it had enabled. Through these protests, we, as young Iraqis, advocated for our right to engage in decision-making, something that had been denied to us by an older generation widely seen as self-serving politicians. Civil society organizations were key in initiating and leading these protests.

In 2015 we still believed in democracy and the possibility of reform. The prime minister at the time, Haider al-Abadi, had a unique opportunity to instigate reforms with the support of the public and the powerful Iraqi Marjiya’a, Iraq’s highest Shiite religious authority. However, he came up with a weak reform package and the status quo continued. Abadi claimed that he was preoccupied with the fight against ISIS, although he stated later that ‘corruption is more dangerous than terrorism’.³⁴

The 2015 protests were eventually hijacked by the Sadrists. I remember vividly how many of the protesters were now chanting for Muqtada al-Sadr instead of Iraq. This is when I, among many others, decided that I could not continue participating in these protests. Such incidents led us to lose some of the faith we had in civil society and the political leadership of the protest movement, especially as, following the protests, the Iraqi Communist Party (ICP) and some prominent activists allied with the Sadrists in the elections.

2019: The October Protest Movement (*Tishreen* Revolution)

In 2019, a fresh wave of protests reached new heights. This time the protests were sparked by disillusioned youth, not the civil society leaders who had let demonstrators down in 2015. While we continued to call for our basic rights, we had developed an acute awareness of the extent to which the political elite had captured the state and was widely seen as having nearly gutted it of public resources. This became all the clearer as members of the elites came together to violently suppress the protests, murdering more than 600 protesters and injuring tens of thousands.

³⁴ Middle East Monitor (2018), ‘Iraq PM says corruption more dangerous than terrorism’, 15 March 2018, <https://www.middleeastmonitor.com/20180315-iraq-pm-says-corruption-more-dangerous-than-terrorism>.

In response, our demands escalated. We began calling for the end of the system of *muhasasa*, and we rejected the political elite that had been involved in its creation and maintenance. We summarized our demands in one sentence: ‘We want a country.’ A country which we felt belonged to the political elite, and which the elite felt we wanted to take from them. Facing an existential threat, some of them tried to demonize us, arguing that protesters were foreign agents, Ba’athists or ISIS members. Now, when I reflect back on those days, my biggest concern at the time was not the snipers or the riot police, but mostly where to tell my mother I was going before leaving the house and what to do if she called me when I was at a protest.

During the 2019 protests, the spirit of our country was in Tahrir Square in central Baghdad under the monument of freedom. We experienced everything there, from unbound happiness to despair, and from hope to frustration. We hoped, laughed, loved, cried and feared for our lives. I remember walking down Rasheed Street near Tahrir Square and seeing two young women painting a mural with the words:

Do not reconcile
even if they give you gold
I wonder
if I were to gouge out your eyes
and replace them with two gems
would you see?
These things are priceless.

As I was talking to the women who were painting this mural, one of them told me that this poem³⁵ represented all the friends and years of her life that she had lost to the greed of corrupt politicians. And that, even if they now rewarded her with all the riches in the world, she would not forgive them. She, too, had to sneak out of her house and pretend she was somewhere else because her family were scared for her safety.

These protests were a major life event for most of us. They briefly shook the country and forced the government to resign. *Tishreen* planted the seeds for change through raising young people’s political consciousness and allowing new political actors to emerge.

Is there more space?

Over the past two decades, Iraqis have longed for freedom and a more prosperous future. However, their attempts to achieve this, whether through civil society activism or mass mobilization, have often been violently suppressed.

Before 2003, we hoped that walking along the wall would keep us safe. After 2003, new walls were erected all over Baghdad literally separating ordinary people from the political elite, many of whom lived lives of comfort and luxury inside the Green Zone while those outside suffered from the impact of systematic corruption

³⁵ Dunqul. A. (@polarabicpoetry) via Tumblr (2014), ‘Do not reconcile’, 16 July 2014, <https://polarabicpoetry.tumblr.com/post/91953926521/%D9%84%D8%A7-%D8%AA%D8%B5%D8%A7%D9%84%D8%AD-do-not-reconcile-by-amal-dunqul>.

and everyday violence. In 2019, *Tishreen* tore down those walls, removing the veneer of legitimacy that had safeguarded the *muhasasa* system and the place of the elite within it.

Since then, young people have pushed to make space for themselves in decision-making by creating new political parties and engaging in alternative forms of activism. They have advocated for change on issues as wide-ranging as climate change, gender equality and human rights. For substantive change to take place, such grassroots initiatives must be nourished. For it is ultimately Iraq's youth, not those politicians who have taken every opportunity to empower themselves and their parties for the past 20 years, who hold the key to the country's future.

How misinformation defeated journalism in Iraq

Thanassis Cambanis

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When I crossed the Iraqi border for the first time in March 2003, I was like many of my media colleagues reporting from the front lines of the war: inexperienced but eager, ignorant but curious. I scrambled around trying to educate myself and the readers of the *Boston Globe* about a country most of us hadn't thought much about until President George W. Bush decided to invade. Most vivid in my memories of that period is the intense sense of transformation and dislocation I witnessed among Iraqis – and the unforgivable disconnect of American officials from the reality of Iraq.

The US media had done a poor job challenging the Bush administration's lies and manipulations during the march to war. In Iraq, many of us were personally determined to make amends through honest, critical reporting.

Once the US embarked on a war of choice for which it had blithely refused to prepare, the media lacked the necessary tools to explain Iraq to an ignorant American public. Journalism could not blunt the overwhelming force of official disinformation.

I drove into Iraq with a photographer and a translator. We weren't embedded with the US military; we camped on roadsides in Umm Qasr and Basra until the day Saddam Hussein fled, and then we sped to Baghdad.

I was woefully uninformed about Iraq and the wider Middle East. I wince today when I re-read my private notes from 2003, full of incorrectly rendered place names, gaping blind spots about recent Iraqi history, and a reflex to explain people's choices by their sectarian, religious or ethnic affiliations. But unlike many of the US officials I encountered over the course of the next three years of reporting, I was open-minded and interested in piecing together a credible account of Iraq's transformations.

Unfortunately, the work of journalists did almost nothing to sway the overall narrative in the US. The apparent mendacity, shamelessness and ignorance of the official narrative meant that Americans heard a fantastical account of US heroism, government largesse and technical prowess – a story in which Americans took credit for any success in Iraq and blamed Iraqis for any failings.

Disconnect and lies

What I saw in Iraq in the spring of 2003 was chaotic but not random. All around the country, Iraqis were counting and mourning their dead. With Saddam gone, some sought to finally learn what had become of their disappeared. Others hunted for advantage in the upheaval: they courted contracts with the Americans, looted public buildings, joined new militias. The contours of Iraq's new order were clear to anyone who was looking, taking shape – often with sectarian inflection – under the leadership of clerics, militiamen, tribal sheikhs, returning well-connected exiles, and the ultrawealthy.

In my early days reporting on Iraq, I learned about the country from English-speaking members of the Saddam-era elite, and from Americans. These sources frequently imparted a rigidly sectarian, and misleading, interpretation of events. Much of the pre-2003 Iraqi elite had their own sectarian biases, often believing themselves to be above the communal fray but facing a new generation of Iraqis who saw themselves above all as Kurdish, Sunni or Shia. The real power lay in the hands of the Americans, who – guided by the flawed views of exiled elites – approached Iraqis strictly as members of religious or sectarian identity groups. As a result, the Americans created a sectarian narrative and then entrenched a sectarian political system for Iraq.

US officials wove a narrative disconnected from the ambiguous realities my colleagues and I were chronicling in detail.

In what is now known as Sadr City – at the time, Saddam City – I visited a man named Adnan Hamid. Although grieving two children who were killed during the invasion, he welcomed the Americans. In a nearby *husainiya* – a Shia place of worship – I sat with a Sadrist cleric who within days of Saddam's fall was distributing aid, registering supporters, and planning for the first Arbayeen pilgrimage to Karbala since Saddam had banned this Shia practice in 1977.

But by August 2003, I was meeting with young men who were joining armed resistance against the Americans. They described themselves variously as Ba'athists, Islamists or nationalists. Some were willing to make common cause with anyone who wanted the Americans gone. Others had a sectarian vision.

The real shock came on those afternoons when I wanted a break from the heat and would attend the daily press briefing in the Green Zone. In the air-conditioned auditorium of the Baghdad Convention Centre – where parliament meets today –

US officials wove a narrative disconnected from the ambiguous realities my colleagues and I were chronicling in detail.

Outside, in Baghdad, a man told me how his unarmed brother had been shot at point blank in his home by US soldiers, who hid his body behind a refrigerator and hoped they wouldn't get caught.

Inside the convention centre, the top military spokesman, Brigadier General Mark Kimmitt, and his civilian counterpart from the occupation authority, Dan Senior, touted what they described as the spread of prosperity and private enterprise.³⁶

Outside, in Balad and Samarra, I heard the rage of men who had been dismissed from the Iraqi military and now were expected to submit to US officers and a coterie of unknown Iraqi exiles. One Samarra man told me about the US soldiers who he said had arbitrarily detained him and subjected him to a mock execution, firing a pistol beside his head, before letting him go.

Inside the briefing room, Kimmitt and Senior spoke in chipper tones about how 'the coalition' was inexorably securing the country from 'anti-Iraqi forces'.

Outside, suicide bombers blew up recruits who lined up to join the reconstituted police and national guard. At one such scene, a frustrated vendor salvaged a murdered recruit's finger from his bowl of falafel mix and wondered why the Americans couldn't provide security.

Inside, Kimmitt and Senior stared over our heads, at the cameras behind us, and told their real audience – the American viewing public – that Iraq was on the road to autonomy. The Americans refused to use the word 'occupation', and followed through on their determination to turn over formal authority in Iraq to an Iraqi government by the summer of 2004, consequences be damned.

Did our stories matter?

As a journalist, I believed that the individual work of a reporter could shift the narrative, and I believed that facts and truth mattered. The collective labour of the press corps in Iraq in 2003 and 2004 is not beyond reproach – not enough of us knew Arabic, and some of our colleagues engaged in embarrassing jingoism. For the most part, however, our efforts were detailed and honourable, and provide an enduring record of what happened in Iraq during those first years after the US invasion. Yet independent reporting did not suffice to shift the narrative in the US, where official spin inalterably shaped public opinion, at times in direct contravention of facts.

During the sweltering summer of 2003, which Iraqis endured with barely any electricity to power air-conditioners or even lights, Donald Rumsfeld visited Baghdad: 'For a city that's not supposed to have power, there's lights all over

³⁶ The Coalition Provisional Authority (2004), 'Coalition Provisional Authority Briefing with Daniel Senior, Senior Advisor, Coalition Provisional Authority; Brigadier General Mark Kimmitt, Deputy Director, Coalition Operations; and Hamid Al-Kifa'I, Spokesman, Governing Council', 12 January 2004, https://govinfo.library.unt.edu/cpa-iraq/transcripts/Jan12_KimmittSenior.htm.

the place. It's like Chicago,' the US defence secretary said.³⁷ Rumsfeld's lie travelled much further than our dispatches that were intended to fact-check the defence secretary.

An Iraqi journalist asked General Kimmitt in February 2004 about the traumatic impact on Iraqi children of the incessant jets and helicopters flying overhead. 'What we would tell the children of Iraq is that the noise they hear is the sound of freedom,' Kimmitt responded without any evident irony.³⁸

The Americans mishandled their occupation as badly on substance as on rhetoric. Security collapsed, insurgencies flared, new and more brazen forms of corruption supplanted the old ways, and Al-Qaeda – hitherto an Iraqi phenomenon only in the fictions of the Bush administration's operation to find questionable intelligence fitting its narrative – flourished in Anbar, Ninewa and other Iraqi provinces.

In many cases, those prominent in the initial Iraq debacle prospered in its aftermath. Kimmitt, for instance, was promoted in the army and then put in charge of political-military affairs at the State Department. In retirement he has worked as a defence consultant, including advising companies that want to work in Iraq.

It's clear today that our earnest print dispatches were no match for the US government's spin machine. My colleagues and I were part of what Karl Rove reportedly dismissed as the 'reality-based community'.³⁹ The Bush administration was busy promoting its own realities, which carried the day, at least with the US public.

Bush won the popular vote for the first time in 2004, perhaps because his administration convinced a majority of Americans of the lie⁴⁰ that Saddam Hussein was personally involved in the 9/11 attacks. Even long after the historical record has been thoroughly corrected, a 2015 Fairleigh Dickinson University poll⁴¹ found that 42 per cent of Americans still thought, erroneously, that US troops had discovered weapons of mass destruction in Iraq.

Iraqi reporters did a heroic and thorough job chronicling the country's politics and ongoing conflict, but they worked with little institutional support for critical journalism. And Iraq's new leaders, following in the footsteps of the Americans, peddled narratives at times unmoored from reality.

³⁷ McCarthy, R. (2003), 'Rumsfeld, Iraq Not a Lot Like Chicago', Arab News, 18 September 2003, <https://www.arabnews.com/node/237515>.

³⁸ The Coalition Provisional Authority (2004), 'Coalition Provisional Authority Briefing with Daniel Senor, CPA Senior Advisor; Brigadier General Mark Kimmit, Deputy Director for Coalition Operations', 25 February 2004, https://govinfo.library.unt.edu/cpa-iraq/transcripts/20040225_Feb25_KimmittSenor.html.

³⁹ Suskind, R. (2004), 'Faith, Certainty and the Presidency of George W. Bush', *The New York Times*, 17 October 2004, <https://www.nytimes.com/2004/10/17/magazine/faith-certainty-and-the-presidency-of-george-w-bush.html>.

⁴⁰ The Washington Post (2003), 'Washington Post Poll: Saddam Hussein and the Sept. 11 Attacks', 3 September 2003, <https://www.washingtonpost.com/wp-srv/politics/polls/vault/stories/data082303.htm>.

⁴¹ Fairleigh Dickinson University (2015), 'Ignorance, Partisanship Drive False Beliefs about Obama, Iraq', 7 January 2015, <http://publicmind.fdu.edu/2015/false>.

Passing flares of attention

International media attention steadily diminished after the Americans captured Saddam and declared victory. Al-Qaeda attacks and the sectarian civil war of 2006 made it increasingly difficult to report from Iraq. By the time President Barack Obama withdrew the remaining US troops at the end of 2011, few international correspondents were based full-time in Iraq. Many news organizations went so far as to close their bureaus and lay off their Iraqi staff. The pattern repeated itself with the rise of ISIS – there was another spike of interest and a huge mobilization of journalists that subsided shortly after the liberation of Mosul.

Although I long ago lost my idealistic expectation that journalism could change the narrative and check government abuses of power, I still find that journalists provide some of the most reliable and compelling accounts of Iraq's true state of affairs.

Today, the international press corps that covers Iraq includes a far higher proportion of Arabic speakers, and benefits from local knowledge and context gleaned from a generation of intensive news coverage of the Middle East. Most foreign correspondents know far more about Iraq than I did when I filed my first stories from Umm Qasr in March 2003. Iraqi journalists report from around the country, publishing in Arabic and Kurdish, in the face of frequent threats and violence that have made Iraq one of the consistently most dangerous places in the world to work as a journalist.

I am heartened that today a reader or researcher can find credible reporting from Iraq, although in the absence of a major international crisis, funding and resources for Iraq reporting remain insufficient.

And sadly, I no longer expect documentaries and investigative reports to overcome the behemoth of the official narrative. Pernicious sectarian assumptions also persist despite copious journalism and research proving their inadequacies. Public attention only periodically turns to Iraq. For me, one discouraging lesson of the last 20 years is that hard-earned truth makes only a small dent in official misinformation.

Eden reborn

Revitalizing Iraq's marshes

Azzam Alwash

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In the 1990s, while Iraq was subjected to stringent sanctions and being investigated for the development and possession of weapons of mass destruction, one of Saddam Hussein's most significant crimes against humanity was overlooked. Right under the noses of coalition planes enforcing a no-fly zone in the name of protecting the inhabitants of southern Iraq, Saddam was draining a site of great global, historical and ecological significance – the Iraqi marshes.

Saddam Hussein's targeting of the marshes was a cruel punishment for the participation of the Marsh Arabs in the 1991 uprising against his government. When he could not flush out the burgeoning rebellion, which took cover within the marshes, he retaliated by damming the water sources that fed these natural wetlands. At a time when Iraq could not sell its oil and Iraqis were going hungry, the country's resources were instead being used to build hundreds of kilometres of embankments and dykes, as well as canals, to divert the water of the Tigris and Euphrates rivers and kill off the marshes.

This ecosystem was a magnificent symphony of biodiversity in Iraq that relied on the annual floods. In the spring, these floods would bring the sprouting of reeds and the spawning of fish – providing sustenance for birds migrating northward. The floods would also replenish farmlands by washing away the salt that accumulated in irrigated fields, due to evaporation under the intense sun, while also depositing a new layer of silt and clay. The Sumerians respected this annual fertilization process, celebrating the goddess of fertility, Ishtar, during the flood season. These symbiotic patterns sustained some of the earliest human societies, and allowed for the development of cities, the invention of writing and the wheel. Moreover, all Abrahamic religions are rooted in this area, as Abraham was born in Ur, on the fringes of the marshes.

As those of us in the diaspora were assiduously collecting satellite imagery to use as evidence of this crime against our treasured heritage, the US and UN paid little attention. The international community took no interest in recognizing the ecocide for what it was – a crime against humanity. To our dismay, sanctions appeared to be the only tool in the UN's arsenal. However, the 9/11 attacks undeniably changed how the US would deal with the Middle East, and all eyes were on Iraq.

When we returned to Iraq after 2003, those of us who had monitored this destruction believed there was time to right the wrongs done to the marshes, and to bring to the world's attention the importance of Iraq's environmental decay.

But we struggled to find anyone willing to listen – be that Iraq’s new so-called democratic leaders or the internationals backing them. This essay is my reflection on a two-decade struggle to try and raise awareness around Iraq’s climate issues, and an examination of what needs to be done today to correct course.

Nature heals

In early 2002, Tom Warrick, a human rights lawyer at the US State Department, suggested that I form a scientific panel to study the data that had been gathered and my proposal for restoring the flow of water to the marshes. This led to the formation of a blue-ribbon scientific panel, which in November 2002 concluded that the restoration of the Mesopotamian marshes was not only feasible but warranted. The world-renowned scientists that made up the panel took a firm stance by adopting a policy position advocating for this important work.

With this badge of approval, I travelled to Iraq in June 2003, marking my first return to the country after living in the US for 25 years. But I was not prepared for the intense feelings that I had at first sight of my country. I visited Basra, a city I had spent time in as a young boy, and where I had studied for two years at university before I left Iraq. I was deeply saddened to see the state of the city – it was dirty and devastated. The thick palm groves I had played in during my youth had become nothing but barren land with few trees still standing. The endless reed forests had been replaced by deserts dotted with salt-loving Tamarisk plants.

But after the shock wore off, it soon became clear that the situation was more optimistic than expected. What had appeared on the satellite imagery to be salt-encrusted lake bottoms, were in fact dried lakes covered with white shells. The catastrophic scenario that the scientists had warned us of – in which super saline conditions irreversibly poison the soil – had not occurred. Moreover, the Marsh Arabs had already begun rebuilding the ecosystem on their own, by breaching small dykes and disabling pumping stations. After the marshes were partially restored, the community began returning to the area to rebuild their homes.

Hope was in the air, and I gathered the courage to leave a lucrative career in California and relocate more permanently to Iraq. Armed with a mandate and funding from the Italian government, I was tasked to survey the marshes and come up with ideas that could be used to improve the life of people in the governorate of Dhi Qar. With this new source of funding, the Eden Again project – which I had previously started under the Iraq Foundation with funding from the US State Department – became part of Nature Iraq, an NGO that I founded to focus on the mission of preserving Iraq’s environment and the cultural heritage it represents.

It was instructive to study the revitalized portions of the marshes and compare them to the areas that were not recovering as well. On 18 December 2003, Nature Iraq bought diesel fuel and paid for the use of large excavators to break down the dykes on the Euphrates, which stood 7 metres high and 20 metres wide. This re-flooded more than 1,000 square kilometres of the central marshes. No permits were needed. No extensive planning was done. It was just good old-fashioned trial-and-error engineering as well as the application of lessons learned from watching nature heal itself.

Looking to the future

This experience taught me two important lessons. First, the Marsh Arab culture, which has endured over five millennia, has the resilience to survive modern persecution and a 12-year drought. Second, I was reminded of the incredible power of nature. Ecosystems have the capacity to heal themselves if we allow them to. If we simply let the water flow, nature can achieve balance on its own. The seeds will grow, the fish will reappear and even birds that have migrated (like the Iraqis of the diaspora) will return.

Knowing of existing and planned upstream dams, we realized that the marshes would only be temporarily re-flooded and not fully restored. Moreover, irrigated farmlands were slowly dying due to salinization, as Iraqi farmers continued using traditional flood irrigation methods while damming projects at the headwaters of the Tigris and Euphrates had reduced the flow of water. Consequently, Nature Iraq shifted the emphasis of the Eden Again project towards focusing on a future with less available water. We developed strategies for eco-sensitive agriculture in the area and explored ways to preserve the marshes for future generations of Iraqis.

Ecosystems have the capacity to heal themselves if we allow them to. If we simply let the water flow, nature can achieve balance on its own. The seeds will grow, the fish will reappear and even birds that have migrated (like the Iraqis of the diaspora) will return.

Aware of the impending increase in development all over Iraq as sanctions were being lifted, our organization expanded its activities to other biodiverse areas of Iraq. We gathered and analysed data on over 500 sites and identified a list of 82 unique sites deserving of protection in Iraq. This list was published in a report entitled *Key Biodiversity Areas in Iraq*.⁴² We also drew up management plans for the marshes and supported their designation as a UNESCO world heritage site in 2016. Key among the strategies for managing the marshes of the future is to focus on reducing wasted water from irrigation methods, but also to use water as a means of fostering cooperation between Türkiye, Syria, Iraq and Iran.

Ignored plans

Iraq's water management infrastructure has historically focused on flood prevention since the 1940s and 1950s. This has led to the loss of over 8.5 billion cubic metres of water a year from the artificial lakes of Tharthar, Habbaniya and Razzaza, as well as Iraq's dams. This will only increase with rising temperatures. To address this issue, I proposed a plan for monitoring the snowpack on the

⁴² Salim, M.A. et al. (2018), *Key Biodiversity Areas in Iraq*, Baghdad: Iraqi Ministry of Health and Environment, https://www.researchgate.net/publication/331101741_Key_Biodiversity_Areas_in_Iraq.

mountains, which would enable us to predict the amount of water that will be available for crops. In cooperation, Türkiye and Iraq could then release water from reservoirs in the winter, just before the spring snow melt, and channel it to the marshes to create the necessary flooding.

Despite receiving international recognition and support, our proposals for solving the water crisis and promoting regional cooperation fell on deaf ears in Iraq. Unfortunately, Iraqi politicians tend to prioritize their short-term political agendas over plans for long-term environmental and economic stability. While the Ministry of Water Resources did develop a strategy for water and land management in Iraq, which was published in 2014, few if any of the proposed projects were implemented. Furthermore, the ministry's decision to build a new dam in Makhoul,⁴³ which commenced construction in 2021 and contradicts the strategy's recommendation against new dams, threatens the ancient city of Ashur, a UNESCO World Heritage Site.

In the summer of 2022, the inevitable occurred. As drought hit the northern hemisphere, the rivers in Europe dropped to historic lows, and so did the Euphrates and the Tigris. In the case of the Tigris, the effects of the drought were amplified by Türkiye's filling of the Ilisu Dam reservoir. While the Ministry of Water Resources has attributed the problem to climate change, the reality is that continued mismanagement and the lack of forward planning are major factors. Regardless of the reasons, the Marsh Arabs have once again lost their verdant reed forests, and their wetlands have dried up.

Hope remains

Despite these challenges, I remain optimistic. Barham Salih, the former president of Iraq and a strong environmental advocate, is working with experts to address the issue of climate change and its impact on the region. With his guidance and political acumen, Nature Iraq has developed the Mesopotamian Revitalization Initiative,⁴⁴ a masterplan for Iraq and the region to mitigate the coming water and financial crises that oil-exporting countries face as the world transitions away from fossil fuels.

The masterplan serves as a blueprint for the future economy of Iraq and the region, building on its historical role as the breadbasket of the Middle East and as a vital international trade route. With the decline of the oil market, the master plan proposes leveraging Iraq's potential as a source of clean solar energy through the development of solar farms, which can generate electricity or produce green hydrogen. This will not only enable the export of sustainable energy but also provide lower cost power for investors in large-scale manufacturing, looking to tap into the abundant labour force of the next generation of Iraqis.

⁴³ Community voices of Makhoul Dam Basin (undated), 'Exploring the Makhoul Dam and its Impact', <https://makhouldam.com>.

⁴⁴ Iraqi Presidency (2021), 'Mesopotamia Revitalization Project ... A Climate Change initiative to Transform Iraq and The Middle East', 17 October 2021, <https://presidency.iq/EN/Details.aspx?id=3437>.

Twenty years have passed since I first returned to Iraq, and I am still as full of hope as I was in June 2003. I hope to see the visions of the Mesopotamian Revitalization Initiative embraced by the younger generation of Iraqis, who make up a significant portion of the country's population, projected to reach 52 million by the end of the decade. They deserve leaders who prioritize planning and good governance, rather than those that constantly blame external factors such as Türkiye, Iran or climate change. My hope is that younger generations will support simple yet effective ideas to convert water management from a source of tension to one of co-dependence and shared prosperity with our neighbours.

I remain convinced, just as I was in 2003, that the only path to a better future in the region is through economic integration and cooperation, following the European example after the two world wars. This time, the focus should be on preserving and harnessing the natural resources of the region, including the sun, water, agricultural lands and labour, for the benefit of the humanity and nature living here.

Flawed by design

Ethno-sectarian power-sharing and Iraq's constitutional development

Zaid Al-Ali

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Iraq's current form of governance – based on ethno-sectarian power-sharing – began to take shape in 2003, under inauspicious circumstances. The establishment of a new, post-invasion political system was subordinated to the interests of the US occupation authorities; exploding levels of violence had worsened distrust among members of the political class; and the country's main political groups all consisted of former exiles who viewed the existing state institutions as hostile targets to be dismantled or absorbed.

These factors, among many, were partly behind the governance decisions that ultimately contributed to Iraq's politically challenging situation today. Although the 2005 constitution did not explicitly codify ethno-sectarianism, this expediency-based political settlement implicitly informed its every page. The features of Iraq's system are by now well known: a parliamentary structure in which leading political groups share control over state institutions without any meaningful oversight, and an unwritten agreement that key state positions should be allocated between Shia, Sunni and Kurdish groups. All those involved in designing Iraq's 2005 constitution had been familiar with the severe problems associated with Lebanon's pre-existing ethno-sectarian framework. But during Iraq's constitutional process and in the nearly 20 years that have followed, there has been no serious attempt to understand the limitations of power-sharing, its impact, or ways to mitigate the problems it creates.

My own awareness of how little the national debate has evolved reflects my long-standing personal involvement in assessments of these issues. In 2005, I served as a legal adviser to a United Nations office that was advising on the drafting of the constitution. I have also remained involved in high-level discussions about constitutional reform since then, sometimes in an official capacity as a legal expert and sometimes merely as a concerned citizen.

That experience has taught me that there are few champions of genuine reform among Iraq's political elite, that the absence of integrity and accountability is the fuel that keeps the system going, and that many members of the elite wholly lack

empathy for the very large segment of the population that is marginalized and in desperate need of economic support and functioning public services. Nearly 20 years after the constitution entered into force, there is little reason to hope a solution is around the corner.

No champions for reform

One of the main characteristics of virtually any ethno-sectarian system is that, almost by design, it inhibits good governance. Any accountability would reduce the scope of ethno-sectarian groups to exercise authority. Thus, the system actively discourages evidence-based policy debates that might serve to improve it. Instead, formal political discourse focuses on stoking fear, and on blaming other communities for failures. Fearmongering is the rule at all times.

The warnings about the potential impacts of such a system in Iraq were clear as early as August 2005, when the constitutional negotiation process went off the rails because of the actions of a small group of unrepresentative parties who leveraged their relationship with the US embassy to impose their view (which mostly consisted of reverting to arrangements already negotiated and adopted in the 2004 interim constitution). The intervention of this group resulted in the majority of constitutional drafters, including those who were supposed to be leading the process, being unceremoniously dropped from the negotiations, and excluded from meetings that led to the finalization of the draft.

Not long before the October 2005 referendum, in which almost 80 per cent of the voting public ultimately approved the constitution, I met with one of the leaders of the constitutional process. He was utterly depressed by the deliberations. 'The politicians broke the process,' he said. He believed that the new constitution granted unlimited power to parliament, and that this meant ethno-sectarian groups would be free to carve up the country as they wished. He was articulating what seemed to me both a convincing critique and an agenda for reform.

Later that day, he and I participated in a closed workshop to discuss the draft constitution with a small audience of experts and political party members. At that point, apparently, our private conversation from earlier that day was already a distant memory. Now, speaking in front of colleagues and counterparts, my interlocutor addressed the audience with a completely changed message: 'No one has any complaints about the constitution,' he said. 'Only the Sunnis are objecting.' In that instant, any hope that he could champion a convincing platform for reform vanished.

No champions for integrity

Iraq's ethno-sectarianism system has led to much of politics being dominated by groups whose strength stems from encouraging fear and distrust of other communities, partially as a means to conceal their own predatory and corrupt behaviour. Senior state positions have at times been occupied by people who have no business being there, and whose only objective has been to secure

access to public resources. The 2005 constitutional process was one of the first instances in which the practice of ethno-sectarian competition for rents manifested itself in Iraq.

Adding to the problems, this was also a critical moment in the country's history. The drafting of the constitution was an opportunity to set in motion decision-making processes that could establish good governance and help remedy some of the damage caused by the Ba'athist regime and others. But constitutional processes can also be moments of intense danger – if fundamental mistakes are made, the impact can be devastating and can take years or decades to rectify.

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Flaws in the proposed system became ever more evident as Iraq's main political groups prepared to negotiate the country's future constitution. The ethno-sectarian nature of the governance proposals was obvious. Almost all existing members of the constitutional drafting committee were representatives of the country's main religious and ethnic communities. Many appeared to have almost no idea how to draft a constitution, or how the state should be structured. The (Sunni) Islamic Party at first presented itself as an exception: initially, it boycotted the process on the basis that the committee was sectarian and therefore contrary to the people's interests. By June 2005, however, after some pressure, the Islamic Party joined the process, and was given the right to nominate 15 committee members. The party had an opportunity to prove its non-sectarian credentials by nominating professional patriotic representatives from diverse backgrounds. Instead, it drew all its nominees from the Sunni community.

When I met with the members of the constitutional drafting committee, I was surprised to see an engineer acquaintance who had been appointed as an adviser on legal affairs. I asked what his credentials were to be part of the process. He bluntly responded that he had none, and that he had been appointed for financial reasons only. He eventually used the money he was paid as an adviser to emigrate to the US.

No champions for accountability

To many in Iraq's elite, power-sharing offered a sense of impunity from prosecution, almost irrespective of the crime or accusation. Efforts to address this problem have struggled to be effective. In October 2022, Iraq's new prime minister, Mohammed al-Sudani, stated in one of his first public appearances after taking office that

there would be ‘no red lines’⁴⁵ – in the sense of exceptions for certain individuals – in the fight against corruption, but few think anti-corruption efforts will be nearly as effective as is needed. There is a widespread perception that the politically well-connected have almost free rein to act as they wish, and that they are unlikely to face adequate punishment for any wrongdoing.

Evidence may exist that specific individuals are involved in high-level corruption. The evidence may have been collected through official channels, and may even be in the hands of prosecutors and judges. But high-level prosecutions have rarely moved forward because these require higher-level approval, which frequently has not been forthcoming. Prime ministers stretching from Nouri al-Maliki’s first term in 2006 all the way to the final days of Mustafa al-Kadhimi’s term in late 2022 have all repeated the same line, according to which they have ‘files’ at their disposal containing ‘evidence’ of corruption.

In 2020, I attended a closed meeting with senior state officials to discuss anti-corruption initiatives in Iraq. I questioned the government’s seriousness in dealing with corruption, and cited the examples of certain state officials who were well known to be corrupt. Although originally from modest economic backgrounds, these individuals were now wealthy – in some cases, conspicuously so. How could anyone take the government seriously when no action was being taken against them? One of the senior officials looked at me askance, and merely said: ‘I don’t know anything about what these individuals are alleged to have said or done. All I know is that they are on our side.’ And that was the end of the discussion.

No champions for the marginalized

Ethno-sectarian power-sharing in Iraq has also been characterized by a lack of empathy for the general population. As poverty and inequality continue to grow, and as climate change continues to erode standards of living, members of the ethno-sectarian elite do almost nothing to bring relief to those in need.

In 2005, during the drafting of the constitution, there was almost no focus on institutional arrangements that could have made a real difference in people’s lives. For example, the court system was essentially left intact, with close to no reflection on its composition and the types of changes that might be necessary to properly serve the public interest. There was no discussion on whether protections of socio-economic rights should be operationalized institutionally, instead of leaving such protections as an aspiration.

More recently, in 2019, during the height of popular protests that led to the deaths of hundreds of people and the wounding of many more, I was in Baghdad to advise a committee that had been formed to agree how the constitution could be amended. During one of the committee’s meetings, I expressed concern that all of the potential amendments being discussed related exclusively to adjusting the power-sharing arrangement in favour of one side or another, and that the general population’s concerns over corruption and poverty were being ignored. I recalled

⁴⁵ Sherko, S. (2022), ‘There is no red line before anyone’s corruption dossier says Iraqi PM’, ESTA, 30 October 2022, <https://esta.krd/en/202878/>.

how a protester from Najaf, whom I had met earlier that day, had complained that he had been forced to thank his torturers when he was released from detention.

In response to my questions, a senior government adviser merely stated that Iraqis' constitutional rights are guaranteed and that there is no need for reforms to improve the situation. A colleague of mine, like myself from outside the government, noted that protesters were being killed and injured in the streets less than a kilometre away. The only apparent reaction in the room was a shrug.

No solutions for the faint-hearted

The ethno-sectarian system has survived for the past 19 years but is increasingly unstable. The proportion of the population that is marginalized by this system is growing rapidly, and will continue to do so. Increasingly large and violent popular protests will almost inevitably continue in the future. For now, the state's only response has been to violently repress protesters – this approach is clearly unsustainable as the challenges to the state continue to grow.

The system is also coming under pressure from within, as some of the country's main political actors are increasingly unwilling to share power, even within their own ethno-sectarian groups. The fighting that took place on 29 August last year was the latest manifestation of that trend, and while the fighting came to a quick end, circumstances could easily have developed differently. The lack of political cooperation within the system also means that, over the years, cabinet formation has become increasingly difficult, with the latest round in 2021–22 being the worst by far. No serious analyst expects that to change.

Barring some unforeseen event, it seems likely that ethno-sectarian power-sharing will eventually cause Iraq's current system of government to collapse, one way or another. The system may already be beyond reform. A likely outcome is that the institutions of state will either withdraw from daily life, gradually losing control over the country, or violently collapse.

Nonetheless, for anyone who still hopes for reform, the solution must be to protect the essential functions of state from political interference. In his resignation letter last year, the former minister of finance, Ali Allawi, suggested an overhaul⁴⁶ that would place key government functions in the hands of professionals. Reforms could limit parliament's power to appoint government staff, and instead could establish an independent process to fill senior positions in the bureaucracy.

But there is little reason to be hopeful: the failure of Lebanon's political class to reach agreement after the start of economic collapse in 2019 shows that even in the face of catastrophe, an ethno-sectarian elite will defend its control over power to the very end.

⁴⁶ Taib Menmy, D. (2022), 'Political deadlock, foreign meddling and corruption: Iraq's finance minister Ali Allawi clarifies why he resigned in a letter to the public', *The New Arab*, 18 August 2022, <https://www.newarab.com/news/iraqs-finance-minister-clarifies-why-he-resigned-letter>.

The backlash against women's rights in Iraq's Kurdistan region

Choman Hardi

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My family fled to neighbouring Iran from the Kurdistan region during the Anfal genocide in 1988, and we eventually sought refuge in the UK in 1993. Initially, I focused on learning English, adapting to the new culture and completing my education, which distanced me from my community and our struggles. However, while researching my PhD on the experiences of Kurdish women living in England, I felt a strong pull towards my homeland, and began to advocate for women's rights.

Between 2005 and 2010, during my post-doctoral research, I visited Kurdistan to interview women survivors of gas attacks, incarceration and mass killings from the Anfal genocide. I conducted fieldwork in all six of the regions that had been targeted by Saddam Hussein's government. My experiences and reflections during this traumatic period, as well as my engagement with young people, made me certain that I wanted to be more effective in bringing about change. To achieve this, I needed to return home and take part in the redevelopment effort with like-minded activists.

So, after 26 years of living away, I moved back in 2014 to teach English and gender studies at the American University of Iraq, Sulaimani (AUIS) and founded the Center for Gender and Development Studies (CGDS) there. My goal was to create a hub for discussions, knowledge production, education and community capacity-building. For this purpose, I built connections with stakeholders, developed and taught courses on feminism, formed a team and fundraised.⁴⁷ CGDS launched the first gender studies minor in Iraq in 2017.⁴⁸

⁴⁷ CGDS (undated), 'Donor Organizations', <https://auis.edu.krd/CGDS/node/908>.

⁴⁸ CGDS (undated), 'Our Courses', <https://auis.edu.krd/CGDS/courses>.

As is often the case in systems born out of guerrilla warfare, governance in the Kurdistan region began with promise and high expectations, but then unfortunately devolved into a corrupt system. Instead of becoming a rare example of inclusiveness in the Middle East, the Kurdistan Regional Government (KRG) has created conditions that exclude the majority of its population from meaningful social and political participation, with patriarchal norms still deeply enshrined in society.

Despite the passage of stronger legislation and promises of reforms over the past two decades, tangible progress has been limited in bridging the gender gap. Women's rights activists have made headway in engaging the public with feminist discourse, but women in Kurdistan continue to be second-class citizens and encounter rising violence. Meanwhile, those who fight for gender equality face threats from powerful conservative and patriarchal groups that have a vested interest in maintaining the status quo.

Early hopes and problems

After decades of gender equality being sidelined by the fight against a dictatorship and ethnic oppression, women's rights groups multiplied after the formation of the KRG in 1992. The advances initiated by the women's rights organizations and adopted by the KRG in the 2000s were encouraging.⁴⁹ These included the 2002 removal of Iraqi Penal Code provisions protecting perpetrators of so-called 'honour' killings; the 2008 civil status law reform imposing restrictions on polygamy and criminalizing forced marriage; the 2009 decision to increase women's participation in political decision-making bodies to 30 per cent; and most notably the 2011 law on combating violence within the family, which criminalized physical, sexual and psychological violence, 'forced sex with a husband' and female genital mutilation. The KRG established institutions, such as the Directorate of Combating Violence Against Women and the High Council of Women's Affairs, to execute its plans for gender equality.

Although the legal reforms are impressive, their implementation has been problematic.⁵⁰ Activists argue that there is no genuine will among members of the Kurdish authorities to improve women's lives. The 30 per cent quota for women's participation in parliament and city councils, for example, is often filled by party loyalists who may or may not be capable of or interested in advancing women's rights. Widespread corruption in the KRG has also given the traditionalists an excuse to reject the government's programme for women's rights. In October 2022, there was a serious risk that some of the rights granted by the 2011 law on combating violence within the family would be revoked, indicating the fragility of these gains. There is also a risk that any regress in Iraq more widely will lead to the rollback of these rights in Kurdistan. This was evidenced in January 2023,

⁴⁹ Hardi, C. (2013), 'Women's activism in Iraqi Kurdistan: Achievements, shortcomings and obstacles', *Kurdish Studies*, 1(1), pp. 44–64, https://www.researchgate.net/publication/307567144_Women's_activism_in_Iraqi_Kurdistan_Achievements_shortcomings_and_obstacles.

⁵⁰ Hardi, C. (2021), 'The Women's Movement in Kurdistan-Iraq', in Bozarlan, H., Gunes, C. and Yadirgi, V. (eds) (2021), *The Cambridge History of the Kurds*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

when the federal court declared the KRG's amendments to restrict polygamy to be against the Iraqi constitution on the basis that these supposedly 'contradict Islamic laws'.⁵¹

During my time teaching and engaging with the community, I realized that a major barrier to achieving justice for women was the prevalence of a conservative cultural and religious discourse. In this worldview, oppressive gender norms and roles are presented as normal and correct and reflective of God's wish or nature. This partly reflects years of sanctions and isolation, language barriers, and a lack of access to gender studies resources and academic research. It became clear to me that an alternative discourse was needed to explain women's subjugation in terms of social construction. So, in addition to my work at AUIS, I began to expand my efforts outside the private university setting and to make discussions around justice and rights accessible to a wider community. We secured funding from the European Union⁵² to democratize learning, and to expand into public universities and beyond.

Since teachers, lawyers, social workers and journalists play an important role in constructing and shaping the gender discourse, a large part of the project focused on translating gender studies texts into Arabic and Kurdish for academic departments in pedagogy, law, social work and media. We also developed online training for professors who want to teach these courses. Our team created an online database⁵³ to share the project's resources with students, academics, activists and researchers. These resources include undergraduate course materials, podcasts, short films, and reports on women's representation in Arabic and Kurdish media and in the K-12 curriculum for primary and secondary education. The material also includes biographies of gender studies scholars in the Middle East and North Africa. We were fortunate that the beginning of our project coincided with a decree from the KRG's Ministry of Higher Education, which mandated the establishment of gender studies centres in all universities in Kurdistan, with the aim of teaching an introductory course on gender in the future.

The patriarchal backlash

We have made great strides in our work promoting gender equality. Through our programming and the discussions that it has fostered, we have highlighted the costs of embedded patriarchal ideas, illuminating sexism in the use of language, explaining the social construction of gender, and exposing patriarchal mechanisms that oppress and marginalize women. We were successful in obtaining funding to promote women's rights, and an increasing number of groups and institutions have expressed an interest in working with us. More local media channels have started sharing our articles and views, and students and trainees are expressing

⁵¹ NRT (2023), 'The Federal Supreme Court of Iraq: The law prohibiting second marriage in the Kurdistan Region is unconstitutional' [English translation], <https://nrttv.com/detail/20326>.

⁵² American University of Iraq, Sulaimani (2018), 'European Union Awards €900,000 Grant to AUIS', News Release, 8 October 2018, <https://auis.edu.krd/?q=news/european-union-awards-€900000-grant-auis>.

⁵³ CGDS (undated), 'Enhancing education, developing community, and promoting visibility to effect gender equity in Iraq and the greater MENA region', <https://egender.auis.edu.krd>.

feminist ideals and principles in their daily lives. But the effectiveness of our work has created an unfortunate but expected backlash against us.

The reaction against advancements in women's rights has taken many forms, including a general increase in violence against women, the creation of men's rights groups that claim women are now victimizing men, and defamatory attacks on activists. In an article⁵⁴ for the London School of Economics and Political Science, I went into greater detail on the different dimensions of these attacks. However, for women's rights defenders such as myself, the impact of our work has led to very public smear campaigns to discredit us and our organizations, and even direct threats against us.

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One of patriarchy's biggest weapons against women is instilling fear – of losing face and of being hated, shamed and stigmatized. So, instead of cowering in fear, a few years back I decided to disarm the online perpetrators by taking screenshots of the worst comments and sharing them on social media. Through my active engagement with these highly abusive comments and lies, I showed that shameless attacks like these will not intimidate or silence us. In fact, they strengthen our resolve to fight for women's rights.

In late 2022, I faced the most severe and well-organized attack yet. Almost overnight, dozens of Facebook pages with large numbers of followers began accusing me of corruption in relation to the EU funding for my project. They accused me of promoting and spreading homosexuality, and of receiving funding from international agencies to destroy family, culture and 'our high values'. These allegations were paired with pictures of me with my family and were shared hundreds of times. Thousands of people repeated these lies, calls were made for the closure of CGDS, and allegations were filed against me in court. This was when I first realized that I had earned powerful enemies who had been monitoring my work and collecting evidence to turn the community against me.

Although my work has focused largely on women's rights for over 20 years, my attackers framed it as being illegal and against 'our values' for promoting the LGBTQ community. They also accused me of receiving funding from 'the West' to destroy our way of life and hence our nation. In so doing, they appealed to the Kurds' longstanding fear of annihilation. The evidence used to demonize me consisted of references to LGBTQ issues in the academic texts we had translated

⁵⁴ Hardi, C. (2020), 'Blaming the feminists: attempts to debilitate a movement', London School of Economics and Political Science Women, Peace and Security Blog, 3 June 2020, https://eprints.lse.ac.uk/105550/1/WPS_2020_06_03_blaming_the_feminists.pdf.

for the EU project, a four-minute film we made about gender identity, and one of my old tweets from 18 months earlier that stated my support for the human rights of the LGBTQ community, members of which had been arrested by the police and vehemently attacked in the media. The association made between women's rights and the LGBTQ community provided ammunition for my attackers to preach their hatred against me, and by extension against all women's rights activists. The word 'gender' itself came under attack and was equated with obscenity, leading to attacks on all organizations and institutions that included that word in their programming. As for me, I was warned that my life was in danger and advised to keep a low profile.

The need for optimism

While this has been a shocking and painful time for me and my family, it has also become clear that the last 20 years of feminist work in Kurdistan have been effective. The fact that those in power feel threatened by this work is evidence of its importance. Nothing is more dangerous and violent than a threatened and failing system – and that is certainly the case for the patriarchy in Kurdistan. The resistance against theocracy and women's oppression in neighbouring Iran has also created panic among conservative forces in our community. Personally, I feel more prepared than ever for the future, and certain that this work is valuable and needs to be continued.

As the Marxist thinker Antonio Gramsci said, it is important to combine 'pessimism of the intellect and optimism of the will'. Pessimism is important because we should be aware how resilient and dangerous patriarchal systems are. However, optimism reminds us that if we persevere despite the obstacles, change is possible. We also need to remember that men who oppress women are not purely evil; they too are victims of their problematic upbringing and education. I hope that Kurdistan will one day become the leading example of democracy and tolerance in the Middle East that had been envisioned.

This essay was enabled by the GCRF Gender, Justice and Security Hub.⁵⁵

⁵⁵ Gender, Justice and Security: A GCRF Hub (undated), 'Providing new perspectives on some of the world's most urgent injustices', <https://thegenderhub.com>.

Iraq's security sector

Twenty years of dashed hopes

Safa al-Sheikh Hussein

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On 13 July 2003, I attended the first meeting of the Iraqi Governing Council (IGC), the interim authority established under US occupation. At that time, I was an adviser to Dr Mowafak al Rubaie, a former Islamic Dawa Party leader and prominent independent exile, who had recently returned from the UK and had been nominated as a member of the IGC. The meeting took place in a building I knew very well: the annex of the Ministry of Military Industry in central Baghdad (in the area that came to be known as the Green Zone). I had regularly attended meetings at this same building in the 1990s, when I held the rank of brigadier general and, for more than 10 years, served as director of research and development in one of the ministry's facilities.

Then I fell under suspicion. I was investigated on the charge of 'not informing the security authorities about family members in the opposition', and Saddam Hussein's government terminated my position in April 2000. As was common practice at the time, the government transferred me to a less important position in the Ministry of Defence, while keeping me indefinitely under security watch.

In the summer of 2003, I met Iraq's new leaders for the first time. All the Iraqis and Americans attending the IGC meeting shared a lot of hope and optimism. I overheard many of the participants talking about the historical juncture we were experiencing as a foundational moment of state reform or state-building. However, none of those hopes materialized in the following years – particularly in the security sector. The US's disastrous decision to disband Iraq's military in 2003 set the stage for failure. The behaviour of Iraq's first leaders compounded this fundamental error with a mix of fractiousness, ignorance and paranoia. Iraqi politicians never reached a consensus vision for the country's security sector. The most powerful decision-makers tended to view the Iraqi armed forces as a potential source of authoritarianism, rather than as an asset to protect the nation from threats. Moreover, structurally weak civilian leadership, poor governance and corruption affected all Iraqi institutions, hitting the security sector especially hard. Taken together, these factors have created two decades of recurring, failed security reform efforts that have produced a fragmented, hobbled security sector in Iraq.

Confused ideas

A few days after the first meeting of the IGC, conversation at lunch turned to the future of Iraq's security sector. One prominent governing council member said the new Iraq should have a small defence army of three divisions, located in northern, central and southern Iraq respectively. No one opposed this idea. For a person like me with a military background, it was puzzling, or downright foolish, to believe that only three divisions could secure a country as big as Iraq from its considerable internal and external security threats. Later, I found that many of the returned exiles had given little thought to the future of the country's security services. They disagreed widely among themselves. Because of painful personal experience, they primarily thought of security institutions as tools of internal repression. They wanted to limit future abuses of power. This concern – amplified by fears of the future held most deeply by Kurds and Sunni Arabs – hampered security sector reform efforts from the start, and it continues to present an obstacle to this day.

For the founders of Iraq's post-2003 order, fear of a strong military outweighed any interest in creating strong security institutions.

These vague visions of Iraq's future security sector, distorted by past fears, compelled most of the new Iraqi leaders to support the Coalition Provisional Authority⁵⁶ (CPA)'s strategic blunder of dismantling the old Iraqi armed forces and security services. One of the governing council's prominent leaders boasted that he had advised the Americans to dismantle all the old security services, arguing that they were the apparatus of Saddam's power, and they could in the future serve as the apparatus of power to a new dictator. This IGC member believed it would be to the country's benefit to spend many years building new military and intelligence services. 'That will give us time to consolidate the new democratic government,' the member declared. In my view, the exact opposite was true – the security vacuum posed a direct threat to our nascent democracy. Yet for the founders of Iraq's post-2003 order, fear of a strong military outweighed any interest in creating strong security institutions. Encouraged by some Iraqi leaders and their fears of another Saddam Hussein, the US chose a radical path to security sector reform that created a large cohort of newly disaffected former soldiers; this also resulted in a pervasive security vacuum that proved to be the greatest challenge of all to security sector reform.

The CPA adopted two mitigating measures to try to address the security vacuum. First, it excluded the Iraqi police and the Ministry of the Interior from the decision to disband the military and security services. Second, it created the Iraqi Civil Defense Corps (ICDC), an armed formation consisting of locally recruited small units that operated under the command of US forces in Iraq. The US occupation authority committed strictly to the principle that local

⁵⁶ The Coalition Provisional Authority (undated), 'Overview: Ambassador L. Paul Bremer', <https://govinfo.library.unt.edu/cpa-iraq/bremerbio.html#>.

communities would provide recruits to the Iraqi police and the ICDC, and that these locals would not deploy outside their own areas. This approach represented a fatal lack of understanding of Iraqi society. Police and civil defence were enmeshed in local dynamics and used their position and power to engage in corrupt practices. They also readily neglected their duties in favour of their social and tribal ties. Unfortunately, the principle of localism for police was enshrined in the constitution, and successive Iraqi governments have struggled with the negative consequences.

Troop numbers, not security institutions

US domestic politics also played a critical role in Iraq's security sector failures. The White House wanted a hasty exit from Iraq and pressured military commanders to reduce the number of US troops deployed, while increasing the number of trained Iraqi troops – with absolutely no concern for the real capabilities of those forces and the consequences for security in Iraq. This policy required the rapid formation of Iraqi forces that could replace US troops (at least on paper), and disastrously shifted the focus to padding the membership rolls of security forces rather than building effective security institutions. This approach prioritized force size over building institutions that could effectively govern the growing security forces.

For example, within months of launching the ICDC in the summer of 2003, US officials decided to expand its size from the original planned 18 battalions to 65 battalions. In response to the deteriorating security conditions, the Iraqi government and the US military command in Iraq repeated the same failed course of action in following years. Since 2005, the institutions of civilian oversight in Iraq have not kept pace with the growing ranks of troops and security sector formations.

The rapid increase in forces also came at the cost of inadequate training (typically lasting just one to three weeks) and poor vetting (or no vetting at all sometimes). These factors contributed heavily to the disastrous performance as the ICDC showed that it had no combat capability and was thoroughly penetrated by insurgents. The failures led to the disbanding of the ICDC, after which its personnel were properly vetted, trained and reinstated in the Iraqi Army in mid-2004.

In addition, the principles of 'civilian oversight' and the 'representation of all Iraqi communities in the security sector' have been misused and abused by Iraqi political powers to extend their influence and hegemony in security sector institutions. The IGC's initial difficult discussions to nominate ministers, their deputies and senior officials ended by agreement on a partisan quota system; political patronage in turn staffed the security sector with some unqualified and corrupt officers in leadership positions. Ministries tended to be comprised of a cast of competing senior officials, many of whom were part of the patronage system, and who battled for power with the state's legitimate bureaucracy. In some cases, these patronage systems funnelled resources to political figures and parties as well as corrupt senior officials.

As a result, senior staff often were not qualified for their positions, and different directorates within each ministry struggled to cooperate. The situation was exacerbated by Iraq's constitution, which requires parliamentary approval for the appointment of ministers, deputy ministers, division commanders and equivalent posts – making it harder for qualified individuals to be approved for these roles. Both prime ministers Nouri al-Maliki and Haider al-Abadi sought to decrease political interference in security sector institutions, for example by appointing acting leaders to circumvent the constitutional requirement for parliamentary approval. However, increased executive power has not necessarily produced better results. For instance, at the end of 2011, following the withdrawal of US forces, the patronage process essentially governed the selection of senior officials and leaders, which further weakened the official leadership of the ministries of defence and interior. This unprofessional process led to the disaster of the fall of Mosul in 2014. The succession of weak prime ministers since 2014 threatens to return Iraq to a situation in which political parties intervene directly in the security sector, further entrenching it in the patronage network.

Is reform possible?

In 2017–18, Iraq's national security adviser tasked me with drafting a security sector reform strategy, at the behest of the prime minister, Haider al-Abadi. In order to ensure that all the institutions involved contributed closely to the drafting of the strategy, I insisted that the members of the project team should represent each institution and be close to their respective heads, with at least the rank of general for those from the military and police, and the equivalent for civilians. We understood that producing a comprehensive strategy would be much easier than convincing the government to implement it.

The first difficulty expected was reluctance from inside the institutions. Reforms create winners and losers – thus, to be successful, leaders in every ministry or institution need to supervise the implementation of reforms to best overcome reluctance from within their own ranks. When we presented our strategy to the National Security Council, we recommended that the deputy head of each institution concerned take charge of implementation. We also recommended the establishment of a joint follow-up team to report on progress to the National Security Council. The council approved our strategy and recommendations.

The second obstacle we anticipated was opposition from some political parties. Security sector reforms touch on issues of division of power, and thus demand close cooperation with local elites. We suggested that the prime minister present our reform plan to the Council of Ministers, which he did. We hoped the council's approval would lead to buy-in from Iraq's political parties. There was also wide international support from the UN and the EU.

However, this early success was not enough to implement our plan for security sector reform. Initial progress was slow, and it has almost completely halted since the 2018 election and the ongoing succession of political crises.

A few months ago, I found myself in a conversation about national security and security sector reform alongside one of the few Iraqi politicians whose intellect I admire. I argued that security reform is ultimately a political act, requiring a strong government with the political will to start and sustain reforms. In our current state of continual political crises and weak governments, we can only hope for minimal, partial reforms. This politician pointed out that in the early years after 2003, thinking on the problem of security reform was distorted by the fears and fragmented visions of former allies in the opposition. Today, Iraq's situation is far more complex and perilous. There are real violent threats, foreign and domestic. Meanwhile, new players in Iraq do not want to lose their power; they mistrust their partners and have not yet committed to the rules of democracy. For example, some members of parliament are affiliated with militias and thus seem unlikely to help resolve the militias problem.

Security sector reform can only be carried out as part of long-term broader political restructuring. Short-term solutions escalate the risks in Iraq's fragile, crisis-prone system. Security sector reform requires a long-term strategy, with political confidence-building measures, assurances of security, and economic alternatives for the many factions that can disrupt progress.

Fragile agency

Iraq's potential as an intermediary for regional dialogue

Kawa Hassan

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I was sceptical when Iraq was first suggested as an intermediary for regional dialogue between Iran and Saudi Arabia. The fragmented nature of Iraqi politics means that the country has not had a cohesive, united and institutionalized foreign policy since the US-led invasion in 2003. Moreover, Iraq's relations with its neighbours have been hindered by the reckless regional policies pursued during the Saddam Hussein era, the bitter legacy of Iraq's invasion of Kuwait and the sectarian tensions that have characterized the post-Saddam period.

Iraq's contribution to the recent thaw between Iran and Saudi Arabia⁵⁷ – which, after years of talks, culminated in an agreement facilitated by China, announced in March 2023 – suggests that Iraq has successfully carved out a role for itself as a regional diplomatic broker.

My initial reservations were rooted in my work in track-two diplomacy between Iran and Saudi Arabia at the EastWest Institute (EWI) and later at the Stimson Center. I assumed that neither Iran nor Saudi Arabia would accept Iraq as a neutral facilitator. The history of Iraq's relations with the Gulf region has been characterized by misunderstandings and misconceptions that have shaped both Iran and Saudi Arabia's views of Iraq's potential role in the region. The US-led invasion further strengthened Iran's political, economic and intelligence influence in Iraq, while Saudi Arabia and other Gulf states remained far less influential in Iraq's political and economic scene. Consequently, post-2003 Iraq became a fertile ground for sectarian and political proxy conflicts.

Traditionally, regional and international powers tend to prefer a country with a proven track record, such as Oman, to act as a neutral mediator. However, throughout 2018, in preparation for a project on Iraq and its neighbours, we at EWI and the Center for Applied Research in Partnership with the Orient (CARPO) held discussions with EU officials on the regional role of Iraq in the post-Islamic State (ISIS) era; these officials were supportive of the idea of Iraq as a mediator for regional dialogue. The EU saw this as an opportunity for Iraq to develop a strong and balanced relationship with all of its neighbours. This came after a rapprochement

⁵⁷ Ayoub, N. (2022), 'Exclusive: Saudi Arabia halts talks with Iran through 'special channels'', Amwaj Media, 8 November 2022, <https://amwaj.media/article/exclusive-saudi-arabia-halts-talks-with-iran-through-special-channels>.

initiated by Prime Minister Haider al-Abadi and the influential Shia cleric Muqtada al-Sadr with Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates (UAE) in 2017.

Tentative progress

I was thrilled to be part of the initiation of the ‘Iraq and Its Neighbours: Enhancing Dialogue and Regional Integration in West Asia’ project in early July 2019. The project was a joint effort between EWI, CARPO and the EU, and it aimed to bring together officials, experts and academics from Iraq, Iran, Saudi Arabia, Jordan, Kuwait, Türkiye and the EU. Its primary objective was to establish Iraq as an intermediary for regional dialogue, rather than a battleground for proxy conflicts. Throughout the project, participants identified specific areas for bilateral and regional cooperation in trade, energy, education, climate change, health and pandemic preparedness, as well as people-to-people exchanges. The project represented a two-year-long effort to promote dialogue and regional integration in West Asia, and to position Iraq as a crucial player in the region’s diplomatic landscape.

The youth-led protests in Iraq that started in October 2019 – which aimed to topple the political system, achieve social justice and boost national sovereignty – played a crucial role in transforming Iraqi society’s views on sovereignty.

However, it was not until April 2021 that Iraq’s role as a mediator between Saudi Arabia and Iran began to take shape. The first in a series of talks took place in Baghdad, facilitated by the then Prime Minister Mustafa al-Kadhimi. The talks covered a wide range of topics, including regional security, political stability and economic cooperation. One key area of discussion was the ongoing conflict in Yemen, where Iran-backed Houthi rebels have been fighting against a Saudi-led coalition. Another topic of discussion was the recent attacks on Saudi oil facilities, which Riyadh has blamed on Iran. The talks also touched on issues related to the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC), such as trade and investment, as well as the impact of US sanctions on the Iranian economy. Subsequent rounds of talks were held in Oman, with both sides expressing cautious optimism about the prospects for improved relations. In January 2023, Shahriar Heydari, the head of the National Security and Foreign Relations Committee in the Iranian parliament said, ‘the mediation that Iraq is now carrying out between the Saudi and Iranian sides has succeeded in bringing points of view closer and reducing differences between the two parties to levels that allow for the restoration of official relations’.⁵⁸

⁵⁸ Middle East Monitor (2023), ‘Iran: Agreement reached with Saudi Arabia to continue dialogue until relations are normalised’, 14 January 2023, <https://www.middleeastmonitor.com/20230114-iran-agreement-reached-with-saudi-arabia-to-continue-dialogue-until-relations-are-normalised>.

A number of factors contributed to Iraq's suitability as a mediator. Firstly, a general trend towards de-escalation in the region created an environment that was conducive to Iraq's nascent diplomatic agency. Secondly, despite Iraq's weak governance and significant deficit in state sovereignty, the Kadhimi administration's personal relationships with both Saudi Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman and members of the Iranian establishment allowed the Iraqi government to capitalize on the regional environment and facilitate talks between Tehran and Riyadh. Thirdly, the youth-led protests in Iraq that started in October 2019 – which aimed to topple the political system, achieve social justice and boost national sovereignty – played a crucial role in transforming Iraqi society's views on sovereignty. The fall of Adil Abdul-Mahdi's government and the rise of Kadhimi were key outcomes of this movement.

Back to square one?

However, the volatility of Iraqi politics has been increasingly evident in recent years due to a series of significant events both inside and outside the country. Ongoing tensions between Iran and Saudi Arabia, coupled with Iran and Türkiye's persistent violations of Iraq's sovereignty, have highlighted the fragile nature of Iraq's diplomatic efforts. The fragmentation among major Iraqi political parties, which are often aligned with powerful neighbouring countries, has made it difficult to develop a shared vision of relations with neighbouring states and prevented the establishment of an institutionalized foreign policy.

Moreover, Iraq's structural weakness in exerting sovereignty has emboldened Iran and Türkiye to treat Iraq as their own backyard, as demonstrated by Iran⁵⁹ and Türkiye's⁶⁰ respective attacks on opposition groups based in Iraqi Kurdistan. These violations of Iraq's sovereignty undermine the country's potential as a respected mediator and reinforce the notion of Iraq as a battleground for proxy wars.

Despite recent attempts to improve Iraq's broader diplomatic standing, including two summits in Baghdad in 2021 that brought together regional leaders and the French president, progress to improve Iraq's status as an intermediary has been slow. The actual impact of these events will depend on the political will, bureaucratic capacity and follow-up action to translate declarations of goodwill into practical policies and projects. Unfortunately, there is little evidence of progress since the conclusion of these summits, with only limited improvements in Iraq–Jordan relations, exemplified by the opening of a joint project for power grid connectivity⁶¹ set to become operational in 2023.

⁵⁹ Motamedi, M. (2022), 'Iran attacks positions in northern Iraq targeting Kurdish groups', Al Jazeera, 21 November 2022, <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2022/11/21/iran-attacks-positions-in-northern-iraq-targeting-kurdish-groups>.

⁶⁰ France 24 (2022), 'Eight Killed in Northern Iraq in Shelling Blamed on Turkey', 20 July 2022, <https://www.france24.com/en/live-news/20220720-eight-killed-in-northern-iraq-in-shelling-blamed-on-turkey>.

⁶¹ Zawya (2022), 'Iraqi power link with Jordan to be ready end-2023', 30 September 2022, <https://www.zawya.com/en/projects/utilities/iraqi-power-link-with-jordan-to-be-ready-end-2023-msle3lke>.

Track-two diplomacy: Developing ideas for ‘the day after’

To establish a more stable and respected role in regional diplomacy, Iraq will need to focus on building stronger institutions, exerting its sovereignty and seeking constructive relationships with its neighbours based on mutual respect and cooperation.

The analysis of Iraqi politics by mainstream sources often oversimplifies events to binary conflicts between Iran and the US, Iran and its Arab neighbours, and overlooks the agency of Iraqi actors. Through my track-two diplomacy work and involvement in the Iraq and Its Neighbours project, I have learned that the positions of Iraqi factions towards their neighbours, including Iran, are complex and nuanced. While further research and engagement with Iraqi stakeholders is necessary to confirm this observation, initial findings suggest that there is an emergence of a generation of leaders in Iraq from influential Shia factions aligned with Iran who are more pragmatic, open to dialogue and seek balanced ties with Iran.

However, given the weaknesses of the Iraqi state, its internal divisions and external interference, such pragmatic leadership may seem unrealistic. Moreover, predicting the future perspectives of these leaders is impossible as geopolitical and internal developments can cause shifts in their views. Nonetheless, due to Iraq’s strategic importance and impact on regional stability, there is a need to continue engaging these leaders on a track-two level.

Such unofficial engagement provides a unique opportunity to understand changing perceptions across generations and assess whether generational shifts can positively influence foreign policy and Iraq’s role in regional dialogue. At the moment, it is unclear what foreign policy the current prime minister, Mohammed Shia’ al-Sudani, will adopt or whether he possesses the capacity, contacts and skills to continue Kadhimi’s active mediation efforts. Furthermore, it is uncertain whether Saudi Arabia, the UAE, Jordan and Egypt will accept al-Sudani as a mediator.

In my experience, track-two diplomacy can generate ideas for ‘the day after’ when Iraqi and regional leaders have sufficient incentives and political will to translate agreements into concrete projects that benefit the region’s people. However, this is unlikely to result in immediate or quick policy changes, and it remains to be seen what the fate of Iraq’s nascent diplomatic agency will be, due to the lack of an institutionalized foreign policy.

Babylon's long return to Iraq

Maysoon al-Damluji

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On 31 December 2004, while the world celebrated New Year's Eve, I travelled to the Baghdad Green Zone's convention centre for a different kind of celebration, albeit a bittersweet one: the return of the ancient heritage site of Babylon to Iraqi control, in a handover from the US-led coalition forces.

No public celebrations took place in Baghdad to mark the end of what had been a long and hard year. Car bombings, missile attacks and kidnappings were an everyday reality in the period after the invasion, and a lengthy curfew was imposed in an attempt to thwart further terror. Many lives were being lost every day – and Iraq's cultural heritage was also being damaged or destroyed.

From the moment of the invasion in March 2003, it had been apparent that the country's rich cultural heritage would be among the many casualties of the resulting chaos. The world witnessed the looting and destruction of museums, libraries, national archives and other state institutions. The power vacuum made it easy for looters to search for treasure, and for the illicit trade of antiquities and cultural heritage to prosper. The decision by coalition forces to establish a military base at the heart of Babylon added insult to injury, and fuelled conspiracy theories. As the senior deputy minister of culture, I led the Iraqi delegation that would receive the damaged site – named Camp Alpha by the invading forces – from the US and Polish armies at the end of 2004.

Ancient Babylon symbolizes the ongoing struggle over Iraq's cultural heritage, which has faced a plethora of threats over the past 20 years. These include the lawlessness that accompanied the US invasion, the corruption and mismanagement that followed, the destruction by Islamic State (ISIS), and the ongoing debate between civil society and religious endowments and developers over the importance of preserving cultural heritage. To promote social cohesion after years of instability, it is essential for Iraq to preserve sites such as Babylon. Through their ancient heritage, Iraqis can find the common history that binds them together.

Desultory celebrations

On that long-ago New Year's Eve, the delegation, consisting of Dr Abdulaziz Hamid, the director of the State Board of Antiquities and Heritage (SBAH), and Dr Donny George, the director general of museums, entered a circular room

within the convention centre, where they were met by representatives from the multinational forces. The meeting was in response to a joint statement on 11 June 2004, by Ambassador Paul Bremer and Lt Gen Ricardo Sanchez, which had demanded a halt to all construction at the Babylonian site and the relocation of all coalition troops. Despite the statement, it took more than six months for the troops to comply.

During the meeting, both parties signed a document acknowledging the return of the site, although the Iraqi delegation was disappointed that the document failed to catalogue the damage to it. The carelessness of the armed forces, mostly from the US and Poland, had led to the excavation of mounds full of undiscovered artefacts, the transformation of flat areas into helicopter pads (which caused the ancient walls to shake during take-off and landing), and some attempts to remove decorative bricks from the walls.

Sadly, the damage to Babylon was not limited to the recent invasion. In the 1980s, Saddam Hussein had built a palace on top of a large archaeological mound at the ancient city to project himself as an heir to the legacy of the Babylonian kings, showcasing his conquests and victories. He had also modified some of the original walls of the city to include his initials, which led to UNESCO's exclusion of Babylon from the tentative list of World Heritage Sites in the mid-1980s.

The Bremer/Sanchez statement had also called for an investigation into the extent of the damage and suggested that the remedial costs should be borne by the US armed forces. However, Iraq only took limited steps towards conducting a comprehensive investigation. A change in government in March 2005 resulted in a revision of all plans made by the previous administration.

Babylon back in Iraqi hands

Despite the transfer of control of Babylon to the Iraqi state, the site was far from fully operational. The fate of Saddam's palace became a point of contention, with the Babylon governorate seeking to turn it into a hotel or holiday resort, while the SBAH insisted it should be a museum. Eventually, the SBAH, with the support of UNESCO, was able to officially designate the palace as a museum and it was restored, preserving all symbols and references to Saddam.

The site was reopened to the public, and in 2019 it was finally designated as a UNESCO World Heritage Site, much to the delight of many delegates at the UNESCO forum in Baku. One head delegate brought tears to the eyes of many (including myself) when he described the pride he felt at inducting Babylon, with all its deep history and influence on human civilization, into UNESCO.

The religious endowment challenged the use of the Babylon ruins and tried to expand a shrine located within the site. However, this initiative was met with objections from the SBAH and UNESCO. Despite the efforts to turn Babylon into a religious site, public pressure resulted in the preservation of its status as a symbol of pre-Islamic Mesopotamian heritage.

In 2022, a local non-governmental organization revived the annual Festival of Babylon, omitting the original slogan ‘From Nebuchadnezzar to Saddam Hussein’. Artists and scholars from Iraq and the Arab world gathered at the site’s Greek amphitheatre – defying protests from conservative segments of society – to celebrate the coming of spring from 21 March to 1 April. The festival included concerts, performances and cultural activities.

Ongoing challenges

Despite the inherent magnificence of the site, Babylon continues to face major challenges and neglect. The same is true of many of Iraq’s other archaeological sites. The Babylon site still lacks basic services such as an information centre or adequate explanatory plaques. In 2018, the Iraqi parliament declared Babylon to be the ‘capital of Iraqi civilization’ and allocated IQD250 billion (around \$170 million at today’s exchange rate) over five years for preservation and development. However, a number of factors – fluctuations in oil prices, the COVID-19 pandemic, political rivalries, frequent changes in government, the absence of a city council due to the difficulty of holding elections, and a lack of trust between all parties – have meant that at the time of writing none of the allocated amount has been released.

Climate change and decreasing water resources have led some archaeologists to warn of the risk of collapse in the foundations, structures and ornamental façades.

Furthermore, climate change and decreasing water resources have led some archaeologists to warn of the risk of collapse in the foundations, structures and ornamental façades. While international funding continues to trickle in, the Future of Babylon project – led by the US government, World Monuments Fund and the SBAH – aims to preserve and manage the site. This effort should be part of a broader initiative to turn Babylon and other Iraqi ruins into educational, economic and social hubs.

The SBAH and UNESCO have a plan for Saddam’s palace to become a museum for research, training and restoration. Once funding is secured and conversion work begins, the struggle will be to obtain objects for the exhibit. Valuable artefacts have historically been stored and displayed in Baghdad, where decentralization is viewed with scepticism. Those familiar with the creation of the Basrah Museum, another conversion of a Saddam palace, understand this challenge. Unfortunately, some of the most valuable treasures of the Babylonian empire, such as the Gate of Ishtar and the Code of Hammurabi, will likely remain elsewhere.

Babylon's everlasting legacy

As a politician and Iraqi nationalist, I view Babylon and other pre-Islamic Mesopotamian history as a means to revive a modern Iraqi national identity in a society that has been torn apart by conflict for many years. While some argue that modern Iraqis have no connection to their ancestors, there is evidence to suggest that ancient Mesopotamian theories, concepts, legends and social attitudes continue to influence society.

Preserving and developing the site, in parallel with efforts to study and excavate it, should be part of a national and civic campaign to educate the public about their common history and promote social cohesion among various communities. The new museum of Babylon should serve as a reminder of all the city has endured, from its days as a glorious imperial capital on the banks of the Euphrates over 4,000 years ago to the events that have led to its ruins witnessed in our lifetime.

Missed opportunities for economic reform

Ahmed Tabaqchali

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In the summer of 2020, I was invited to join a government team tasked with reforming the Iraqi economy. It seemed to me that we had a promising foundation for structural change, as the government formed in May 2020 included Ali Allawi as minister of finance, who brought with him a wealth of experience in practice and in academia. To me, he understood the scale and the root causes of the economic crisis the country was facing in the wake of the emergence of COVID-19 and the collapse in oil prices.

The dependence on oil prices meant that for much of the year the government's revenues⁶² were less than its expenditures, with particular fiscal pressures arising from the need to maintain public sector salaries, pensions and social welfare. These conditions created a potential 'perfect storm', or so it seemed, that might force the ruling elite and the institutional system to consider a change of course and avoid an economic collapse. We knew that the problem was systemic, and that we faced an uphill battle. But we also thought that the severity of the crisis created an opportunity – small as it was – to change the direction of economic management, and to correct wrongs stemming from post-2003 decisions.⁶³ The team's strategy, the *White Paper for Economic Reform*, was published later in 2020.

However, the recovery of oil prices shortly following the paper's release meant that the worst of the crisis was averted, allowing the government to meet payments for public sector salaries, pensions and social welfare. This ultimately sealed the fate of the white paper's reform proposals. As the threat of economic collapse

⁶² Tabaqchali, A. (2020), 'The irrefutable logic of numbers and the inevitability of reform in Iraq', Atlantic Council, 2 November 2020, <https://www.atlanticcouncil.org/blogs/menasource/the-irrefutable-logic-of-numbers-and-the-inevitability-of-reform-in-iraq>.

⁶³ Emergency Cell for Financial Reform (2020), *White Paper* (Arabic), Government of Iraq, October 2020, <https://rmc.gov.iq/assets/ViewerJS/#../pdfs/white-Iraq-1.pdf>.

faded in lockstep with increasing oil prices, the elite re-embraced the policies pursued since 2003, and abandoned all thoughts of a change of approach. In giving up a golden opportunity for reform, Iraq's ruling elite followed an all too familiar pattern: much the same had happened after the 2014–17 crisis associated with the conflict with Islamic State (ISIS) and the crash in oil prices, as well as after the 2008–09 global financial crisis and related fall in oil prices.⁶⁴

An unfulfilled promise of economic transformation

The expectation for the future of the country and its economic development, following the 2003 US-led invasion and the prior decade and a half of international isolation and sanctions, was that reconnection of Iraq with the global economy and a resumption of growth in oil exports would prove transformative. If successful, these changes would establish a modern market economy driven by a thriving private sector. Projected revenues from increased oil exports were expected to fuel GDP growth, finance the rebuilding of infrastructure destroyed by decades of conflict, and restore what had been one of the region's largest and most advanced economies to its former glory.

As such, the country attracted significant investments from regional and international players seeking to benefit from an expected explosion in economic activity as structural transformation got under way. In banking, major regional and international banks either bought majority stakes in Iraqi banks or established branches in the country. This promised to accelerate the adoption of banking, and with it an expansion in economic activity as banks began to play an increasing role in providing capital to the private sector. In telecoms, three mobile operators – majority owned by regional and international mobile operators – started offering country-wide telecom and internet connectivity that increasingly made the provision of modern services, such as e-services and e-commerce, possible.

Concurrent with these developments was the evolution of the Iraq Stock Exchange (ISX) to support the development of an efficient economy as a vehicle for providing capital for companies to grow. By 2012 it was about to undergo significant growth as a consequence of requirements that the three mobile operators launch initial public offerings (IPOs). Such a transformation promised to bring the ISX to the attention of major international emerging and frontier market investors.⁶⁵ Underpinning the IPOs were aspirations for the country to benefit in the same way as other emerging and frontier markets had done when they had begun to attract foreign capital in the past. By that time, I had over 20 years of financial industry experience working in international and regional capital markets. This provided

⁶⁴ Tabaqchali, A. (2020), 'Between a Rock and a Hard Place: Iraq's Political Class' Dilemma between Budget Realities and Protestor Demands', LSE, 11 March 2020, <https://blogs.lse.ac.uk/mec/2020/03/11/between-a-rock-and-a-hard-place-iraqs-political-class-dilemma-between-budget-realities-and-protestor-demands/#comments>.

⁶⁵ Crowcroft, O. (2013), 'Iraq Stock Exchange Goes from Bunker Mentality to Boom Times', Institutional Investor, 26 March 2013, <https://www.institutionalinvestor.com/article/b14zbbt7d2jfmr/iraq-stock-exchange-goes-from-bunker-mentality-to-boom-times>.

me with the opportunity to be involved in 2013–14 as part of the advisory team for the IPO of one of the mobile operators, and ultimately allowed me a deeper involvement with Iraq's economy.

The makings of a perfect storm

However, the opportunities presented both by the inflows of foreign capital and by the evolution of the ISX were not sufficient on their own in enabling wider structural reform, or in sustaining those reforms that were undertaken. Working against the transformation to a diversified market-based economy driven mostly by the private sector were the policies pursued by members of the ruling elite, who instead used the country's increasing oil wealth to enlarge the state's role in the economy and society, in exchange for social acquiescence to their rule.

That is not to say that reforms were never attempted, but they were tentative, lacked depth and were not sustained. This ultimately meant they were either abandoned or reversed. For example, in 2016 it had seemed that the double whammy of the ISIS conflict and lower oil prices might provide just the impetus needed for far-reaching policy change: indeed, an IMF Stand-By Arrangement (SBA) in that year was linked to fiscal adjustments and improvements in public financial management.⁶⁶ However, the rise in oil prices that occurred when the conflict ended soon relieved the pressure to sustain reforms; instead, the elite doubled down on the policies of the past and reversed most of the measures implemented under the SBA.⁶⁷

While there was grudging acceptance of the need for real change – and a gradual realization that the 2020 crisis was unlike prior ones – this did not result in actual buy-in for structural reforms.

By 2020, Iraq's economy was largely dependent on government spending, either directly through state provision of goods and services or indirectly through the public sector payroll. Funding for this spending was in turn almost entirely dependent on the government's oil revenues. The severity of the economic disruptions brought about by the COVID-19 pandemic and the collapse in oil prices meant that for most of that year the government's oil revenues were below its level of expenditure, magnifying the negative effects of these disruptions. A key risk was that if the situation continued, it could cause a major fiscal crisis that would have especially dire economic and societal consequences given the centrality of the public sector's role in the economy. This meant a real change of direction seemed essential – or so we thought.

⁶⁶ IMF (2016), 'IMF Executive Board Approves US\$5.34 billion Stand-By Arrangement for Iraq', press release, 7 July 2016, <https://www.imf.org/en/News/Articles/2016/07/07/19/55/PR16321-Iraq-IMF-Executive-Board-Approves-US5-34-billion-Stand-By-Arrangement>.

⁶⁷ Tabaqchali, A. (2020), 'Between a Rock and a Hard Place'.

During the deliberations on the white paper, we devised a twofold strategy to address the crisis: the first element was to rebalance the budget to avert a fiscal crisis; the second was to propose policies on ‘retooling’ the economy to shift it away from its overwhelming dependence on government spending. As daunting as it seemed to address such issues in the prevailing environment of low oil prices, an even greater challenge was to overcome resistance from the political class and the population at large. While there was grudging acceptance of the need for real change – and a gradual realization that the 2020 crisis was unlike prior ones – this did not result in actual buy-in for structural reforms. A real change of course was never deeply accepted.

The improbability of reform

Looking back now, two and a half years since the white paper’s publication, I can see that three critical vulnerabilities doomed our proposals, and may threaten meaningful economic reform in the future. Firstly, the economy’s structural imbalances were inextricably interwoven with the post-2003 political order, so that reform of one could not be undertaken in isolation from reform of the other.⁶⁸ Secondly, the population’s deep alienation from the political class meant that any reform package coming from the government would be distrusted. Thirdly, given the first two vulnerabilities, any impetus for reform was susceptible to being reversed if oil prices recovered sufficiently to restore the status quo ante.

The current economic outlook is much improved since the 2020 crisis,⁶⁹ but the economy’s structural imbalances have been deepened by the fact that the political elite is once again doubling down on the policies of the past.⁷⁰ Consequently, the economy’s underlying vulnerabilities⁷¹ are likely to manifest themselves once more should oil prices decline for an extended period in the future. In addition, over time demographic⁷² pressures – which have been persistently reducing the effectiveness of economic management that relies on ever-increasing expenditure on the public sector payroll, and eroding the buying power of oil rents that have underwritten the system – will create similar conditions for a crisis. In essence, the current political economy is unsustainable, as the state in future will struggle to provide public sector salaries and pensions, let alone sustain social welfare, on a scale sufficient to prevent social unrest.

⁶⁸ Emergency Cell for Financial Reform (2020), *White Paper*; Tabaqchali, A. (2021), ‘Gone with the Muhasasa: Iraq’s static budget process, and the loss of financial control’, Atlantic Council, 6 January 2021, <https://www.atlanticcouncil.org/in-depth-research-reports/report/gone-with-the-muhasasa-iraqs-static-budget-process-and-the-loss-of-financial-control/>; Tabaqchali, A. (2020), ‘Will COVID-19 Mark the Endgame for Iraq’s Muhasasa Ta’ifia?’, Arab Reform Initiative, 24 April 2020, <https://www.arab-reform.net/publication/will-covid-19-mark-the-endgame-for-iraqs-muhasasa-taifia>.

⁶⁹ IMF (2022), ‘Iraq: Staff Concluding Statement of the 2022 Article IV Consultation Mission’, press release, 7 December 2022, <https://www.imf.org/en/News/Articles/2022/12/07/iraq-staff-concluding-statement-of-the-2022-article-iv-consultation-mission>.

⁷⁰ Tabaqchali, A. (2023), ‘Debt and the Ides of March: An Overview of Iraq’s 2023 Federal Budget Proposal*’, LSE <https://blogs.lse.ac.uk/mec/2023/05/08/debt-and-taxes-of-what-can-we-be-certain-in-iraqs-2023-federal-budget>.

⁷¹ Ibid.

⁷² Tabaqchali, A. (2020), ‘How Demographics Erode the Patronage Buying Power of Iraq’s Muhasasa Ta’ifia’, Arab Reform Initiative, 30 July 2020, <https://www.arab-reform.net/publication/how-demographics-erode-the-patronage-buying-power-of-iraqs-muhasasa-taifia>.

Lessons for the future

In a few years' time, I can imagine myself dusting off the white paper, updating the data, and making pretty much the same arguments that we made in 2020. However, our inability to persuade the elite, and to a large extent the population, to take up the paper's proposals supports my conviction that economic reform cannot be pursued – irrespective of any economic crises or their severity – without first addressing the three critical vulnerabilities mentioned above.

Until then, we are destined to perpetuate the dysfunctional patterns of the past in which successive crises – each ultimately stemming from falls in oil revenue, and each more severe than the one preceding it – have not led to economic policies to minimize dependence on oil revenues, but instead to policies that have magnified and deepened this dependence.

Two decades of feminist struggle in post-invasion Iraq

Yanar Mohammed

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Over the past 20 years, the fight to improve and protect women's rights in Iraq has been incredibly challenging for me and my colleagues at the Organization of Women's Freedom in Iraq (OWFI).⁷³ Every month has brought new obstacles, including security threats, legal intimidation, media attacks and social media stigmatization.

When the dictatorship of Saddam Hussein was overthrown in 2003, I had hoped for a future in which women in Iraq could be respected and treated as equals under a state that upheld human rights. Instead, the US-led invasion solidified existing patriarchal structures and created the conditions for an increase in violence against women. This prompted me and others to establish OWFI. In this restrictive atmosphere, my writing and advocacy for women's freedoms turned me into a target for Islamist political militias which saw my work as a threat to their moral values. Despite the continued difficulties, I remain committed to championing women's independence and equality in Iraq.

A sense of what was to come

In 2004, I remember speaking at a seminar and participating in one of the first women's demonstrations against Resolution 137, which aimed to impose Sharia law in Iraq. At the time, we were also preparing to march in support of International Women's Day. Consequently, I received two threatening emails, one promising to kill me within days and the other filled with misogynistic rants against me and others working at OWFI. The second email was signed by a militia,

⁷³ Organization of Women's Freedom in Iraq (OWFI) (undated), 'Organization of Women's Freedom in Iraq', <https://www.owfiraq.org>.

and it made me think twice about being seen in public. At this time, violent militias were vying for positions of power in the new governing structure of Iraq, but also within the so-called 'resistance'. Despite the threats, on 8 March 2004 I helped organize a gathering of hundreds of women and men demanding equality in Firdos Square. Surrounded by supportive individuals, acutely aware of the dangers, we proudly celebrated International Women's Day.

On the same day, the Iraqi Governing Council (IGC) approved the Interim Constitution of Iraq. The constitution introduced the concept of federalism and de-Ba'athification, but did not address women's rights. It referred to the state religion but did not adopt Resolution 137. The head of the US occupation force that was ruling Iraq had selected the IGC's members based on their ethnicity, religion, sectarian background and tribal strength, instead of choosing those who represented the diverse views and political affiliations of the Iraqi people. As a result, a group of religious clerics and many sheikhs became the main leaders of Iraq, influenced by the political views of the US and the UK. The political legacy of these appointments lasts to this day.

Under the colonialist appointments of these religious and tribal leaders, women's spaces in Iraq diminished. Those living in relatively peaceful parts of the country were confined to the kitchens and bedrooms of their homes, while women in conflict zones became vulnerable and were subjected to exploitation, abuse and trafficking by tribes and militiamen. Even the new media platforms that once embraced diverse political views began to favour the patriarchal leaders of the time. Requests for interviews with representatives of OWFI became less frequent, and some that did take place were never aired, while TV talk shows became increasingly aggressive and misogynistic. The situation became difficult for women as their voices were silenced and their freedoms limited.

Taking women's protection into our own hands

With rising incidents of so-called 'honour killings' and sex-trafficking, I knew I had to take action to advocate for women's protection. In 2003, as director of OWFI, I wrote to the US administrator of Iraq demanding that the occupying forces fulfil their duty to protect Iraqi women. In addition, the women of OWFI took it upon themselves to document the sex-trafficking industry, with the help of women who had been rescued from trafficking and were living in our shelters. As a result, from 2003 until the present day, every issue of OWFI's *Al Mousawat* newspaper has included an article or statement calling for anti-trafficking measures. With the support of my colleagues, I also compiled the information and published it in a report for the United Nations Commission on the Status of Women in 2010.

When our calls for feminist progress were ignored, we shifted our focus to directly protecting, empowering and educating women who have survived these forms of violence. These women, who had already broken away from their patriarchal oppressors and taken control of their lives, became the next generation of OWFI feminists. Our support capacity at shelters grew steadily along with the expansion of our small feminist community of women, made up largely of survivors. In 2004, there were only three women at our first shelter, but by 2010 we were providing

refuge to 12 women, and this number continued to grow until it reached 150 women in 2022.

It is noteworthy, and shameful, that the Iraqi government does not officially allow women's shelters. Instead, it has established the NGO Directorate, one of whose primary missions seems to be to monitor and restrict the work of women's organizations like ours. The women we sheltered, and continue to shelter, have received what amounts to death sentences from their powerful tribes, who have lobbied authorities for their return. From 2008 to 2018, our shelters were constantly targeted by members of the police and intelligence agencies, who questioned and intimidated us regarding the young women and girls in our care who had no official identification. Because we were housing women without male guardians, the authorities accused us of running brothels. Despite our efforts to protect and empower victimized women, the newly formed state and its advisers from the US and the UK showed no interest in jeopardizing relations with the Islamist and tribal leaders in order to save these women.

The women we sheltered, and continue to shelter, have received what amounts to death sentences from their powerful tribes, who have lobbied authorities for their return.

For years, we submitted numerous documents to the NGO Directorate in an attempt to gain legal registration for our facilities, but we faced massive resistance until eventually we received support from our international allies. Even then, the managers of the NGO Directorate still asked that we not run shelters for women, citing religious and cultural traditions. Despite these challenges, over the course of two decades, our shelters have provided refuge to over 1,300 women and girls escaping 'honour killings', sex-trafficking and domestic abuse.

Besides sheltering women, we have focused our energies on strengthening Iraq's feminist media landscape. I launched the first issue of *Al Mousawat* in April 2003 and have since mentored the next generation of feminists running it. The paper has recently published its 69th issue. We have trained over 100 shelter residents to express feminist views in their own articles or personal stories, using aliases to protect their identities.

However, our radio station, Radio Al Mousawat (103.8FM), has faced greater pressures. The Communications and Media Commission (CMC) ordered it to be shut down in 2014 after we spoke out against the proposed Jaafari Law, which attempted to legalize child marriages and oppress women in various ways, including denying them inheritance rights. The CMC and its police force have raided the station and intimidated its staff on several occasions since June 2014. Although we managed to negotiate its reopening with a new CMC official, our registration with the NGO Directorate is now being denied, putting the future of the radio station in jeopardy.

Successes

After years of advocating against gender-based violence, we have succeeded in shifting public opinion and raising awareness about the harmful nature of ‘honour killings’. Initially, our efforts faced fierce resistance and criticism from the government and the public. We were condemned for going against the popular perception that these killings were somehow justified. But our persistence has paid off, and as a result the issue of violence against women has gained mainstream attention, with television and online media starting to report these cases on an almost daily basis. In February 2023, when Tiba al-Ali, a woman from Diwaniyah, was killed by her father in an alleged ‘honour killing’ for living with a man of her choice in Turkey, her death made headlines in Iraqi media outlets.

OWFI has also had successes fighting for stronger government protections for women. The Family Protection Unit and the Community Police, assigned by the Ministry of Interior to protect women, have become close allies and rely on OWFI’s services on a weekly, if not daily, basis. While OWFI has managed to influence some officials and judges to adopt a more women-friendly stance and stand up to patriarchal norms, the organization’s shelters remain technically illegal due to the absence of legislation supporting privately run shelters. Despite some progress, we continue to be at the mercy of extremist politicians and their misinterpretation of women’s rights.

In January 2020, after the outbreak of the October (*Tishreen*) uprising and the assassination in Baghdad of the head of the Quds Force of Iran’s Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps by US drones, there was another crackdown on civil society. I was subpoenaed to attend court after the Secretariat of the Council of Ministers (COMSec) filed a lawsuit against OWFI with the aim of dissolving the organization, but after a year-long court battle, the case was ultimately dismissed by a sympathetic judge.

Two decades of religious and tribal domination in Iraq have had devastating consequences for women. The ongoing battle between rival religious political groups only adds to the hopelessness, with the international community’s support of the Islamic Shia factions and their tribal allies further perpetuating the tragedy. Without a change in this dynamic, the people and women of Iraq cannot hope for a brighter future.

Note: Yanar Mohammed advises that between the writing of this article and its publication, the NGO Directorate issued an order for OWFI to stop all its activities immediately.

Conclusion

The architects of the ‘new Iraq’ designed an undemocratic state

Renad Mansour and
Thanassis Cambanis

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Twenty years after the United States led a war of choice against Saddam Hussein, Iraq still struggles to develop coherent state institutions. Wave after wave of crises, from the rise of salafi-jihadi organizations like Al-Qaeda or Islamic State (ISIS) to the fallout from the US confrontation with Iran, have struck Iraq since 2003. As this collection of essays has shown, some of the country’s foundational problems stem from early decisions taken – during the initial invasion and occupation – by the US and the coterie of exiled Iraqi leaders who assumed control of the nascent political structure. Other elements of Iraq’s political, economic and security problems stem from decisions by Iraqi officials and their international allies during the ensuing years.

The US and its allied Iraqi exiles incorporated fundamental flaws into the design of the new political system, based on an ethno-sectarian power-sharing agreement. Crucially, the first decisions about the new Iraqi order prioritized the short-term political interests of the US government and its Iraqi allies – at the expense of promoting democracy or establishing a coherent state. Each piece in this collection reveals that much of what passed for state-building and democracy promotion over the last 20 years has followed the same flawed template. Rhetoric about rights and governance accompanied policies that promoted counterproductive transactional or short-term gains. The US and the international community habitually prioritized their own domestic political imperatives, spending hundreds of billions of dollars on programmes that accomplished little. When international powers did invest attention in Iraq, it was often to counter Iranian influence or to fight Al-Qaeda and ISIS. In these instances, US and international policy pursued short-term (and often military) wins, such as quickly withdrawing troops, negotiating utilitarian security bargains and, later, defeating terrorist groups.

The contributors in this special Chatham House collection explore the legacy of the invasion based on their observations from working in Iraq over the last 20 years. Representing a wide range of professional backgrounds, they recall key moments from their careers in Iraq, what went wrong, and what could have been done differently. Taken together, these personal stories and the lessons learned offer powerful insights for policymakers, analysts and others concerned with Iraq – and with other conflict and post-conflict zones.

Incompetence and bad faith

Unique to Iraq's trajectory were the initial decisions to dissolve the state's security institutions and bar most existing civil servants from continuing in the bureaucracy, citing their ties to the Ba'ath Party. Returning exiles with minimal local support but with US endorsement designed an ethno-sectarian power-sharing system, which many saw as their only shot at acquiring and staying in power. The origins of Iraq's two-decade political crisis are based on a dilemma shared by US occupation authorities and Iraq's many new rulers: they wanted security and state capacity, but feared the emergence of strong institutions that could provide a cornerstone for any one group to centralize power and move against their interests. Their fear of resurgent authoritarianism condemned Iraq to an incoherent and fragmented state, with security institutions incapable of staging a coup but also of protecting Iraq from domestic or foreign threats.

Following the restoration of partial Iraqi sovereignty in 2004, and the withdrawal of US combat troops in 2011, Iraq's leaders have laboured, with the ambivalent support of regional and international governments, to achieve some of the trappings of democratic governance, security and development. Progress has been fitful on every front – in large measure because the most powerful players, from the UN and international aid community to Iraq's neighbours and the still influential US government, all suffer from conflicting incentives. Those actors who rhetorically endorse pluralism, democracy and strong state institutions for Iraq have, in practice, endorsed policies that produce short-term wins as measured by certain narrow indicators (dollars disbursed, troops trained, displaced people returned) while still endorsing, over the long run, Iraq's fragmented ethno-sectarian political system.

Inherent contradictions in promoting democracy

Our contributors tell stories across the full spectrum of Iraqi life, and illustrate the inherent contradictions that hobbled state-building from the outset. Several case studies in the series reveal the incoherent and paradoxical assumptions behind the initial invasion and US occupation, and behind the design of Iraq's governing system.

Those tasked with writing the constitution – appointed in an opaque, hardly democratic manner – were disconnected from Iraqi society. As a result, as Zaid Al-Ali argues from his time advising on the constitution, Iraq's transitional authorities drafted a constitution that generated a faulty social contract and distorted the legal system. The referendum on the country's new constitution was hurriedly constructed, not allowing most of the population to engage in a dialogue on its main tenets. At the same time, Hayder Al Shakeri recalls, violence, instability and resurgent authoritarianism closed the space that had briefly opened, after the fall of Saddam, for him to protest and hold to account Iraqi leaders.

International players, meanwhile, indulged incompetence and hypocrisy while claiming to be in the business of building strong state institutions. Former US diplomat Ryan Crocker argues that the US failed to appreciate the complexity

of entering, and later disengaging from, Iraq; although the US had limited options, Washington contributed to ongoing governance problems by promoting the post-2003 ethnic power-sharing. Renad Mansour writes of how international state-builders in Baghdad often worried more about the political vagaries of their bosses back home than about the Iraqis they were trying to help. Some repeated the same failed experiments over and over, even admitting that exercises in security or administrative reform were aimed more at satisfying external domestic agendas than at bringing real change inside Iraq.

Belkis Wille of Human Rights Watch recounts times when Iraqi and international officials sidelined her efforts to expose rights violations. They appeared more concerned about short-term stability for the Iraqi leadership of the moment than the long-term instability that such violations could instigate. In each of these cases, Iraqi government and international actors purporting to build accountability and governance adopted policies that often did the opposite, eroding stability in the long run. Journalists at times exacerbated the problem, Thanassis Cambanis writes. They tried to chronicle the unfolding calamity (he recalls the US general who suggested Iraqis welcomed jets and helicopters overhead as ‘the sound of freedom’), but were hamstrung by insufficient knowledge and resources. Their coverage ultimately fell prey to a Western audience’s waning interest.

Short-term bargains

The most urgent societal questions never fell in line with the short time horizons of the decision-makers, who usually had their eyes on an annual budget cycle, or an upcoming election in Iraq, or their home countries. International officials sometimes stayed in Iraq for as little as six months, and rarely longer than two years. These structural factors created a preference for quick wins and short-term stability at the expense of addressing underlying societal problems. Structural violence, which had been created or worsened by the invasion, drove the most severe problems.

Both Yanar Mohammed and Choman Hardi show how Iraqi and international state-builders ultimately ignored the issue of gender in both the federal government and the Kurdistan Regional Government (KRG). The constitution paid cosmetic attention to the issue by, for example, creating a women’s quota in parliament. But the system of law heavily discriminated against women, while Iraq’s new political leaders swiftly adopted laws and practices that marginalized women. The US and the international community never took any serious stand or adopted any policy that prioritized women’s rights or sought to provide adequate safety from violence.

The aftermath of the US occupation also had serious environmental and economic consequences. Water management has always been a matter of life or death for Iraq, which depends on the flow of the Tigris and Euphrates rivers. However, as Azzam Alwash shows, short-termism has so far doomed any effort to manage the nation’s dwindling water resources. Oil money has time and again bailed out Iraq’s irresponsible rulers, Ahmed Tabaqchali argues, relieving any pressure on the government to address systemic economic ills. Iraq’s antiquities

and cultural heritage also perpetually get short shrift, despite the outsized attention paid to some of the worst depredations, Maysoun al-Damluji argues.

The international community has proven surprisingly rigid, over time amassing a reform record as inept as that of Iraq's leaders, preferring the status quo at every critical juncture. Many international officials who were supposed to lead reform efforts remained mired, decades after the fact, in a war mentality and economy, Mara Revkin argues. They saddled themselves with unnecessary restrictions and failed to notice the periods when areas of Iraq were safe and conditions on the ground conducive to development. A majority remained stuck in Baghdad's Green Zone, unable to meet with the society they were seeking to help. This isolation has contributed to a situation in which billions of dollars have been spent with little to show for the investment. Until recently, the wealthy and powerful governments in the Gulf have reflexively clung to the status quo, minimally engaging with Iraq at all. Only in the last few years have Arab monarchies in the Gulf begun to consider Iraq as a potential regional partner, Kawa Hassan argues.

Finally, retired Iraqi national security official Safa al-Sheikh Hussein pointedly demonstrates that Iraqis and Americans feared the creation of functional and strong Iraqi security institutions, believing that a powerful military could lead to a return to dictatorship. This fear doomed efforts to create viable Iraqi armed forces, and in turn spawned the cycles of insecurity that have hampered Iraq's progress on every other issue.

The security and counterterrorism community still draw on Iraq as a paradigmatic case, citing the rise of Al-Qaeda and then ISIS as symptoms of a weak state. Other analysts and officials point to the growing influence of Iran and the proliferation of Iraqi militias, without understanding the central role of the US and its Iraqi allies in unravelling Iraq's ability to govern itself and provide security. Anyone interested in state-building and post-conflict governance needs to take fresh stock of the bitter lessons of the failures in Iraq. Authoritative eyewitness accounts at times make the case even more powerfully than academic analysis, although both lead to the same conclusion.

Bad decisions by the US and returning Iraqi exiles consigned Iraq to undemocratic instability. The invasion, occupation and subsequent international engagement never prioritized the rights of Iraqis. Instead, they guaranteed a fragmented 'order of the strongest' in which most Iraqis did not enjoy basic rights or due process.

The missteps that followed mostly compounded the initial errors. Forced regime change by outsiders is unlikely to produce good governance or a coherent state. Iraq's plight stems from long-term state failure, pre-dating 2003 but exacerbated by the invasion and its aftermath. This series makes the case that policy decisions made conditions in Iraq worse – and wiser decisions would have produced decidedly better outcomes.

Overall, despite sometimes honourable intentions, the main decision-makers on Iraq, whether from inside or outside the country, never adopted policies that incorporated the voices of the larger public or created the possibility of security institutions that could protect the country. That is what should have been done. The new Iraqi government and its international backers should have insisted

on mechanisms that held to account the new system and its elite. These mechanisms span across the topics covered by the series' authors, including the judiciary, civil society, the media, economic reformists and more. While the idea of accountability was nominally enshrined in the constitution, the Iraqi government never upheld the principle of accountability in practice, usually prioritizing short-term political benefits. International actors, heeding political pressure from their home capitals and players in Baghdad, backed individual leaders and invested in personalities rather than in institutions, when the latter would have stood a better chance at changing governance. A more sustainable state-building project in Iraq would have required the political courage to shoulder short-term costs in exchange for long-term gains.

Moving forward, those who still work in these areas in Iraq need to heed this advice, as documented by the authors of this collection.

About the authors

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Renad Mansour is a senior research fellow and the project director of the Iraq Initiative at Chatham House. He is also a senior research fellow at the American University of Iraq, Sulaimani, and a research fellow at the Cambridge Security Initiative based at Cambridge University. Renad was previously a lecturer at the London School of Economics and Political Science, where he taught the international relations of the Middle East. From 2013, he held positions as lecturer of international studies and supervisor at the Faculty of Politics, also at Cambridge University. He is the co-author of *Once Upon a Time in Iraq*, published by BBC Books/Penguin (2020) to accompany the critically acclaimed BBC series.

Thanassis Cambanis

Thanassis Cambanis is an author, journalist, and director of Century International. He has written about Iraq since 2003 and is currently working on a book about the impact of the US invasion of Iraq on the international system. His work focuses on US foreign policy, Arab politics and social movements in the Middle East.

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Hayder Al Shakeri is a research associate with the Middle East and North Africa Programme at Chatham House.

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Azzam Alwash

Dr Azzam Alwash was born in Kut, Iraq, in 1958 and moved to the US in 1978 where he completed a PhD in civil engineering. He started Eden Again, a programme to highlight the drying up of the marshes of southern Iraq, under the auspices of the Free Iraq Foundation, where he is a member of the board of directors. After the removal of Saddam Hussein, he founded Nature Iraq, an Iraqi NGO focusing on the preservation of the environment of Iraq and its cultural heritage, earning him the Takreem Award in 2011 and the 2013 Goldman Environmental Prize. He was designated one of the 100 global leaders by Foreign Policy in 2013. In 2006, and in recognition of the need of Iraq to improve its undergraduate education, he became a founding member of the board of trustees of the American University of Iraq, Sulaimani.

Zaid Al-Ali

Zaid Al-Ali is the senior programme manager in constitution-building in the Africa and West Asia region at International IDEA. Al-Ali's research and work focuses on constitution-building and peacebuilding, particularly in Arab countries. Al-Ali started practising international commercial arbitration in 1999. He also worked for the United Nations on Iraqi constitutional and parliamentary reform for five years. Since 2011, Al-Ali has implemented projects on and provided assistance to the majority of constitutional reform initiatives in Arab countries. He has also overseen the establishment of the Arab Association of Constitutional Law, the region's first regional network of constitutional experts. He is the author of the *Struggle for Iraq's Future*, published by Yale University Press (2014) and of *Arab Constitutionalism: The Coming Revolution*, published by Cambridge University Press (2021). Al-Ali has previously taught law at Sciences-Po (Paris) and at Princeton University. In 2019–20, he was a fellow at the Berlin Institute of Advanced Studies (Wissenschaftskolleg zu Berlin).

Choman Hardi

Choman Hardi is an educator, writer and scholar known for pioneering work on issues of gender and education. After 26 years of exile from Iraq, she returned home in 2014 to teach English and initiate gender studies at the American University of Iraq, Sulaimani (AUIS), where she also served as English department chair in 2015–16. She founded the Center for Gender and Development Studies (CGDS) at AUIS in 2015, developed and taught feminist courses, built a team, fundraised and conducted and published research. Choman was the driving force behind initiating the first interdisciplinary gender studies minor in Iraq in 2017. She was also keen to make gender studies resources available in Kurdish and Arabic, and with her team, she secured funding from the European Union to do this. In 2019, she received support from the UK Global Challenges Research Fund for a research project about masculinity and violence, in partnership with London School of Economics. Choman is the author of critically acclaimed books in the fields of poetry, academia and translation.

Safa al-Sheikh Hussein

Safa al-Sheikh Hussein earned his BSc in electrical engineering from the University of Baghdad in 1976, and later an MSc degree in computer engineering from the Baghdad University of Technology and a diploma in military science from the College of Reserve Officers Baghdad in 1978. He worked as an engineer officer in the Iraqi Air Force from 1976 to 1987 and subsequently moved to the Military Industry Corp where he worked until 2001 as brigadier-general and director of a research and development facility. He also lectured for a period at the Baghdad University of Technology.

After the fall of Saddam Hussein, Mr al-Sheikh Hussein was appointed as a deputy member of the dissolved Iraqi Governing Council during the period 2003–04, then to the position of deputy national security adviser in the interim Iraqi government and for subsequent governments, until his retirement in 2018.

Kawa Hassan

Kawa Hassan is a non-resident fellow at the Stimson Center's Middle East and North Africa (MENA) Program, and a member of NATO Mission Iraq's strategic assessment capability. Previously, he was executive director at Stimson Europe, and has held a number of roles in the Stimson Center's MENA Program, including director, senior fellow and vice president. He was also director of the EastWest Institute's EU office, where he led Track 2/Track 1.5 diplomacy projects and served as a member of the Atlantic Council's task force on the future of Iraq.

Maysoon al-Damluji

Maysoon al-Damluji is a liberal politician who studied at the Architectural Association School of Architecture in London and practised as an architect until 2003. She served as deputy minister of culture (2003–06) in Iraq, was a member of the Iraqi parliament for three terms (2006–18), and chairperson of the Parliamentary Committee for Culture and Media. She served as an adviser for culture and reconstruction affairs for former president Barham Salih. Her main focus is cultural issues and women's rights in Iraq.

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Yanar Mohammed

Yanar Mohammed is a prominent Iraqi feminist who was born in Baghdad in 1960. She is a co-founder and president of the Organization of Women's Freedom in Iraq (OWFI), a national women's organization dedicated to rebuilding Iraq on the basis of secular democracy and human rights for all. OWFI has sheltered more than 1,300 women and girls from violence throughout 20 years within a network of secret shelters for women in many Iraqi cities.

Previously, Yanar Mohammed established the Defense of Iraqi Women's Rights (DIWR) organization in 1998 and campaigned against the Iraq war. She received the Gruber Foundation Women's Rights Prize in 2008. She is also editor-in-chief of OWFI's newspaper, Al-Mousawat (Equality), and is a passionate speaker and advocate on behalf of Iraqi women and other marginalized and at-risk Iraqis.

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Renad: Faleh Abdul Jabbar taught me to study Iraq and helped me make sense of its complex political and sociological dynamics. Everyday, I feel the void that he left.

The Iraq Initiative

The Iraq Initiative is a fieldwork-based policy project that rethinks the nature of state-building and governance in Iraq.

The project tackles the root causes of state failure to challenge assumptions held in Western capitals about stabilization and peacebuilding and reach a more nuanced approach to navigating Iraq's complex and interlinked political, security, and economic environment.

The initiative is based on original analysis and close engagement with a network of researchers and institutions inside Iraq. At the local level, it maps key political, business, military, tribal, clerical, and civil society figures across Iraq. At the national level, it explores the struggle over the state.

The project uses these field-based insights to inform international policy towards Iraq. Chatham House convenes Iraq Initiative activities in various cities in the Middle East, the UK, the US and Europe.

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