Harith Hasan*

From Modernization to Communalism: The Remaking of Iraqi Politics and the Hollowing-Out of the State since 2003**

من التحديث إلى "المكوناتية": إعادة تشكيل السياسة العراقية وتجويف الدولة ما بعد 2003

Abstract: This paper argues that the conceptual basis of the political community in Iraq has shifted since the US-led invasion of 2003, and a political ideology has emerged to underpin the formation of the new political system and govern the state's relationship with society: communalism. The study argues that the new concept of the political community contains the seeds of a process of "hollowing-out" the state, weakening its developmental role. This reflects a shift away from the modernist/developmental definition of the state's role during colonial and post-colonial phases, and toward an identitarian-collective definition, which could be linked to the neo-liberal postmodernist context as well as to the pre-eminence of sectarian classifications in Iraq's political community. The study finds that communalist ideology has contributed to hollowing out of the Iraqi state, as well as to obscuring the nature of the social contract underpinning it. Iraq's "hybrid regime" was a natural result of the post-2003 ideological transformation of the political system. Furthermore, without a departure from the current conceptual framework and its procedural implications, the nature of the Iraqi state is unlikely to change.

Keywords: US-led Invasion of 2003; Political Community; Iraqi State; Communalism; Hybrid Regime.

الملخص: ترى هذه الدراسة أنّ تغييرًا في مفهوم المجتمع السياسي في العراق قد بدأ منذ الغزو الأميركي للعراق عام 2003، وفي الأيديولوجيا السياسية التي حكمت تشكل النظام السياسي الجديد وعلاقة الدولة بالمجتمع. وتسمّي الدراسة هذه الأيديولوجيا السياسية "المكوناتية"، وتجادل في أنّ هذا الإطار المفاهيمي الجديد للمجتمع السياسي حمل في طياته بذور العملية التي تطلق عليها الدراسة "تجويف الدولة"، وإضعاف دورها التنموي على نحو عكس انتقالاً من التعريف الحداثوي/ التنموي لدور الدولة، الذي اقترن بمرحلتي الاستعمار وما بعد الاستعمار، نحو التعريف الهوياتي - الجماعاتي، الذي يمكن ربطه بالسياق ما بعد الحداثي والنيوليبرالي، وبتفوق التصنيف الطوائفي للمجتمع السياسي في العراق. وتستخلص الدراسة أنّ الأيديولوجيا المكوناتية أوجدت شروطًا لتجويف الدولة في العراق، وغموض العقد الاجتماعي الذي تقوم عليه. إنّ ما يسمّى "النظام الهجين" في العراق، كان نتيجة طبيعية لهذا التحول في الأيديولوجيا الحاكمة للمجتمع السياسي بعد عام 2003، ومن دون الخروج من إطاره المفاهيمي، وما يترتب على ذلك إجرائيًا، فإنّه لا يُحتمل أن تتغير طبيعة الدولة القائمة.

كلمات مفتاحية: الغزو الأميركي للعراق عام 2003؛ المجتمع السياسي؛ الدولة العراقية؛ المكوناتية؛ النظام الهجين.

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* Non-resident fellow, Carnegie Middle East Center. Email: harithalqarawee@gmail.com

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From Modernization to Communalism: The Post Developmental State

Modern state formation in the Arab Mashreq took place in the context of European colonialism and the accompanying disintegration of the Ottoman Empire. Hence, the emergence of such states was linked to a shift in the conceptual and political structure of the international system, centred around "modern" Western conceptions of the state and its role. Some researchers believe that the modern state in the Global South arose primarily as a colonial project, and that the idea of development lay at the heart of that state's formation, ruling ideology, and relationship with society.[1]

This may be an exaggeration, given the idea of the state and the associated meanings of independence and empowerment already had currency in the region, at least among political and cultural elites. Yet their acceptance of the concept was greatly influenced by modernist perceptions.[2] Without plunging into a lengthy discussion of the "Western-ness" of modernism or the extent to which it is "foreign" to the Mashreq,[3] the idea of the modern state, arising from the colonial experience, can be understood to have been closely linked to the ideological-political framework forged by Western supremacy, specifically through three central concepts. First is the concept of the "nation" as an ethno-geographical community with a measure of cultural homogeneity. Second is the concept of sovereignty, meaning that the state has geographical borders within which it has a monopoly over legal coercion and responsibility to manage society. Third is the concept of modernization or development, based on the proposition that the primary function of the state – under the auspices or mandate of the colonial power – is to "modernize" society, and that this state should move teleologically toward a more developed formula. Accordingly, the state should transform the population (or "the people") from a "primitive" state into "civilization", following the model of Western countries.[4]

This concept of the state's modernizing role was adopted by the new ruling elites,[5] guiding the role of the state despite being subject, in practice, to the compromises imposed by power relations and the pragmatic needs of governance. In general, the establishment of the modern nation state along ethnic-geographical lines marked a break with the imperial Ottoman state , which was based on ethnic pluralism, religious ties, and the military supremacy of the ruling dynasty.[6]

Anthony D. Smith argues that the nation-building model in the Third World granted ruling elites a central role in shaping the nation's project, the creation of its modern narratives, and the invention of a "patriotism" that matched its national borders.[7] Hence, the apparatus of such a nascent state was based

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[1] Rajeev Patel & Philip McMichael, "Third Worldism and the Lineages of Global Fascism: The Regrouping of the Global South in the Neoliberal Era," *Third World Quarterly*, vol. 25, no. 1 (2004), p. 238. The two authors argue that the state's developmental/modernist project, generated by Western colonialism, is based on the two ideas of "managerialism" and "sovereignty", and that this project demanded the replication of the modern European state structure and the mechanisms of control and domination upon which it is based.

[2] These visions had a major influence in forming a theory of modernization in approaching the role and policies of Third World states. Talcott Parsons argues that according to this theory, modernization builds on a number of processes including structural differentiation, functional specialization, and cultural secularization. See: Talcott Parsons, *The Social System* (New York: Free Press, 1951), pp. 45-67; M. D. Litonjua, "Third World/Global South: From Modernization, To Dependency/Liberation, To Postdevelopment," *Journal of Third World Studies*, vol. 29, no. 1 (2012).

[3] Mohammad R. Salama, *Islam, Orientalism and Intellectual History: Modernity and the Politics of Exclusion since Ibn Khaldun* (London: I.B. Tauris, 2005).

[4] Arturo Escobar approaches the idea of "development" by questioning its Western-centralism and attempts to subjugate the Third World through a system of power, truth, and knowledge production. See: Arturo Escobar, *Encountering Development: The Making and Unmaking of the Third World* (Princeton: Princeton University press, 1995).

[5] A famous letter attributed to King Faisal I, and addressed to a section of Iraq's political elite during the monarchical era, reflects this modernizing philosophy, although it proposes a different approach to its implementation. This extract offers a good example of the concepts that formed the modernizing ideology: "I say, with a heart full of sorrow… that in my opinion, so far there is no such thing as the Iraqi People. Rather, there are imaginary human blocs, devoid of any national idea, saturated with religious traditions and falsehoods, not united by anything, listening to evil, prone to chaos, always ready to rise up against any government whatsoever. We want, in this situation, to form a people, discipline it, train it, and teach it. Whoever knows the difficulty of forming a people in such circumstances must also know the greatness of the efforts that must be expended to complete this process … This is the people whose formation I have taken upon my shoulders". See: Abdulrazzaq al-Hassani, *Tārīkh al-ʿIrāq al-Siyāsī al-Ḥadīth*, vol. 1 (Saida: al-ʿArfān Press, 1957), p. 12.

[6] Ernest Gellner, *Culture, Identity and Politics* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1987).

[7] Anthony D. Smith, *National Identity* (England: Penguin Books, 1991), pp. 107, 135.

on this conception of its role as a modernizing force, manifested in the "secular" civil education system, the civil court apparatus, the security agencies, the army, the financial and monetary structures, and the administrative bureaucracy.

In Iraq, it is possible to distinguish analytically between two eras of this modernizing ideology, each defined by the nature of the ruling elites, their ideological backgrounds, and their approach to the country's modernizing role. The first stage entailed "limited modernization," which prevailed under the British Mandate (1921-1932). At that time, the state-building project was in its infancy and the state's ability to exercise coercion was limited. Modernization was linked to the interests of the colonial power and focused on containing traditional entities (such as the clan and religious authorities), rather than seeking to minimize confrontation with them (with some exceptions).[8]

The second period was the post-colonial, populist developmentalism, dominated by republican elites that formed on the margins of the expanding state's space. The elites now adopted a populist-leftist, anti-colonial approach, placing the slogans of social justice and political independence at the heart of their discourse. They formed what Samuel Huntington and other political scientists have called "praetorian regimes", in which political struggles are not organized within the framework of institutions but are based on abstract force. In such systems, the military plays a decisive role (through coups), and stability is guaranteed by establishing an authoritarian bureaucracy, often conflating oppressive rule with nationalist populism.[9] This phase was dominated by developmental ideologies influenced by socialist ideas about the role of the state in redistributing wealth to promote social justice. Terms such as "modernization" and "progress" were replaced by "development," which was seen as being at the core of the struggle against colonialism rather than a tool to serve it.[10]

Arguably, the difference in the two approaches to the modernization project was reflected in how they addressed questions of sectarian and ethnic diversity. Notwithstanding the fact that the Sunni Arab elite played a dominant role throughout, the first era saw attempts, led by King Faisal and others, to acknowledge the existence of a "sectarian" problem, and work to integrate the Shiʿi population into the system through a form of positive discrimination in employment.[11]

However, there was no consensus on defining sectarianism in Iraq. It could be argued that it is part of a conflict of interpretation between two currents that struggled over the creation and form of the country's political community. First, the homogenizing current, which relied on the ideology of modernization, understood sectarianism as a push to invoke traditional, "outdated" categorizations as a basis for discrimination between citizens. This was the position held by most of the Sunni elite during the monarchical era,[12] as well as the Arab nationalists and the Baathist regime. In contrast, the pluralist-consensualist current held that Iraq was by definition comprised of sects and ethnicities, meaning that justice would require that each be proportionally represented in state structures. This was the position of

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[8] An example of such "compromises" is the British Mandate authorities' attempt to maintain a separate civil and penal legal system for the rural-tribal areas, taking into account existing customs and upholding the authority of clan chiefs allied with the mandate. See: Toby Dodge, *Inventing Iraq: The Failure of Nation-Building and a History Denied* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2003), pp. 43-44.

[9] Samuel P. Huntington, *The Third Wave: Democratization in the Late Twentieth Century* (Oklahoma: University of Oklahoma Press, 1991), p. 196.

[10] Alan Richards et al., *A Political Economy of the Middle East: State, Class, and Economic Development* (Boulder, CO: Westview, 1990); Paul W. T. Kingston, *Britain and the Politics of Modernization in the Middle East, 1945-1958* (Cambridge: Cambridge University press, 1996), p. 2. It could be said that communist and Baathist literature during and after the 1940s are reflections of this perception. For example, see Article 6 of the Constitution of the Arab Baath Party in: "The Constitution of the Arab Resurrection. (Baʿth) Socialist Party of Syria," *Middle East Journal*, vol. 13, no. 2 (Spring 1959), p. 197. The article links between the struggle against foreign colonialism and "rebel[lion] against existing evils affecting all intellectual, economic, social and political aspects of life". Ibid, p. 9.

[11] Abdulkarim al-Arzi, *Mushkilat al-Ḥukm fī al-ʿIrāq* (London: n.p., 1991), pp. 16-22; Hanna Batatu, *The Old Social Classes and the Revolutionary Movements of Iraq* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1978), p. 47.

[12] The responses of some elite politicians during the monarchical era, such as Tawfiq al-Suwaidi and others, to the aforementioned letter of King Faisal (see footnote 5) and the writings of Satiʿ al-Husari, reflect the opinions of this current. See: al-Arzi, pp. 39-41.

certain Shiʿi religious and civilian factions during the monarchical era, as well as Kurdish nationalist forces. It was to be the embryo of the "communalist" ideology detailed later in this study. Between these two camps, a weaker strand represented during the monarchy by *Jamāʿat al-Ahālī* and today by some sectors of the civil protest movement adopted a democratic-modernist vision. However, this strand was unable to impose its view to any great extent.

The rule of Abdul Karim Qasem, another phase in the era of populist development, also saw attempts to overcome sectarian divisions, this time through policies focusing on social justice, without giving sectarian distinctions a central role or clear political connotations. Subsequent nationalist rulers, Abdul Salam Aref and, particularly, the Baathist regime, took a "denialist" approach to sectarian questions, essentially rendering them taboo in the public sphere. This camp resorted to security solutions and a discourse that played up the supremacy of national affiliation, dismissing talk of sectarian differences as "reactionary". Yet the Arab nationalist regimes, including the Baathist, both due to their nationalist nature and for pragmatic reasons, were forced to acknowledge the existence of the Kurdish national question and the country's pluralist nature, as well as to seek out solutions. Nevertheless, the growing centralizing and integrationist orientations left no room for such solutions to mature, and these regimes largely tackled the issue via the security apparatus.

The principle of the modernizing state was implemented in ways that ranged from pragmatic to ideological, conservative, and revolutionary, in alliance with and in opposition to colonial powers. Yet the idea of the state as a modernizing force in society remained an article of faith for the ruling elites, and the ideological cornerstone of the state's relationship with society.

The end of the colonial era gave way to Third World nationalism and the emergence of a middle class harbouring anti-colonial sentiments, along with elites keen to assert their independence. Now, the so-called "developmental state " came to oversee the transformation of state and society.[13] This translated into more revolutionary, fundamental efforts to dismantle or subjugate traditional structures such as clans and religious authorities, while transcending sub-national differences based on traditional ties, such as religion and sect, in favour of a project of authoritarian integration with populist overtones. This project took on a totalitarian nature under the Baath regime, taking advantage of growing oil revenues, especially in the 1970s, which gradually transformed into a model of patrimonial rule under Saddam Hussein. By the 1990s, the regime had essentially dropped its developmentalist programme, partly due to crippling economic sanctions following its invasion of Kuwait. Instead, it jumped on the region-wide wave of social Islamism and nurtured an informal, clientelist economy.[14]

Therefore, simplistic narratives of "Sunni rule" and the "Shiʿi and Kurdish opposition" prior to 2003, as well as attempts to reduce political and social dynamics to ethnic and sectarian struggles alone, fail to explain phenomena such as the gradual rise of Shiʿi representation in the state under the monarchy, the emergence of the Communist Party as the country's most popular party in the mid-20th century, the presence of Shiʿi leaders within the Baath Party, or the fact that the Baath regime remained comfortably in control of Shiʿi areas even after it executed a senior Shiʿi religious figure, Muhammad Baqr al-Sadr, in 1980.

In other words, narratives that explain Iraq's modern history entirely through the lens of ethnic and sectarian divisions fail to capture more complex dynamics related to the formation of the state and its

[13] Here, it is important to distinguish between two uses of the "developmental state" concept. The first was influenced by socialist approaches, While the second focused on models of state intervention in the economy. Recent literature presents Japan, South Korea, and Singapore as good examples. I argue that the dominant model in Iraq was the former. See: Kingston.

For examples of the concept in East Asia, see articles in the edited volume: Meredith Woo-Cumings (ed.), *The developmental state* (Ithaka: Cornell University Press, 1999).

On the leftist perspective of the concept, see: Samir Amin, *Maldevelopment: Anatomy of a Global Failure* (London: Zed Books, 1990).

[14] Faleh A. Jabar, "Shaykhs and Ideologues: Detribalization and Retribalization in Iraq, 1968-1998," *Middle East Report*, no. 215, MERIP (2000).

relationship with society, the transformation of identities resulting from policies of social and cultural integration, the creation of a centralized economy, the emergence of the rentier state, and the massive rural to urban migration. This narrative fails to understand that identities are social constructs rather than fixed entities, and that they change and take on new meanings and implications in evolving relational contexts.[15] Furthermore, the central role and political implications they carry today do not necessarily reflect their role decades ago. While the impact of sectarian factors cannot be denied, claims that such factors offer the *only* explanatory tool – as for example in Hassan al-Alawi's book *The Shiʿis and the Nation State in Iraq, 1914-1990* – do not stand up to scrutiny.[16] Nevertheless, this reductive interpretation of Iraq's history has played a central role in shaping the political ideology that dominated the post-2003 period and which forms the central theme of this study: communalism.

The Decline of the Developmental State and the Rise of Communalism

The central argument of this study is that the decline of the ideology of the developmental state in the Middle East and the nature of the social contract upon which it was based helped crystallize new perceptions of Iraqi political society and the role of the state therein, eventually giving rise to the ideology of communalism. Several factors explain this process, including the emergence of a form of political romanticism in the era of anti-colonial struggle, and later during the post-colonial phase. Ideas of a return to the "roots" and an emphasis either on the distinct "spirit" of the nation, particularly in nationalist discourse,[17] or its religious identity, in Islamist narratives, re-asserted and politicized cultural factors as focal points of both political struggles and discourse.[18]

Yet while the "developmentalist" vision prevailed in the political discourse and public policies of both nationalists and Baathists, especially prior to the one-man rule of Saddam Hussein, it was utterly absent in the Islamist discourse. after the regime stepped up its repression of the Shiʿi Islamist movement and religious establishment, and as Salafism became increasingly dominant within Sunni political Islam from the 1990s onwards.

The decisive factor, however, was the global decline of the populist-leftist model, both under the pressure of its economic failures and due to political crises, most notably the clash with the new right, as represented by the rise of Islamist movements in the region. The latter succeeded, to a large extent, in monopolizing the cultural ground and the narrative of "distinctness". On the other hand, the rise of neo-liberalism and market ideology, along with the collapse of the Soviet Union and Communist movements around the world, dealt a blow to the idea of the planned economy. It also presented elites in the region and the Third World more broadly with the alternatives to "opening-up" and "marketism", helping turn them into oligarchies and creating neo-liberal templates of authoritarianism.[19]

This marked the end of the old social contract, under which the state had ensured economic and social development plus employment in exchange for political submission and the abandonment of political participation. The shift pushed the ruling regimes – under pressure from the economic and political liberalization policies pushed by the US and international economic institutions following the Cold War – to open up economically and politically, albeit within bounds that prevented the process from threatening their

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15 Rogers Brubaker, *Ethnicity Without Groups* (Harvard: Harvard University Press. 2004).

16 Hassan al-Alawi, *al-Shīʿa wa-l-Dawla al-Qawmiyya fī al-ʿIrāq* (London: Dar al-Zawraʾ, 1990).

17 For an example of this perspective, see: Elias Farah, *al-Qawmiyya al-ʿArabiyya wa-l-Wiḥda fī Manẓūr al-Baʿth al-ʿArabī al-Ishtirākī* (Baghdad: Manshurat al-Taliʿa, 1989).

18 Hazem Saghieh, *Rūmanṭīqiū al-Mashriq al-ʿArabī* (Beirut: Riyad al-Rayyis, 2021), pp. 281-343.

19 Dennis C. Canterbury, *Neoliberal Democratization and New Authoritarianism* (New York: Routledge, 2005).

authority.[20] The post-Cold War period was also marked by a retreat from the developmental state model, the ideology of modernization, and the idea of the state as a lever for social change. States largely abandoned socio-economic development programmes and cultural modernization approaches. This augmented the influence of non-governmental organizations (NGOs), aid organizations, and charities, which became tools to mitigate the harmful effects of economic liberalization and the decline in state-backed social guarantees.[21] Among these organizations were Islamic charities, many of them funded by the Gulf states, which broadened their cultural and proselytizing activities. They sometimes operated within a pact with the state that gave them the freedom to proselytize in return for abstaining from any direct political activity.[22]

The two-fold impact of post-modernism and neoliberal thought deeply marked the post-Cold War period. The former vision saw modernization ideology as an outdated grand narrative that reflected a monolithic interpretation of societies and their purpose. Neoliberals, for their part, rejected the interventionist state model in favour of market ideology and strict limits on the state.[23] In the context of what was labelled "late capitalism", there was a celebration of cultural diversity, an acceptance of relativity and the absence of objective truth, along with the rise of consumerism and the increasing commodification of cultural identities. The concepts of tolerance, coexistence, and diversity were held to have replaced ideological struggles.[24] The rise of "culturalism" as an alternative to political ideology and class struggle was another feature of postmodernist liberal discourse and was associated with the return of ethnic and national conflicts to Europe (in the Balkans), and on the borders of the crumbling Soviet empire.

All of this had a deep impact on post-2003 Iraq. While the emergence of "communalism" as a conceptual framework for political community was radically influenced by transformations in the global system, including the decline of the developmental state model, several transformations specific to Iraq also contributed to this process.

Communalism, here, means a perception of society as largely made up of sectarian and ethnic "communities" [*mukawwināt* in Iraqi political lexicon], each of which is a fixed, "essentialist" entity and separate from the others. Accordingly, Shiʿi, Sunni, Kurdish, Christian, Turkmen, and other ethnic and religious identities are also political identities. Thus, communalism views the sect as a political entity, meaning that sects must be represented politically; indeed, the only legitimate form of political representation is sectarian representation. As we shall see, this framework played a major role after 2003 in shaping these "communities" into politico-social realities, just as, in the words of Azmi Bishara, sectarianism created sects.[25]

In the Iraqi case, communalism was a result of domestic developments, particularly the repressive policies of Saddam Hussein, his regime's reliance on the loyalty of a small base of Sunni Arab clans, and its fabrication of an internal hierarchy in which sectarian and national affiliation clashed. This was particularly true in the case of the regime's repression of the Kurdish national movement and the Shiʿi Islamist current.

However, key differences gave rise to the Kurdish national movement and the Shiʿi Islamist movement in the first place. The former drew its legitimacy from the international system that emerged from the First

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20 Stephen J. King, *The New Authoritarianism in the Middle East and North Africa* (Indiana: Indiana Series in Middle East Studies, 2009).

21 For more details about the topic, see: Laura Guazzone & Daniela Pioppi (eds.), *The Arab State and Neo-Liberal globalization: The Restructuring of State Power in the Middle East* (UK: Ithaka Press, 2009).

22 For more details on the role of the unofficial economy and religious networks in political and social Islamization, as well as the influence of remittances from the Gulf in shaping these networks, see: Khalid Mustafa Medani, *Black Markets and Militants: Informal Networks in the Middle East and Africa* (Cambridge: Cambridge University press, 2021).

23 This is despite a substantial body of research showing that neoliberalism did not actually dispense with the role of state, but rather used that role to guarantee the state's continuity and secure the transition toward a market economy. See: "The State Never Went Away: Neoliberalism as a State-Driven Project," in: William Mitchell & Thomas Fazi, *Reclaiming the State: A Progressive Vision of Sovereignty for a Post-Neoliberal World* (London: Pluto Press, 2017).

24 Fredric Jameson, *Postmodernism, or, the Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism* (Durham: Duke University Press, 1991).

25 Azmi Bishara, *Sectarianism Without Sects* (London: Hurst, 2021).

World War, and accepted the nation-state as its basic unit, linking the idea of the nation to an ethno-linguistic community. Hence, the movement was not a rebellion against the nation-state system *per se*, but rather against the contemporary makeup and nature of that state. Therefore, even the Baathist regime was obliged, up to a point, to recognise the Kurdish cause, because the regime itself emerged from a similar conceptual framework. In contrast, the regime did not bestow similar recognition on the Shiʿi Islamist movement, firstly due to its fundamental clash with political Islam, and secondly because it refused to confer legitimacy on the Shiʿis as a political group.

While both experienced formative shifts, the Shiʿi Islamists' transformation from an ideological movement formed in the context of the struggle against communism to an identity-based movement played a greater role in the rise of communalist ideology. Shiʿism and its ideological categories such as the Imamate, occultation, and *wilāyat al-faqīh* (the rule of the jurist) became the main source of the movement's legitimacy and fused with Shiʿi identity in a process of mutual reproduction. This process paved the way for an alliance between the Shiʿi Islamist movement and the Kurdish nationalist camp, revolving around the simultaneous struggle against a dictatorship that was primarily Arab, from a Kurdish perspective, or Sunni, from a Shiʿi perspective. All of this helped lay the groundwork for communalism within which communities came to acquire a supposed existence and essentiality that was more real and immediate than the entity that had brought them together – the Iraqi state.

This ideological basis for political community served a process of hollowing-out the state, which now transformed into a space for expressing the balance of power between the assumed communities and for managing the relationships between them. This led to the Iraqi state taking on a form that some researchers refer to as the "hybrid state".

Post-2003 Tensions between Communalism and Democracy

The entrenchment of communalist ideology in Iraq led to the the creation of consociational system. The roots of this system can be traced back to conferences held by the Iraqi opposition in the 1990s, when ideas of ethnic- and sectarian-based power sharing within state bodies gained currency. Similar thinking has persisted ever since,[26] especially with the rise of the Kurdish nationalist and Shiʿi Islamist movements, and in contrast to the decline of Arab nationalist, leftist, and liberal currents.

The post-2003 transitional Iraqi Governing Council, whose 25 members were selected according to ethnic and sectarian distribution, marked the first embodiment of communalism in the new regime's institutions and political reality.[27] US officials tended to see Iraq primarily in communalist terms. Ideologically, the US liberal view of the world tended to give precedence to cultural factors when classifying identities. This also mirrored the cultural-ethnic classifications so prevalent in the United States – a way of exporting the cultural aspects of these classifications overseas.[28]

On the other side, US views of Iraq specifically, in light of the long conflict with Saddam Hussein's regime, have emphasized sympathy with groups that the regime brutally persecuted. At the same time, scholars and writers close to neoconservatives, who played an important role in promoting the overthrow of Saddam Hussein, promoted the idea that backing Iraq's Shiʿis would put right a historical mistake

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26 Ali A. Allawi, *The Occupation of Iraq: Winning the War, Losing the Peace* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2007), pp. 50-76.

27 Allawi, pp. 164-167.

28 Neda Antanasoski discusses "the reinterpretation of post-Cold War Eastern Europe from the perspective of US multiculturalism … whereby Eastern Europe was imagined as the anachronistic likeness of racist formations in the US past". This refers to the idea of the conflicting "cultural" or "ethnic" groups as representing the composition of societies that have not yet completed their development, arguing that it is necessary to strike a balance and establish justice between them as a recipe for peace. See: Neda Antanasoski, ""Race" Toward Freedom: Post-Cold War US Multiculturalism and the Reconstruction of Eastern Europe," *The Journal of American Culture*, vol. 29, no. 2 (2006), pp. 213-226, 214.

committed by the British, empowering a majority long oppressed by the Sunni minority. Once again, this view was based on a simplistic understanding of both, based on entirely imagined fixed sectarian identities. They argued that empowering that majority was the key to democratizing the region and would win over new allies.[29]

Notable was the indirect role played by theorists of consociational democracy, who presented it as a formula for dealing with conflicts in "divided" societies,[30] and a ready-made recipe for "post-conflict" societies, without, in the Iraqi case, the need for a clear definition of the "conflict". Paul Bremer, head of the now-defunct Coalition Provisional Authority, revealed that there was no specific theoretical framework that governed the political transformation in Iraq. Yet the effects of consociational theory and some of its basic elements were clearly present in the formulation of the post-2003 political system, starting with the formation of the Transitional Governing Council.[31]

Politically speaking, the US needed to gain allies in Iraq, and most of those it did find belonged to exiled political groups, which increasingly formed their identities on an ethno-sectarian basis. Washington treated this as a *fait accompli*, an assumption reinforced by the US perception that because of the post-2003 "Sunni" rebellion, any legitimization of the emerging political system would require Shiʿi-Kurdish acceptance (to which the Sunnis were later attached), and that winning over the "Shiʿis" and "Kurds" would help the US confront the rebellion. But the US view was neither homogeneous nor consistent across time. Rather, the State and Defense departments had wrangled over how to approach Iraq and the form of the post-Saddam regime. The victory of the Pentagon and its "simplistic" vision, along with the influence of Vice President Dick Cheney (who was close to the neo-conservative camp and the Pentagon), made this a vital factor in shaping Washington's policies and its acceptance of communalism as a basis for the post-2003 political equation.[32]

Despite this, communalist ideology continued to face resistance within Iraq itself, including from within the Iraqi opposition, particularly pan-Arabists, leftists, and liberals. This was reflected in the nature of the "consociational system" that followed, which adopted what some would label "liberal" or "flexible" consociationalism.[33] Toby Dodge describes this approach as "informal consociationalism",[34] as the 2005 constitution did not explicitly stipulate the distribution of key positions on an ethnic-sectarian basis. Nor did it contain (except in the preamble) clear definitions of the country's ethno-sectarian components. Fixed quotas of seats were only specified for small ethnic and sectarian groups, such as Christians and Yazidis. This can also be attributed to other factors, such as strong resistance from what came to be reductively known as the "Sunni community" toward the minority status handed to Iraqi Sunnis, in contrast to the Sunni elite's long history of dominance.

Even within Shiʿi Islamist circles, unlike the main Kurdish forces, the idea that Iraq was a self-contained entity, but with a Shiʿi majority, had currency. The main inter-Shiʿi debate was between those who saw majority status as justification to entrench themselves deeper within their sect, fearing a new Sunni dictatorship, and those who wanted to use it to reshape Iraqi identity by submitting it to the will,

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[29] See, for example: Fuad Ajami, *The Foreigner's Gift: The Americans, the Arabs, and the Iraqis in Iraq* (New York: Free Press, 2006); Vali Nasr, *The Shia Revival: How Conflicts Within Islam will Shape the Future* (New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 2006).

[30] Arend Lijphart, "Constitutional Design for Divided Societies," *Journal of Democracy*, vol. 15, no. 2 (2004), pp. 96-109.

[31] Personal Interview with Paul Bremer via email, 20-21 July 2015.

[32] Allawi.

[33] John McGarry & Brendan O'Leary, "Iraq's constitution of 2005: Liberal Consociation as Political Prescription," *International Journal of Constitutional Law*, vol. 5, no. 4 (2007); Matthijs Bogaards, "Iraq's Constitution of 2005: The Case Against Consociationalism 'Light'," *Ethnopolitics*, vol. 20, no. 2 (2021); Harith Hasan, "al-Tajruba al-Tawāfuqiyya fī al-ʿIrāq: al-Naẓariyya wa-l-Taṭbīq wa-l-Natāʾij," *Siyasat Arabiya*, no. 23 (November 2016).

[34] Toby Dodge, "Iraq's Informal Consociationalism and Its Problems," *Studies in Ethnicity and Nationalism*, vol. 20, no. 2 (2020).

symbols, and narratives of the majority. The differences between Shiʿi Islamist factions over the question of federalism, pitting the Shiʿi federalist Supreme Council for the Islamic Revolution in Iraq (renamed the "Islamic Supreme Council of Iraq") against the Daʿwa Party and the Sadrist movement, who promoted a centralized state and were sceptical of federalism, were early manifestations of this struggle.[35]

However, with the growing influence of political forces that had returned to Iraq from exile, the communalist ideology began to seep into various political bodies. These factions put in place political norms that became more entrenched than the principles of the constitution itself, such as the custom that the position of President of the Republic goes to a Kurd, the Speaker of Parliament is a Sunni, and the Prime Minister a Shiʿi, with similar distributions of ministries, embassies, and so on. Communalism came to dominate the concept of political representation and the post-2003 era saw the institutionalization and normalization of existential socio-cultural splits.

Post-2003 elections played a tangible role in this process, not so much by dividing electoral districts into Shiʿi, Sunni, and Kurdish, but by facilitating the process through which grievances, fears, and anger became politicized, in a context of general collapse and growing violence, terrorism, and identity-based killings. They also turned these phenomena into foundations to produce political representation. In such an atmosphere, elections were held for the Transitional National Assembly and the constitution was passed in 2005, largely on the basis of the Shiʿi-Kurdish consensus.

While the Kurdish issue retained its distinctness, enshrined by the constitution's recognition of the Kurdistan region as part of a federal entity, the Shiʿi-Sunni division was subject to a process of "sectarianization" of social identities. Widespread violence, especially that unleashed by *takfīrī* jihadi groups, which turned into a civil conflict between them and Shiʿi militias, deepened divisions through sectarian cleansing and waves of forced displacement. Mixed areas gradually diminished, and urban spaces became isolated cantons divided by sectarian walls. This gave rise to separate imagined communities, each with its own grievances, symbols, and narratives.

It is useful to note the controversy that followed the victory of the "Iraqiya" coalition in 2010 parliamentary elections. Its leader, Iyad Allawi, a non-Islamist Shiʿi with nationalist leanings, remained outside the explanatory framework of communalism. However, being prime minister of the interim government in 2004 had allowed him to accumulate political capital, which he later invested in presenting a narrative that mobilized some nationalist and liberal currents, in addition to Sunni forces who objected to their perceived marginalization. This narrative was centred on Iraqi-Arab identity and alluded to the contradictory question of Iran, a regional sponsor of Shiʿi Islamist forces and Shiʿi empowerment. Allawi's discourse and his alliances helped the Iraqiya coalition achieve its sweeping victory in the Sunni-majority regions during the 2010 parliamentary elections. The bloc also obtained significant votes in Shiʿi-majority regions, especially among Shiʿis who rejected the Islamist rule and/or had pan-Arabist leanings.

Nuri al-Maliki, however, relied firmly on communalist logic in refusing to grant the position of prime minister to Allawi, on the grounds that the latter did not obtain the support of the "Shiʿi majority" and did not represent Shiʿi political culture. That position was reflected in the way Washington handled the issue. Then-vice president Joe Biden, who was responsible for the Iraqi file, adopted al-Maliki's reasoning and supported his extension in office, on the grounds that he represented the "Shiʿi majority," and that the position of prime minister should go to the representative of that majority.[36]

[35] Hasan, "al-Tajruba al-Tawāfuqiyya fī al-ʿIrāq," p. 47.

[36] Emma Sky, political advisor to the chief of the Multi-National Force in Iraq from 2007-2010, who took part in the negotiations following 2010 elections. Personal Interview with Emma Sky in Washington, April 2013.

The crisis following the 2010 elections reflected the tension between the communalist framework and the idea of democracy. This tension was latent but present in the constitution, which largely embraced the "flexible consociationalism" described above. The way in which this tension should have been resolved could have given precedence to and consolidate one or another of both ideas. This was the case in Al-Maliki's success in securing a second term. His triumph was based on a Federal Court ruling that under Article 76A of the Constitution, "the most numerous parliamentary bloc" could form a government, regardless of whether the bloc in question had won elections. That is to say, a bloc could form after elections and win a mandate to rule. This ruling largely neutered the role of elections in defining the political balance, allowing Shiʿi Islamist forces to form a majority. This episode empowered the notion that the nomination for prime minister should come from the "largest community," whereby this community is defined in sectarian, rather than political, terms. The assumption here is that communities are fixed categories and not susceptible to internal changes or to decline in their political salience.

Moreover, the agreement to form a new consensus government was followed by controversy over the status of Allawi's coalition, whose leadership refused to reduce it to a "Sunni" bloc, insisting that it was an Iraqi national entity. Yet when negotiations over government posts began, some members broke away and joined the government as representatives of the "Sunni community". This left Alawi and a handful of his allies isolated in a political grey zone, one that the conceptual code of the new system would not decipher. This crisis rendered communalism a key source of political legitimacy, alongside democracy.

The aftermath of the 2021 elections saw another attempt to indirectly challenge the communalist equation. This time, there was a serious split within each of the three communities. The Sadrist movement had come first in elections, and its leader Muqtada al-Sadr decided to ally with the Kurdistan Democratic Party and the "Sunni" Sovereignty Alliance, instead of reviving the "Shiʿi house" and reaching a deal with the remaining Shiʿi Islamists, which were allied under what became known as the "Coordinating Framework" (*al-Iṭār al-Tansīqī*). Sadr announced that he was adopting the project of the political majority, not the consensual government. He did not completely transcend the communalist ideology or its foundational customs, i.e. the distribution of presidential positions among the three communities. However, by proposing a majority government, he challenged the procedural political framework put in place by communalist ideology – that is to say, "Consociational government".

If Sadr had been able to create a real majority government, it could have been a step toward dismantling "communal" blocs and the ethno-sectarian definitions of majority and minority, creating a new dynamic of alliances based on political options and the transcendence of ethnic and sectarian boundaries. However, communalism imposed its will again. The factions that clung to the concept won the support of Iran and the endorsement of the Federal Supreme Court, which ruled that two-thirds of deputies must be present so the session to elect the President of the Republic, the first step toward forming a government, could reach quorum. This established what became known as the "obstructive third", or as the Coordinating Framework labelled it, the "guarantor third" (i.e. the guarantor that a government could not be formed without it, thus protecting "Shiʿi interests", and keeping itself in government).

This situation led to a series of events and disputes which culminated in Sadr's withdrawal from parliament, clearing the way for his opponents to form the new government. In this context, it was notable that the Coordinating Framework, in its rejection of Sadr's project, appealed to the principle of defending the rights of the largest community. It repeated this phrase frequently in its statements,[37] implying that the largest community could only be defined as "Shiʿi," and that community hierarchy took precedence over election results. This brought the tension between democratic mechanisms and the communalist

[37] See, for example: "al-Iṭār al-Tansīqi: Jalsat al-Sabt Satuʾadī ʾIlā al-Tafrīṭ bi-Ḥuqūq al-Mukawwin al-Akbar fī al-ʿIrāq," *Rudaw Arabia*, 24/3/2023, accessed on 10/8/2023, at: https://rb.gy/yu4s0

ideology back to the fore. Meanwhile, the Coordinating Framework's insistence that it represented the (Shiʿi) community, despite most of its factions' weak electoral results and the rise of new, independent Shiʿi factions who opposed ethno-sectarian quotas system, reflected the crystallization of an ideological definition of the "Shiʿi community". This saw Iraq's Shiʿis not only as a demographic group, but as a bloc that should be represented by Islamist factions – proposing that the latter had the right to speak on behalf of that group, even if the overwhelming majority of Shiʿis had not voted for them.

Communalism, the Hollowing-Out of the State, and the Hybrid Regime

Communalism assumes the political community is comprised of fixed components, each existing independently of the others and the state itself. Although suspicious of the state as a threat to these communities' autonomy and self-sufficiency, communalism also approaches that state as a space in which to affirm the presence of and represent each community, according to its demographic weight. Thus, the state is the product of the communities' coexistence and a coexist and a formula for compatibility between their competing interests.Ultimately, this ideology assumes that the state does not have an agency independent of its parts – nor is any legitimacy attached to state projects independent of those parts. Accordingly, the state is not guided by a specific goal, and does not follow a pre-ordained line of evolution, as claimed by the modernizing approach, whose linear perception has often been criticized.[38]

In Iraq, the political struggle has mostly focused on distributing quotas among communities, rather than on public policies. Indeed, communalist ideology has led directly to what has become known as the "quota" system,[39] which has become informally accepted as a system for distributing ministerial and other top positions, both at the level of communities (Shiʿi, Kurdish, and Sunni) and the inter-communal level (the quotas allocated to political parties and forces within each community). Under this system and in a rentier state like Iraq, where oil revenues constitute nearly 95% of state income, political posts translate into party influence, allowing them to access oil revenues through state employment, contracts between the state and the private sector, and similar clientelist tools. In this way, national consensus governments have become fragile compromises based on heterogeneous coalitions. One of the most striking results has been the segmentation of the governing apparatus, transforming ministries and institutions into the fiefdoms of political parties. This has weakened mechanisms for accountability and oversight.

The quota system is generally regarded as just another embodiment of consociationalism.[40] However, I argue that Consociationalism, despite its weaknesses and the fair criticism it has received,[41] aims essentially at providing guarantees to cultural groups (especially minorities) that their rights will be protected, by involving them in power, decision-making, and the administration. It has thus been presented as a recipe for resolving conflicts in "divided" societies. By contrast, the Iraqi system has served to institutionalize and perpetuate these divisions, without producing real participation in power and decision-making. Instead, these processes have become *more* concentrated in the hands of the oligarchs of each community – without even providing guarantees for minorities. Evidence for this can be seen in the catastrophe that befell the Yazidi minority and the steep decline of the Christian minority. In 2017, this contributed to the crisis over an independence referendum in the Kurdistan region, which turned into armed confrontations between the federal government and the Kurdistan Regional Government.

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38 Escobar; Litonjua.

39 I discussed the nature of the *muḥāṣaṣa* system broadly in: Harith Hasan, "Tashrīḥ 'Dawlat al-Muḥāṣaṣa': al-Niyūbātrimūnyāliyya, al-Mukawwinātiyya wa-Marākiz al-Sulṭa fī al-ʿIrāq," in: Muhammad Hemchi & Morad Diani (eds.), *al-Dawla al-ʿArabiyya al-Muʿāṣira: Buḥūth Naẓariyya wa-Dirāsāt Ḥāla* (Beirut: Arab Center for Research and Policy Studies, 2023).

40 During a closed dialogue between the author and a group of foreign researchers working on Iraq, they asked why *muḥāṣaṣa* had not translated into consociationalism, in a paper written by the author in English.

41 For a critical assessment of consociationalism see: Hasan, "al-Tajruba al-Tawāfuqiyya fī al-ʿIrāq," pp. 42-43.

While Lijphart, the most prominent theorist of consociationalism, talks about cartels of "communal" elites that comprise governments,[42] the rentier quota system in Iraq has become a mechanism for producing elites, which in turn create a base within their communities, through clientelism. It may be true that clientelism and rampant corruption stemming from the "fiefdom" system have indeed produced some horizontal distribution of resources and allowed the creation of a social base for "communal oligarchies". Yet both, by their nature, are exclusionary, and have benefited a limited number of winners in exchange for a greater number of losers. Moreover, clientelism has sometimes been used not to represent but to subjugate the supposed community, by producing a parasitic oligarchy focused on its own interests and with little concern for the basic interests of those it supposedly represents. Elections in 2021 starkly revealed the narrow social base of these "communal oligarchies", whose parties obtained between 25-30% of the total support of registered Iraqi voters, amid a widespread boycott.[43]

This has also given rise to the hollowing-out of the state. This term refers to three attributes: the state's increasing ineffectiveness; its lack of a guiding vision for development; and the lack of a clear social contract regulating its relationship with society. Evidence of the first attribute is found in the rapid post-2003 growth of the civil and military bureaucracies, which together constitute about 40% of the labour force today.[44] This growth has not led to any improvement in the state's governance; experts estimate that the average Iraqi public sector employee is productive for just 17 minutes per day.[45] This reflects a public sector that is, for the most part, a form of disguised unemployment which does not fulfil a specific occupation or role. Transparency International still ranks Iraq among the most corrupt countries in the world (in 2021 it ranked 22nd).[46] In the World Bank's opensource Worldwide Governance Indicators in 2021, Iraq ranked 10th from bottom in terms of governance effectiveness, and 9th from bottom in terms of control over corruption.[47] By some estimates, rampant corruption has led to the theft of as much as $150 billion from the Iraqi state since 2003,[48] which other estimates put at nearly $300 billion.[49]

The government's loss of effectiveness is linked to its transformation from a "tool" of governance into a framework for group representation, then into a tool of political clientelism. The recruitment process had adapted to rid the state of the influence of the Baath Party in government bodies, a legacy of the previous regime's efforts to "Baath-ize" the administration which, in its time, had prioritized loyalty over competence in filling jobs and building governmental and bureaucratic hierarchies, particularly in the security agencies.[50]

However, the policy of ridding government institutions of Baathists evolved into one of substitution in the name of balance among communities, then into a way for the communal factions to broaden their clientelist bases and plant loyalists within the bureaucracy, both civilian and military. Given the weakness of the private sector, the absence of a development programme, rampant corruption, and the proliferation of mafias and armed groups, government employment also became a tool to reduce unemployment and to

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42 Arend Lijphart, "Consociational Democracy," *World Politics Journal*, vol. 21, no. 2 (January 1969), pp. 213-222.

43 Wissam Jaafar Radi, "Fī al-Jumhūr al-ʿĀm wa-l-Aṣwāṭ al-Thābita: Dirāsa fī al-Sulūk al-Intikhābi lil-Aḥzāb al-Siyāsiyya fī al-ʿIrāq," unpublished manuscript.

44 According to some estimates, the number of government employees increased from about 1.5 million in 2003 to nearly 4 million by 2019, and is continuing to grow. "Iraq Labour Force Survey 2021," *Report*, Central Statistical Organization (CSO), Kurdistan Region Statistics Office (KRSO), and International Labour Organization (ILO) (2022); Ali Merza, "Istiḥkām al-Fakh al-Rayʿī fī al-ʿIrāq: Mulāḥaẓāt wa-Muqtaraḥat," *Iraq Journal of Strategic Issues*, no. 6 (2018).

45 "Khubarāʾ: Muʿaddal Intāj al-Muwaẓẓaf 17 Daqīqa fī al-Yawm min Aṣl Thamān Sāʿāt," *Al Mada Paper*, 11/11/2024, accessed on 10/8/2023, at: https://tinyurl.com/yc8hrr69

46 "Corruption Index", *Trading Economics*, accessed on 28/12/2022, at: https://tinyurl.com/bddaw9ed

47 *Worldwide Governance Indicators*, accessed on 28/12/2022, at: https://tinyurl.com/sp93334b

48 Mohammed Tawfeeq, "Iraq estimates that $150 billion of its oil money has been stolen from the country since the US-led invasion of 2003," *CNN*, 23/5/3021, accessed on 10/8/2023, at: https://tinyurl.com/59uwv46y

49 Sajad Jiyad, "Corruption is Strangling Iraq," *The Century Foundation*, 14/12/2022, accessed on 10/8/2023, at: https://tinyurl.com/ykfdcsmz

50 For more details about policies of Baathification, see: Aaron M. Faust, *The Baʿthification of Iraq: Saddam Hussein's Totalitarianism* (Texas: University of Texas Press, 2015), pp. 97-116.

win over social sectors that were benefitting, within the framework of an implicit rentier contract based selectively providing on government jobs and handouts, in return for submission to the political status quo.

This brings us to the second feature: the absence of a developmental programme. To the extent that there is any discussion of "development" in the Iraqi state and in political discourse today, it is largely of a technical nature, not a comprehensive socio-economic vision, as during the stage of developmental populism. Furthermore, the marriage between the rentierist system and the neoliberal economy has created an understanding of "progress" focused on consumption, with an emphasis not on production, but rather on importing. This system is not concerned with social justice. Rather, it has developed a kind of parasitic mafia economy designed to serve the political class, the merchant class, and the armed groups.

One outcome of this transition to "rentier-neoliberalism"[51] is that Iraq imports most of its needs, including many locally-produced agricultural products due to their low competitiveness, a result of the cheapness of imports compared to the cost of productive investment. This is inseparable from the tendency of the political and commercial oligarchs to chase quick profits, and the unstable nature of the quota system and its tendency to deter long-term investment.

An aspect of rentier-neoliberalism is the uneven distribution of wealth. The number of Iraqis living below the poverty line has increased, and the lower middle class and those on limited incomes live hand to mouth due to political instability and the country's total economic dependence on oil. While accurate statistics on inequality in Iraq are lacking, some studies estimate that some 60% of the population are on low incomes, while those who meet the description of "poor" number more than 11 million, out of an estimated 41 million.[52] By contrast, the wealth of the political and commercial oligarchy has seen unprecedented growth, giving rise to a new merchant class, widespread mafia-like practices, and a weak regulatory and judicial apparatus.[53]

The third feature is the relationship with society that is no longer regulated by a clear social contract, raising the question of legitimacy. The American vision, adopted by the opposition political class before the 2003 invasion, was that Iraq would move toward democracy as a basis for the legitimacy of the regime and choosing who would rule. However, communalism has become the basis for shaping perceptions of the democratic system and the form of Iraq's political society. The function of democracy, as adopted by this system, is thus to represent the communities.

Furthermore, "communalism" is instrumentalized by parties that are authoritarian in structure, usually led by a family or a figure with a clientelist network. Most of Iraq's so-called "political parties" are more like "small cliques," which disregard the principle of periodic transfer of power, are not governed by coherent intellectual structures, nor shaped by real political-social necessities. The leaders of these cliques tend to use clientelism and sometimes illegal or extra-legal violence as well as elections (and fraud, if possible) to secure their interests. They are helped in this by the fact that most of them have armed wings, a clear violation of one of the central principles of democratic systems: the state monopolizes the tools of legal coercion. These cliques (whose leadership is often hereditary), see elections as a procedural necessity to renew their control. In the event that elections fail to produce satisfactory results, they then appeal to their right to defend the "community" to re-impose a favourable balance of power. This was the case in polls in both 2010 and 2021, and repeated following elections in the KRG.

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51 Irene Costantini, "A Neoliberal Rentier System: New Challenges and Past Economic Trajectories in Iraq," *The International Spectator*, vol. 52, no. 1 (2017), pp. 61-75.

52 Munqith Dagher, "Iraq Stability and its Free-Falling Middle Class," *Commentary*, Center for Strategic and International Studies (21 October 2021).

53 Simona Foltyn, "'Heist of the century: how $2.5bn was plundered from Iraqi state funds," *The Guardian*, 20/11/2022, accessed on 10/8/2023, at: https://tinyurl.com/f298s6wk

Hence, some researchers tend to describe the political system in Iraq as a hybrid regime,[54] neither an authoritarian system controlled by a dominant power centre, *nor* a democratic regime that allows for free competition under the rule of law.[55] Nor, indeed, is it a system in which the state has a monopoly on the legitimate use of force. The Iraqi state systematically violates legal and constitutional rights through torture, arbitrary arrest, executions following flawed trials, and blatant discrimination between citizens, failing to subject major political forces to the rule of law.

This hybrid system and the political compact on which it is built prioritizes procedural legitimacy over democratic legitimacy. What real legitimacy remains is subordinated to power relations. As Luciani argues,[56] the rentier nature of the regime still allows the elites controlling the state to gain some legitimacy, by allocating rents to specific sectors in exchange for their submission. This guarantees a form of stability for the regime and a social base that defends it and is linked to it in terms of interests – or at least has no interest in opposing it. The distribution of power and resources among communalist oligarchs also allows for a horizontal distribution of those resources among the sectors of the population with which these elites have a clientelist relationship, in a way that may mitigate the effects of a vertical distribution that reinforces inequality.

In moments when the regime will be unable to use enough violence to ensure public submission, or the resources that allow it to buy such submission start to run low, it may face opposition seeking to overthrow or reform it, providing other psychological and logistical conditions are met. This was demonstrated in the October 2019 protest movement. However, overthrowing such a regime is difficult, due to the multiplicity of power centres, the use of communalist ideology (which in turn is based on fuelling collective, ethnic, and sectarian fears), and the absence of an ideological alternative agreed upon by a broad sector of the population. At the same time, it is a difficult regime to reform from within, firstly due to the intricacy of reconciling various interests, and secondly because reform would threaten the power of communal oligarchies that control the system.

Conclusion

An accurate understanding of the nature of the Iraqi state in the 20 years since the US-led invasion and the fall of Saddam Hussein demands an analysis of the ideological basis of the subsequent regime, which I have termed communalism. This ideology marks a break with the ideology of integrationist modernism, which dominated both during the colonial and the postcolonial periods. The hybrid nature of the resulting state, and its vision of political community, cannot change unless there is a shift in the whole ideology on which it is based. Here, the term "ideological basis" does not refer to the constitution. A hybrid state derives its existence not only from constitutional provisions and laws, but also from unwritten rules. Nor does the term refer to a change in the ruling elite, because communalism is capable of producing alternative elites. Rather, the term refers to the need to abandon collectivist ideas based on understandings of the political community as comprising fixed ethnic and sectarian communities, and of political representation as something limited to representation of those communities. An alternative ideology would describe political community and the necessities of its existence in a way that also reshapes the state's relationship with society, and the function that is expected of the state.

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[54] Renad Mansour & Lina Khatib, "Where is the 'state' in Iraq and Lebanon? Power Relations and Social Control," *Research Paper*, Chatham House (April 2021).

[55] Joakim Ekman, "Political Participation and Regime Stability: A Framework for Analyzing Hybrid Regimes," *International Political Science Review & Revue Internationale de Science Politique*, vol. 30, no. 1 (January 2009).

[56] Giacomo Luciani, "Allocation Vs. Production States: A Theoretical Framework," in: Hazem Beblawi & Giacomo Luciani (eds.), *The Rentier State* (New York: Croom Helm, 1987).

The struggle over the definition of the Iraqi "political society" since the inception of the modern state can be seen as a struggle between two currents, integrationist (which took a form close to totalitarianism under Baathist rule), and pluralistic (which took the form of dismantling society and handing the fragments to imagined communities, which were given an "essential" character at some point after 2003). It is hard not to see that the second current was, to a large extent, a product of abuse of the first, as well as being influenced by the domestic and international contexts of its emergence, as detailed above.

Communalism sees the state fundamentally as a sum of its parts and a space in which those parts can be represented. As a result, the "communalist state" lacks any subjective identity independent of those parts and has thus been unable to adopt effective development policies. Doing so would impinge on the territory of those communities, claiming that the state had a logic independent of them.

While communalism has been presented as having a representational aspect, based on proportionalism, the rentier nature of the Iraqi state and the way this allows the state to operate independently of society have produced communalist elites. However, those elites have limited legitimacy, along the lines of rentier-clientelist logic, and have even resorted to private militias to defend their areas of authority and used extra-legal violence. Yet, communalist ideology faces major challenges: the growing political, social, and economic problems arising from the failure of the communalist state, and the escalation of a protest movement demanding reform and voicing widespread resentment against the dominant elites.

This situation could give rise to attempts to overthrow it from within, if the most powerful party seeks to impose its hegemony over the system, resources, and the tools of legitimate coercion. It could then adopt a new authoritarian project, according to a different ideology which centralizes the culture and perspective of the dominant party at the expense of the weaker ones. On the other hand, the system could dissolve or collapse under the weight of its own contradictions as well as external pressures, via protest movements – especially if the latter were to successfully develop a mature alternative based on a national ideology. In the absence of an alternative, the most likely result of a systemic collapse would be civil conflict, followed by a long struggle to fill the vacuum.

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