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IRAQ'S YEAR OF RAGE

Mieczysław P. Boduszyński

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Iraqis are fed up. Even as they wage war on the Islamic State in Iraq and Syria (ISIS),[1] they are also battling their own country's corrupt and ineffective political elite. Since the summer of 2015, Iraqis have turned out to protest in record numbers in order to demand change. On 30 April 2016, protestors led by followers of populist Shia cleric Muqtada al-Sadr penetrated Baghdad's heavily fortified and deeply despised International Zone (or "Green Zone"), overrunning the country's parliament, destroying property, and assaulting several parliamentarians. The protesters demanded accountability for corruption and the replacement of the entire cabinet with nonpolitical technocrats. These chaotic scenes at once demonstrated the depth of popular anger at the entrenched political elite and the impotence of Iraqi state institutions. In the following days, the circulation on social media of photos of Prime Minister Haider al-Abadi inspecting a destroyed couch in the parliament building invited scorn for his apparent concern about a piece of furniture while millions of Iraqis live without security, electricity, jobs, and clean drinking water.

It may surprise some that an Iraqi group or movement, especially one rooted in the majority Shia population, would seek to challenge a Shia-led government at a time when the country faces the existential threat of ISIS. But Iraqis of all ethnic and sectarian stripes, not just Sunnis and Kurds, are tired of the ineptitude and corruption of their political leaders, political parties, and government institutions; hence, the protest movement was neither sectarian nor religious. Iraqis also blame politi-

cians for having squandered the country's fortunes when oil prices were high. More recently, record-low prices have severely decreased government revenue and worsened the quality of already poor public services and infrastructure. The Iraqi army's shameful retreat in the face of the initial ISIS onslaught in 2014, as well as its inability to prevent the massive bombs planted in Baghdad by ISIS in summer 2016, were just further evidence of political dysfunction, corruption, and state weakness in Baghdad.[2] It is most telling that, in early 2016, many more Iraqis saw as the central obstacle to progress in Iraq the failure of political parties, rather than ISIS or falling oil prices.[3]

Since 2004, Iraqis have written and ratified (in 2005) a democratic constitution and held regular national and local elections. There is a lively media sector, and civil society groups operate throughout the country. On these narrow parameters, Iraqis are freer than many of their fellow Arabs, save for Tunisians, Moroccans, and Lebanese. Yet the protest movement of 2015–16 has put a harsh spotlight on two central and interrelated failings of Iraq's post-2003 order that have led to unprecedented levels of popular discontent: 1) the entrenchment of a self-interested, corrupt "partyocracy" that has captured the state and deepened sectarian divisions; and 2) weak state institutions and the lack of rule of law, which encourage unparalleled levels of corruption and have fostered broad popular distrust toward state institutions among large swaths of the public.

Images of "people power"–style antigovernment protests in Baghdad and other Iraqi cities over the past year bring to mind those in Cairo, Tunis, and Sana'a during the "Arab Spring" in 2011. Yet while Egyptian, Tunisian, and Yemeni protestors mobilized against unaccountable and undemocratic autocrats, Iraqis' outrage has been directed toward the ruling clique for whom they voted in multiple elections. A closer look at the origins and development of Iraq's partyocracy—the clutch of parties that dominate public life and have captured the Iraqi state and its institutions since 2003—helps to explain the roots of popular anger toward it.

In the period following the 2003 U.S.-led invasion and occupation of Iraq, a constellation of mostly religious Shia actors and parties swept into Baghdad on the "backs of tanks," as Iraqis say to emphasize the link between the invasion and the previously exiled political elite. These persons and parties came to dominate the post-Saddam transition, gradually eliminating alternatives to their rule. Many belonged to Shia Islamist opposition movements—including the Supreme Council for the Islamic Revolution in Iraq (SCIRI; later the Islamic Supreme Council in Iraq, or ISCI), its previously affiliated Badr Brigade, and Dawa (Islamic Call Party)—that had spent decades trying to dislodge Saddam Hussein and his Baath Party regime from power.

Some figures, such as former prime minister Ibrahim al-Jaafari of Dawa, had spent many years in the West. Others had close ties to Iran;

some had even fought on Tehran's side in the Iran-Iraq war and pledged loyalty to the Iranian revolution. Other exiled dissidents, such as the secular-minded Ayad Allawi (who would serve as interim prime minister in 2004–2005 and vice-president in 2014–15) and Ahmad Chalabi, benefited from millions of dollars of support from the United States and United Kingdom during the Saddam years and were handpicked by the Bush administration to participate in Iraq's post-Saddam interim Governing Council (2003–2004). Still others, including Nuri al-Maliki (prime minister from 2006 to 2014), had spent years in neighboring countries working for Dawa, which at the time was plotting clandestine operations to overthrow the Saddam regime.

The 2003 invasion was an opportunity for these exiles to realize their decades-long dream of overthrowing Saddam and giving Iraq's oppressed Shia majority the opportunity to rule. Besides enjoying the support of the U.S. occupation authority (the 2003–2004 Coalition Provisional Authority, or CPA), many members of the emerging Shia political class benefited from the backing of Iran, which also saw tremendous opportunities to promote its interests in the post-Saddam order. Iraq's new elites installed themselves in Baghdad's International Zone, taking over the walled villas and other facilities previously occupied by the Baathist elite.

Also important was the Sadrist Trend (which later inspired the al-Ahrar political bloc), an indigenous Shia Islamist political force that emerged after 2003. Its leader, Muqtada al-Sadr, was the heir to a prominent Shia clerical family in Najaf that was distinguished by its political activism (in contrast to the "quietism" of Iraq's top Shia cleric, Grand Ayatollah Ali al-Sistani) and vocal opposition to the Saddam regime. Muqtada's father and uncle were allegedly killed by the former regime, but the Sadr family largely remained in Iraq and continued to champion the needs of the masses of Shia poor. This meant that Muqtada, along with the Kurdish politicians, was among the few post-2003 Iraqi political elites who had a genuine domestic political base. In contrast to the former exiles, who owed their positions to the United States, Muqtada used anti-American nationalist messages to appeal to marginalized Shia. He formed a militia, the Jaysh al-Mahdi, which played a role in both the anti-U.S. insurgency and the sectarian conflict of the 2000s. Muqtada has managed, albeit in a mercurial and populist fashion, to mobilize large numbers of people at key junctures, most recently by jumping on the protest bandwagon.

Non-Shia parties also entered the post-Saddam vacuum. The two most powerful Kurdish parties, the Kurdistan Democratic Party (KDP) and the Patriotic Union of Kurdistan (PUK), fought a civil war against each other in the 1990s, but later worked together to establish a quasi-independent state (Kurdistan) in Iraq's three northern provinces. After 2003, they quickly gained a place in the interim governing structures. Their pre-2003 ruling elites, who already had close ties with the

Iraq's Main Political Parties, circa 2015–16

Party	Leader	Coalition	Ethnosectarian Affiliation	No. of MPs
Badr Organization	Hadi al-Amiri	State of Law	Shia	21
Dawa Party (multiple factions)	Nouri al-Maliki	State of Law/ National Alliance	Shia	61
Al-Ahrar Party	Dia al-Asadi	National Alliance	Shia	34
Fadhila Party	Ammar Tuma	National Alliance	Shia	6
National Reform Trend	Ibrahim al-Jaafari	National Alliance	Shia	6
Islamic Supreme Council (ISCI)	Ammar al-Hakim	Al-Muwatin/ National Alliance	Shia	31
Mutahidoon	Usama al-Najaifi	Etihad	Sunni	28
Al-Arabiya	Saleh al-Mutlaq	Etihad	Sunni	12
Kurdistan Democratic Party (KDP)	Masoud Barzani	Kurdish Alliance	Kurdish	25
Patriotic Union of Kurdistan (PUK)	Barham Salih	Kurdish Alliance	Kurdish	21
Gorran	Nawshirwan Mustafa	Kurdish Alliance	Kurdish	9
Wataniya	Ayad Allawi	Al-Wataniya	Nonsectarian	29

Note: Religious and ethnic minorities and various independents fill the remaining 35 seats in the Iraqi Council of Representatives.

United States, quickly became part of the Shia-led ruling establishment in Baghdad, in addition to governing their own autonomous region in the north. The Sunni Arabs also had elites who came to Baghdad "on the backs of tanks" in 2003, among them the leadership of the Muslim Brotherhood–affiliated Iraqi Islamic Party. After boycotting the first post-Saddam elections in 2005, Sunnis formed the National Forces Alliance, a political bloc that purports to represent the interests of Iraq's embattled Sunni minority, but is seen by many ordinary Sunnis as a part of the failed, graft-ridden political machine.

It is worth highlighting here the "baggage" that the former exiles brought with them to Iraq and how deeply this baggage has influenced the trajectory of the partyocracy. For some, Iraq's emerging political elite was tainted by its association with the U.S. invasion and its dubious justification on the grounds of ridding Iraq of weapons of mass destruction. In addition, since most of the new elites had long been based outside of Iraq, they were thought by many to be out of touch with the country's current reality. The protagonist of *The Rope,* Kanan Makiya's 2016 novel about postinvasion Iraq, offers this description: "They look like us, because they were born among us, but they no longer think or feel like us . . . they live in Baghdad in heavily guarded compounds . . . they avoid us ordinary Iraqis . . . they are revolutionaries in words alone."[4]

Most had operated for decades in secretive, undemocratic, conspiratorial, and closed opposition movements, many of which were sectarian

or religious in character, and thus were wholly unprepared to lead modern democratic political parties. Sectarianism as a means of legitimation became especially attractive for those obsessed with victimhood at the hands of Saddam but with no real indigenous support base, political platform, or power. Moreover, the exile leaders did not trust one another, making it hard for them to cooperate for the good of the country (a trend exacerbated by the plethora of parties that emerged after 2003, many of which entered the first parliament due to low electoral thresholds).

Finally, while the CPA saw the exiles as potential intermediaries between the international administrators brought in to run state institutions and their Iraqi staff, the exile elites' lack of administrative—or indeed any meaningful—experience made them very poor managers. Iraqi lawyer Zaid Al-Ali writes, "They hid their lack of qualifications behind a screen of deceit, arrogance and supreme self-confidence, which only served to worsen the situation."[5] De-Baathification, a policy that was initiated by the CPA and implemented with increased vigor by Iraqi elites after 2004, purged tens of thousands of civil servants (from agency heads to primary-school teachers) based on Baath Party association rather than on conduct.[6] This policy emptied the bureaucracy of managers who may have been corrupt or inefficient, but it replaced them with politically connected exiles and their local loyalists, who had no idea how to run agencies and were at least as corrupt as their Baathist predecessors.

How Ethnosectarianism Prevailed

How did the partyocracy become entrenched and succeed over time in eliminating genuine alternatives to its rule? The answer begins with *muhasasa,* a term I heard repeated frequently and with much disdain by Iraqis from all walks of life during the 2015–16 year of protest. *Muhasasa* is translated as "quotas," but in the Iraqi context it refers to the informal system by which Iraq's partyocracy has divided the state among its members. One part of *muhasasa* involves the ethnosectarian division of power. Unlike postconflict power-sharing provisions in Lebanon or Bosnia and Herzegovina, Iraq's arrangement is not codified in the constitution but has instead become the de facto practice through which certain positions are doled out to particular sects: The president is a Kurd; the prime minister, a Shia; and the speaker of parliament, a Sunni.

The roots of ethnosectarian *muhasasa* lie in the CPA, which believed that stability would be served by an interim Governing Council that reflected the country's ethnosectarian balance.[7] Over time, the idea of large ethnosectarian electoral blocs dividing power among themselves became ingrained in Iraq's political system. Sectarian feelings and policies (as well as authoritarianism) intensified under the rule of Prime Minister Maliki, especially during his second term (2010–14).[8]

In the eyes of the hundreds of thousands of Iraqis who took to the streets in 2015 and 2016 to protest *muhasasa* (among other things), sectarian quotas are directly responsible for Iraq's poor governance. A majority of Iraqis surveyed in 2016 named ending the quota system as the most important step that the country could take toward political reconciliation.[9] Iraqis resent a practice that values membership in a particular group over merit and has led to the installation of incompetent and corrupt elites. Furthermore, *muhasasa* incentivizes political parties to organize and mobilize around ethnic and sectarian identity, thereby deepening sectarian rifts and conflict. As a result of *muhasasa* and a party-list electoral system, sectarianism became the most reliable platform on which to contest elections.[10] Indeed, many Iraqis have even come to see sectarianism as something that the ruling political parties created in order to maintain their privileges and power and then reinforced by deploying their affiliated armed groups.

The Shia parties made de-Baathification a centerpiece of their agenda, while Sunnis came to see this as a deliberate attempt to marginalize them from post-Saddam political and economic life (some have referred to de-Baathification as "de-Sunnification"). They blame the Shia parties for inciting the 2006–2008 sectarian conflict in which party-affiliated militias played the leading role, as well as for the more recent years of sectarian rule under Maliki.

Of course, ethnosectarian divisions in Iraq have roots that long pre-date 2003: The Baathist crackdown on Kurds in the 1970s and 1980s and Saddam's repression of the southern Shia uprising after the 1991 Gulf War were particularly important in galvanizing ethnic and sectarian identities. Several other episodes of large-scale sectarian conflict occurred in the sixteenth, seventeenth, and nineteenth centuries. But as the post-Saddam transition progressed, the role of the *muhasasa* system in mobilizing ethnosectarian sentiment became clear. Today, 95 percent of Iraqis see politicians and parties as "very responsible" for creating divisions and hindering reconciliation—more than the 89 percent who see ISIS as "very responsible" for fomenting sectarian division.[11]

The second part of the reviled *muhasasa* system is the divvying up of state institutions among various parties within the ethnosectarian blocs. Over the past thirteen years of transition, parties have "colonized" the ministries in Baghdad, which never got beyond their Baathist, neosocialist roots as bloated, inefficient bodies presiding over an enormous workforce and Iraq's unreformed state-driven, oil-dependent economy. Iraqi government bodies have the power to award billions of dollars in contracts, and they employ approximately 3.5 million people, in addition to providing electricity, fuel, various services, and even food. Control of particular ministries has become a major source of patronage and corruption, and thus a vital interest of the political parties—hence their fierce opposition to calls for a technocratic government.

After every election, there are ferocious battles for control of ministries, with the biggest prizes—ministries such as Oil, Transport, and Electricity that award lucrative contracts—going to the most powerful parties. Over time, certain political groups have become so entrenched in particular ministries—for example, the Badr Organization (formed from the Badr Brigade in 2012) at the Interior Ministry—that they are seen as "owning" the institution, and fiercely oppose any policies that might threaten their position. Ministries, in turn, control positions in a host of provincial-level directorates and other state-run bodies (such as universities) that are equally important sources of patronage.

The lack of a legal framework for regulating the activities of political parties also has helped to enable Iraq's partyocracy. As Zaid al-Ali notes, Iraqis have no way of knowing where parties get their money, where and how they keep it, and what they do with it.[12] Parliament has never passed a comprehensive law on political parties, and the lack of regulation and oversight allows them to use government funds and state resources to buy votes. Parties have also gained millions of dollars in kickbacks for granting (through the ministries under their control) contracts to foreign companies. Moreover, parties "own large tracts of land, businesses and media empires, and employ thousands of people. Each has become a state in its own right."[13] In the 2010 election, Maliki's State of Law Coalition gave golden revolvers to southern tribal leaders in exchange for their support. At other times, parties have handed out state jobs, state-owned land, and cash that they have stolen from the state.

Finally, militias have played a central role in fending off challenges to the primacy of the partyocracy. The 2005 elections brought to power parties such as SCIRI (later ISCI), long tied to the Badr Brigade militia that had operated in Iran as an armed wing of the opposition to Saddam. In 2012, the renamed Badr Organization split from ISCI and formed its own eponymous political party (while continuing to operate a militia), and ISCI started a new militia, the Ashura Brigades. Other militias, such as Muqtada al-Sadr's Jaysh al-Mahdi (later disbanded and reconstituted as the Peace Brigades), were formed after 2003 and had no ties to earlier groups. Eventually all the major parties came to rely on affiliated militias to protect their interests and, at times, to intimidate journalists, protestors, and other political opponents.

The militias filled the void created by the CPA's disbanding of the Iraqi army and police and formed what became the de facto security sector in many towns, cities, and regions, while simultaneously providing vital sources of employment. Yet these armed groups also engaged in criminal activity, thereby playing the roles of both "arsonist and firefighter" in Iraq's post-2003 chaos. This led to a vicious cycle in which many militias argued that they could not disarm so long as the state was unable to provide security, which only further enfeebled the state. Adding to the militias' legitimacy was Sistani's 2014 *fatwa* calling on

all able-bodied Shia men to fight ISIS. While new militias have formed since 2014, previously existing groups (especially those tied to Iran) have been leading the charge against ISIS under the state-sanctioned Popular Mobilization Forces (*hashd al-sha'abi*) umbrella, a fact that they publicize on affiliated party-militia television stations and on the ubiquitous militia and martyr posters that cover Iraqi cities and towns. Meanwhile, there were numerous reports of party-affiliated militias intimidating peaceful protestors in 2015–16.

So it was that the Iraqi parties, like a devastating cancer, spread to every organ of the state, the economy, and the informal security sector. Party and state have become virtually indistinguishable, with political blocs divvying up state agencies and control of resources like bereaved relatives dividing the family estate among themselves. But capture by the parties weakened the state's capacity to carry out its most basic duties, such as maintaining a monopoly on the use of force and controlling the country's borders.

While Saddam's regime had been corrupt and repressive, it was at least able to maintain order, unlike the post-2003 partyocracy. Civil society, which had never existed under Saddam, had little time to develop after 2003 before security broke down, and it was unable (at least until 2015) to challenge either the parties' strength and resources or the militias' violence and intimidation.[14] While Ayad Allawi's al-Wataniya coalition (successor to the al-Iraqiya coalition) presented a nonreligious, nonsectarian alternative, both al-Wataniya and Allawi himself came to be seen as just as corrupt and ineffective as the powerful Shia religious parties and their leaders. In 2016, most of the same individuals and groups that took the reins of power in 2003–2004 remain in control of the state, while alternatives to their rule appear weak or nonexistent.

The Protest Movement Emerges

In the hot summer of 2015, things came to a head as oil prices fell, the army failed to defend the country against ISIS, reports of high-level corruption continued, and electricity and clean water remained scarce.[15] Mounting frustration over these issues drove Iraq's relatively weak and fragmented civil society groups to unite in a call for nationwide protests to demand sweeping changes in the prevailing system of governance. Although Iraq witnessed large antigovernment protests in 2011 and 2012, those were mostly confined to Sunni areas and focused on Sunni-specific grievances. This time, civil society led the protests, which were not sectarian and took place in almost every city and province (except those controlled by ISIS), including in Kurdistan. In August 2015, tens of thousands of protestors filled Baghdad's Tahrir Square and nearby streets—some were demanding the dismissal of corrupt ministers, while

others were calling for deeper changes to the constitutional order, including a secular state.

The Partyocracy Strikes Back

The ferocity with which the partyocracy resisted this challenge from the street demonstrated just how threatened party leaders felt. They pulled out all the stops to thwart and discredit the protests, blaming foreign powers and accusing the protestors of being either anti-Islam or pro-Baathist. Numerous reports also suggest that the parties deployed their affiliated militias to intimidate, beat, and humiliate civic-activist protestors.

Transport Minister Baqir Jabr al-Zubeidi, a member of the ISCI-led Muwatin coalition, claimed that "dubious political parties stand behind this protest and wanted to stir chaos, annoy the citizens and humiliate the government." Former prime minister Nuri al-Maliki issued a number of statements strongly opposing the protests and protesters. He said in an interview that "the protests went outside of the framework they should have stayed within because of their use of slogans against religion and Islamic movements."[16] Elsewhere, Maliki played on Shia fears of the former regime, claiming that the protestors were Baathists and members of Saddam's Republican Guard. Qais al-Khazali, a leader of the pro-Iranian militia Asaib Ahl al-Haq, criticized Abadi's reform agenda, saying that it was distracting the government from the war against ISIS.

Haider al-Abadi, the prime minister chosen to replace Maliki in August 2014 after the latter's humiliation at the hands of ISIS, was forced to confront the outpouring of popular anger. On 9 August 2015, Abadi, backed by Sistani (who had explicitly called on Abadi to prosecute senior figures accused of corruption), announced a sweeping package of reforms designed to eliminate waste, fight corruption, and improve public services. Parliament approved it two days later. Abadi's proposed reforms included the elimination of the vice-presidencies, four ministries, and a number of government commissions; the merger of eight ministries; the dismissal of 123 unnamed deputy ministers and directors general from across 23 ministries and agencies; the introduction of a program to evaluate the performance of ministries; the elimination of paid advisors at ministries; the elimination of discretionary funds for government agencies; the cancellation of government contracts not in conformity with standards; reductions in the salaries of civil servants; adoption of measures pushing accountability for corruption; and an end to sectarian and partisan quotas. These measures faced fierce resistance from most of the party establishment, and by the end of October 2015, they remained largely unimplemented. Then, on November 2, the Iraqi parliament voted to revoke any mandate for Prime Minister Haider al-Abadi to conduct further reforms without consulting the parties.

Following a period of sustained activity, the protest movement lost

steam in the fall of 2015. After months of repeatedly prodding the politicians to heed the people's calls, a frustrated Ayatollah Sistani went silent. That same month, Abadi announced plans to replace current ministers with nonparty "technocrats." Not long after, Muqtada al-Sadr jumped on the reform bandwagon—he led a rally of a hundred-thousand people in Baghdad, called on his followers to occupy the Green Zone, and demanded the appointment of the technocratic cabinet promised by Abadi. Muqtada managed to marshal some of the civic activists who had been on the frontlines of protest in 2015 to join him, turning a fading protest movement into a major national force.[17]

Hardly a democratic figure, and one affiliated with the al-Ahrar party (widely perceived as corrupt), Muqtada had nonetheless successfully placed himself in the vanguard of the proreform protest movement. The Sadrists, emboldened and buoyed by their increasing popularity, began to coopt the civil society groups that had led the protests in 2015, helping to swell the protest numbers. Although the two protest groups (Sadrists and civic activists) had very different ideological orientations, they were united, at least temporarily, by their fury at the corrupt partyocracy.

In late March 2016, following weeks of sit-ins in front of the Green Zone, Muqtada gave Abadi a deadline to propose the new technocratic ministers. When that deadline passed, Sadrist protesters stormed the Green Zone and parliament on April 30, meeting little resistance. The security forces stationed there appeared to embrace the Sadrists, with one general kissing Muqtada's hand, a sign of submission. Muqtada also ordered parliamentarians from the al-Ahrar party to stop participating in legislative proceedings and fired several who had been accused of corruption.

On May 20, the Sadrist protesters accused Abadi of failing to follow through on promises to fight corruption and again stormed the Green Zone. This time, security forces responded harshly, with tear gas and live ammunition. Several protestors were killed. Muqtada, perhaps shaken by the escalation of violence and likely reined in by Iran, secluded himself in the Iranian city of Qom (where he had lived until 2011 after fleeing Iraq in 2007) and ceased protest activity. By mid-July, he was again calling for a "revolution" against "the [ISIS] of terror" and the "the [ISIS] of corruption in the current government."[18] Turnout was smaller, however, and some civic activists were now signaling a break in their alliance with Muqtada.

In response to Muqtada's movement, the parties tried to outdo each other in calling for reforms, though with little sincerity. It was abundantly clear that groups such as ISCI, Badr, and the Kurdish parties were terrified of losing control over key ministries and agencies that were irreplaceable sources of graft and patronage. A group of ostensibly proreform parliamentarians voted to oust the Sunni speaker, Salim al-Jabouri, a move that was later declared illegal by the Iraqi Federal Court. Anti-ISIS liberation operations in the city of Fallujah in May and

June 2016 helped to give both the prime minister and the parties some breathing room, at least in the short term.

On 19 July 2016, Abadi accepted the resignation of seven Shia cabinet ministers from the ISCI, Ahrar, and Badr parties as part of an internal deal to satisfy the demands for change. On 25 August 2016, the parliament sacked Defense Minister Khaled al-Obeidi, the result of wrangling within the Sunni political bloc. Neither development, however, guaranteed the kind of reforms demanded by the protestors and promised by Abadi in 2015.

State Weakness, Corruption, and Illegitimacy

Over the past year, Iraqis have directed much of their rage at corruption. There are a number of structural factors that have encouraged weak rule of law in Iraq: a legacy of corruption from the Saddam years, especially during the period of sanctions (1991–2003); the "resource curse" of oil dependency; the security breakdown after 2003, which facilitated impunity and led to the targeting of officials charged with countering it; massive inflows of foreign aid; a weak, politicized judiciary; constitutional weaknesses (including insufficient and vague competencies granted to the central government); and legal and regulatory gaps that have inhibited the enforcement of transparency and accountability.

Corruption has had an enormous impact on the lives of ordinary Iraqis. Despite being classified as a middle-income country and having one of the largest budgets in the Middle East, Iraq has been among the least effective countries in the region at improving the lives of ordinary citizens. Roads, schools, hospitals, power stations, water, and other public infrastructure and services are in appalling shape for a country with its level of income. During my travels in southern Iraq between August 2015 and August 2016, I was continually amazed by the degree of abject poverty and the dire state of services and infrastructure.

Iraq ranks near the bottom of Transparency International's Corruption Perceptions Index, ahead only of the likes of Afghanistan, Angola, Libya, North Korea, South Sudan, Sudan, and Somalia. Iraq's enfeebled judiciary is a principle enabler of impunity. To compensate for the weak judiciary, special independent institutions were created after 2003 to deal with corruption and enforce the rule of law. In 2004, the CPA ordered the Board of Supreme Audit (BSA), an old Iraqi institution, to refer corruption charges to newly created inspectors general (IGs), within the appropriate ministries. That same year, the CPA created the Integrity Commission (IC) to enforce basic standards (such as financial disclosure by public officials) and pursue corrupt officials.

Both the BSA and the IC suffered from serious limitations.[19] They had to work through the IGs, who were often unqualified, party-selected insiders (whose own positions were poorly delineated by law) and thus

could not be relied on to seriously investigate allegations of graft. In addition, the IC was highly vulnerable to political interference. The government removed several IC directors (although technically parliament is the only institution allowed to do so), and some of them have fled the country in fear of retribution from powerful officials whom they had attempted to investigate.

The legal framework almost invited corruption. Article 136(b) of the legal code, a legacy of Saddam's rule, stated that an investigative judge could not prosecute a civil servant without the relevant minister's approval. This provision was not repealed by parliament until 2011, showing how determined the partyocracy was to maintain its access to graft through control of ministries.[20] But other legal loopholes and deficiencies, including the lack of party-financing regulations, remain and allow corruption to flourish. The weakness of the bodies tasked with investigation and enforcement means that those anticorruption measures that are in place are rarely implemented.

It is no wonder that in public-opinion polls, Iraqis see corruption as the second-biggest threat to the country. Between the summers of 2014 and 2015, despite the ISIS occupation, the percentage of Iraqis who thought security was the top issue that the government needed to address fell from 61 percent to 48 percent, while the share of those who saw corruption as the main concern rose from 34 to 43 percent. By early 2016, fully 76 percent of Iraqis perceived that corruption was getting worse, while 82 percent (compared to 65 percent just a few months earlier) thought that the country was moving in the wrong direction (including 68 percent of Kurds).[21] This was the case despite continuing gains in the fight against ISIS.

In 2008, the Brookings Institution published an "Index of State Weakness in the Developing World." It ranked 141 developing countries on their performance in fulfilling the four core functions of statehood: providing security, maintaining legitimate political institutions, fostering equitable economic growth, and meeting human needs. Iraq was ranked fourth to last, above only the Democratic Republic of Congo, Afghanistan, and Somalia. Given the ease with which ISIS routed the Iraqi army from major cities in 2014, the state's capacity to provide security and to control Iraq's borders clearly had not improved six years later.

Today, as international attention is focused on ISIS's control over large swaths of Iraqi territory, it is easy to forget that nonstate actors (or at least those beyond the effective authority of the central state) have controlled large parts of Iraq for many years now. For instance, Iranian-backed militias control Basrah, Iraq's second-largest city and the center of its oil wealth. In the autonomous Kurdistan region, the security sector is controlled by the region's own security force (the Peshmerga) as opposed to national security forces.

Corruption not only undermines government capacity, it also erodes

popular faith in ostensibly democratic institutions. Ordinary Iraqis have come to see the formal state as deeply illegitimate. In thirteen years of transition, their political leaders have done little or nothing to improve the conditions in which Iraqis live. Evidence abounds that Iraqis do not trust their institutions; this includes the judiciary, parliament, and government ministries, as well as the political parties that have been the focus of this essay. A growing number of Iraqis say that they are unlikely to vote in the next election in 2018, reflecting popular disillusionment with the existing political system. More troubling still, perceptions of state legitimacy vary considerably by sect. Only 29 percent of Sunnis and 6 percent of Kurds say that their group is treated fairly by society and the government (even among Shia, 30 percent believe that they are not treated fairly). The vast majority of Kurds support independence for their long-autonomous region. Nearly half of Iraqis see their country as mostly divided, despite a surge of national sentiment resulting from the war on ISIS.[22]

One of the greatest threats to Iraqi state legitimacy is the disenfranchisement of the Sunni population, whose leaders and people were marginalized, detained, and harassed during Maliki's rule.[23] For more than two years, ISIS has been governing parts of Iraq where the central government has lost all sovereignty. At the time of ISIS's takeover of Mosul, Iraq's third-largest city, a majority of the population appeared to support the group or at least to express indifference toward it. In other words, large numbers of Sunnis seemed to prefer being governed by a terrorist group such as ISIS over Maliki's repressive and sectarian rule.

While the outside world is preoccupied with the ISIS threat, Iraqis are focused on the rot within their own elected government, a decay that helped to bring about ISIS and that will have to be dealt with the day after the terror group is defeated, if not before. Years of poor governance have left many Iraqis longing for the relative order of the Saddam regime. Even as the international community provides military and humanitarian support in the fight against ISIS, large numbers of Iraqis are angry at the United States, Iran, the Gulf states, and other international actors for propping up the corrupt, illegitimate partyocracy rather than supporting the people and their legitimate grievances.

While as of 2015 a strong majority of Iraqis (69 percent) continue to see democracy as the best form of government,[24] a growing number of Iraqis (many of them middle-class) have begun to profess support for a presidential system and a strong leader to lead the country out of chaos. A Western-educated Iraqi businessman, whose company once benefited from U.S. military contracts, told me that he is in favor of an "Iraqi Sisi"—a reference to Egypt's military strongman—"to bring discipline to the country." Others have called for a "government of national salvation" to rule the country on an interim basis. And nostalgia for Saddam is ubiquitous on social media these days.

The emergence of ISIS following years of sectarian rule poses a di-

rect threat to Iraq's survival as a unified state. Yet ISIS and sectarianism should also be seen as symptoms of deeper illnesses in the Iraqi polity, the same ailments that drove ordinary Iraqis to demand change in 2015–16: the corruption and ineffectiveness of the entrenched political class, exceptionally weak state capacity, and deep popular distrust of state institutions. Moreover, each of these maladies reinforces the other two. The CPA certainly set in motion some policies (such as the disbanding of the army and de-Baathification) that laid the groundwork for years of poor governance. Decades of repression under Saddam, as well as the oil-dependent Iraqi economy, also made the task of democratization very challenging. Yet Iraq's political elite need look no further than the "man in the mirror" to find the principal source of inept and corrupt governance.

The demand for political change that began in 2015, while perhaps delayed by the fight against ISIS, is unlikely to be reversed. As of this writing, civic activists are debating whether to continue their protests or to postpone them until all Iraqi territory is liberated from the terrorist group. Alternatively, if sectarianism continues to be the legitimizing principle for Iraqi political parties, and corruption and poor governance continue to be the norm, the consequences will be grim. The Shia populism of Muqtada al-Sadr would promote further polarization, new groups feeding on Sunni marginalization might emerge, and pressures for Kurdish separatism would most likely grow—all of which would threaten not only the emergence of genuine democracy but the very survival of the Iraqi state.

NOTES

1. At its height, ISIS managed to occupy nearly a third of Iraq's territory and install a reign of terror that the European Union and United States have designated as genocide. On 3 July 2016, the Karrada neighborhood of Baghdad was struck by coordinated bombings, for which ISIS claimed responsibility, that killed more than three-hundred people and injured hundreds more.

2. The failure of the Iraqi army to defend the city of Mosul has been directly linked to corruption: Because there were tens of thousands of "ghost soldiers" whose salaries were pocketed by corrupt officers, there were many fewer soldiers actually defending Mosul than there were on the books.

3. Greenberg Quinlan Rosberg Research, "A Challenging Path Toward Reconciliation: December 2015–January 2016 Survey Findings," NDI, 25 February 2016; see summary at *www.ndi.org/Poll_Points_Path_Forward_Iraq_Reconciliation.*

4. Kanan Makiya, *The Rope* (New York: Pantheon, 2016), 28.

5. Zaid Al-Ali, *The Struggle for Iraq's Future: How Corruption, Incompetence, and Sectarianism Have Undermined Democracy* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2014), 56.

6. For a comprehensive analysis of the problems with de-Baathification, see Miranda Sissons and Abdulrazzaq Al-Saiedi, "A Bitter Legacy: Lessons of De-Baathification in Iraq," International Center for Transitional Justice, March 2013. See also Beth K. Dougherty, "De-Ba'thification in Iraq: How Not to Pursue Transitional Justice," Middle East Institute, 30 January 2014.

7. Al-Ali, *Struggle for Iraq's Future,* 65.

8. Many Iraqis will readily note that sectarianism is mainly a problem between politicians, and not between people. Zaid al-Ali observes that in his five years of working with the United Nations in Baghdad on rule of law issues after 2003, he encountered sectarianism mostly among parliamentarians, and not in other state institutions such as the judiciary. See al-Ali, *Struggle for Iraq's Future,* 60.

9. Greenberg Quinlan Rosberg Research, "A Challenging Path Toward Reconciliation."

10. On the negative consequences of the closed-list, single constituency electoral system used in Iraq's initial elections, see Adeed Dawisha and Larry Diamond, "Iraq's Year of Voting Dangerously," *Journal of Democracy* 17 (April 2006): 89–103. The electoral law was subsequently amended to allow for an open-list system, and multiple constituencies.

11. Greenberg Quinlan Rosberg Research, "A Challenging Path Toward Reconciliation."

12. See interview with Zaid al-Ali on al-Jazeera's "Q&A: Iraq elections explained," 30 April 2014. *www.aljazeera.com/news/middleeast/2014/04/qa-iraq-elections-explained-201442973557966208.html.*

13. Al-Ali, *Struggle for Iraq's Future,* 159.

14. USAID Iraq, "Citizens' Attitudes Toward Civil Society in Iraq: A Public Opinion Survey," September 2015.

15. Peter Harling writes: "Iraq's national grid is a metaphor for the country's problems. Access to electricity, the starting point for all modern human activity, is the last problem you would expect in a country with plentiful hydrocarbon reserves, big rivers and as much sunshine as the Garden of Eden. But the electricity supply illustrates the failings and the convolutions of the political system"; see Harling, "Why Iraqis Fear Victory," *Le Monde Diplomatique,* 5 August 2016.

16. Ali Mamouri, "Iraqis Protest Corruption, Lack of Services While Politicians Blame Everyone but Themselves," *Al Monitor,* 25 August 2015. Iranian officials also criticized the protestors.

17. Adnan Abu Zeed, "How Religious Movements Gained the Upper Hand in Iraqi Protests," *Al-Monitor,* 6 April 2016.

18. See Muqtada al-Sadr's website, *http://jawabna.com,* where he made the statement in response to a question sent by one of his followers.

19. Al-Ali, *Struggle for Iraq's Future,* 197.

20. Al-Ali, *Struggle for Iraq's Future,* 200.

21. Greenberg Quinlan Rosberg Research, "Lack of Responsiveness Impacts Mood: August–September 2015 Survey Findings," NDI, 23 November 215; see summary at *https://www.ndi.org/Iraq_Survey_August_to_September_2015.*

22. Greenberg Quinlan Rosberg Research, "A Challenging Path Toward Reconciliation."

23. This included the unfair application of a harsh "antiterrorism" law and continued de-Baathification, which Iraq's Sunnis feel targets them as a group.

24. Greenberg Quinlan Rosberg Research, "Lack of Responsiveness Impacts Mood."