Research Paper

The Political Regime in Iraq: Between Reform and Legitimacy

An Analytic Perspective on the 2011 Protests

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Series (Research Papers)

Contents

The Arab region has recently witnessed a wave of protests with varying end-results; these protest movements have shared similarities, as well as differences, as to their impetus and motivations. Iraq also saw some protests during the months of February and March 2011, which continued in an irregular manner in the ensuing months and drew inspiration from the events in Tunisia and Egypt. Specific demands were made for improvements to public services, limitations on corruption, and a general increase in the standard of living – absent, however, were demands for comprehensive change in the political system.

The demands of the protestors have stemmed from deficiencies in the performance of the government and the executive organs, and even of the legislative authority. Various reasons exist to explain this, chief among them corruption and political power-sharing deals (*muhasasa* in Arabic). These deficiencies have led to increased daily suffering on the part of the citizens, which in turn has exacerbated the feeling of dissatisfaction with government policies in general. The protests motivated the government to adopt a number of measures to deal with the popular demands; however, no comprehensive solution for the grievances has been enacted. Today, even if the government and the executive apparatus were capable of assimilating the new social, economic, and political factors, society would be unlikely to extend legitimacy to the system due to identity considerations (sectarian, ethnic, and regional), which represent the basis of the current political system.

In this study, we have concluded that the levels of social awareness in favor of changing Iraq's political and economic reality remain limited and specific to civil society movements; these movements are inherently weak and thus incapable of mobilizing the street with enough momentum to change the status quo. On the other hand, the state uses the need to combat terrorism as an argument to justify repression. Certain social sectors are in fact supportive of this discourse, as are some pillars of social power that support the political process as a tool for fulfilling their own ambitions regarding the Iraqi street. The Western world, including the United States, has proved more concerned with attempts to influence the more ;radical changes taking place in the Arab region than with the happenings in Iraq.

Introduction

In April 2003, Iraq witnessed an upheaval in the political system due to the military intervention of the United States, propelling the country into a period of chaos in terms of politics, security, and administration. This lasted until mid-October 2005, at which time Iraqis went to referendum over the shape and content of their country's political system in the context of a new permanent constitution, and the Iraqi people voted in favor of a federal parliamentary system.

Even after the constitution took effect, the period of political crisis continued due to a variety of domestic and foreign factors. This crisis manifested itself in various ways: escalation of the security crisis, persistently dire economic and social conditions, and continuing vulnerability to foreign interference. The newly inaugurated political system was faced with a degree of rejection based on political-social factors, a rejection which sometimes took the form of armed violence

employed by a variety of political opponents. This grim political reality effectively reduced the attention paid to the performance of the government and executive apparatus, whose deficiencies were increasingly glaring in the form of dwindling public services and inadequate administrative capacity, not to mention the spread of poverty.

With the political situation in Iraq showing signs of movement toward stability in 2008, predictions of the eventual fragmentation of the country began to be cast aside. A new direction emerged among the opponents of the political system, with a shift from the use of armed political violence to the practice of peaceful opposition. This intersected with the rise of a third camp whose focus was not on security so much as the issues affecting the conditions of the citizens and the services that were made available to them.

This shift led to a confusion in the post-2009 political scene following the provincial and legislative elections, with the political system suffering from a preponderance of interest-based rhetoric at the expense of competence; i.e., the dominance of the power-seekers over the statesmen. This reality revealed that the majority of political cadres were ill-qualified to fulfill their respective positions. The issue was compounded by the flagrant delay in forming the new cabinet, as well as by proposals for projects serving personal or party interests in areas concerning the citizenry.

In this critical stage of Iraq's history, as 2010 drew to a close, the region witnessed a host of changes, which were viewed by some as an extension of American theses proposed in 2004 and 2005 under the title "The Greater Middle East Project", which had with creative chaos as its *modus operandi.* The Greater Middle East Project suggested that nations of the regions should enact a host of reforms in order to respond to the challenges presented by Iraq's post-occupation phase. These reforms included an embrace of peaceful alternation of power as well as an increase in the margin of freedoms. As for the creative chaos, it consisted of unleashing a movement among the peoples of the region, with the eventual intention of inciting internal and regional conflict. This would be followed by the dominance of a single power in each country; the United States would then be able to intervene, dealing with these emerging powers as competent representatives of their populations in an environment of increased regional stability.

However, repercussions of Iraq's plight were such that the US suspended these proposals, recognizing them to be poorly matched to the historical phase in which they had been crafted and fearing increased vehemence in the opposition to the American Project. Today, however, the proposals have found an audience among domestic elements in the various countries, owing to a variety of motivations (some of them external). This analysis is informed by the view that domestic protest is attributable to the actions of foreign elements. It is pointed out that, while the masses were moved to demonstrate vigorously for change in the context of a harsh social reality, the extent of the actual change that took place remains largely superficial in both Egypt and Tunisia (with the second tier of government officials having simply stepped in to assume authority).

Defining the Problem

The transformations described above have inspired some Iraqis to use demonstrations as a way of drawing attention to the extreme state of deterioration now obtaining in their country. Demonstrations also offer an opportunity to pose once more the now-familiar question of whence comes the current political predicament: does it stem from the absence of legitimacy or the need for reform, or has society undergone an evolution that necessitates the revision of certain key parts of its political system?

The tumultuous situation in Iraq in 2011 has drawn attention to several questions: does the political system established in 2005 suffer from a lack of sufficient legitimacy? That is, are the bases upon which the system (or significant portions of it) was founded considered invalid and thus rejected by the people, to the point where political violence is considered necessary to change the character of the regime? Or is the political system - which was assembled under exceptional circumstances, and preceded a broad social transformation - in need of a process of renewal and reform, in order to enhance its legitimacy in the eyes of the people? Or, rather, has the political system suffered from both domestic and external disturbances to an extent detrimental to its smooth functioning, which would require the introduction of reforms to align it with the desires of Iraqi citizens and, indeed, Iraq's national interests?

Defining the Hypothesis

In light of the established problem, this study proposes two hypotheses:

1. That the outbreak of demonstrations in Iraq has expressed demands relating to the inadequacy of services provided by the state institutions, as well as the existence of a popular movement whose demands cannot be addressed within the current political framework. Also, that dealing with the protests (the independent variable) requires a reformulation of important aspects of the political system to enable it to respond to the existing social dynamism, thus ensuring its own longevity (the dependent variable).

2. Alternatively, that society is ill-prepared to meet demands for change in the Iraqi political paradigm, through the interaction of three variables. Firstly, the external factors, which are not concerned with such change during this phase; secondly, the authority, which has shielded itself to a large degree with religious/sectarian privileges that decrease its motivation to enact change; and finally, the generally inadequate strength of Iraqi civil society.

Research Methodology

The descriptive method has been adopted in order to analyze data relating to the research question, formulate conclusions, and, ultimately, prove or disprove the above hypotheses.

The subject shall be analyzed as a function of three axes.

First Axis: the Political System Post-2006

The 2003 US invasion precipitated major changes in the body of the Iraqi state; the existing political regime was replaced by a new and distinctly different one. This regime remains in place today, and was the object of the demonstrations by Iraqi citizens that occurred at different intervals in 2011.

A. the Occupation and Political Regime Change

The occupation of Iraq was not a haphazard event; it was the considered result of a number of factors, among them the political regime's posture vis-à-vis Western interests. Also influential was the global importance of Iraq and its location, which prompted the attempt by the United States to completely reformulate the existing political landscape, rather than merely replacing one regime with another.

1. Reasons for the Change in Iraq in 2003

Iraq enjoys great strategic importance in the eyes of major global powers. This is partly due to its vital geo-strategic location in the Middle East: it overlooks the Arabian Gulf, shares borders with Iran, and creates a separation between key Western allies in the region (Turkey and the GCC states). On the geopolitical level, the prevailing culture of politics in Iraq had long carried the seeds for confrontation with Western interests and policies, especially American ones; i.e., Iraq was culturally primed for a clash with the Western world. Furthermore, Iraq's oil and gas wealth make it a key player on the geo-economic scene. Its confirmed oil reserves exceed 143 billion barrels (around 10 percent of global reserves), and its natural gas reserves have reached 3,170 billion cubic meters (around 1.8 percent of global reserves).[1].

Iraq's importance in economic, strategic, and geopolitical spheres was enhanced by its ability to assume a variety of leading roles in its own region. Iraq emerged in 1988 from the war with Iran with a military capability in excess of its defense needs; however, its economic capacity was neither sufficient to maintain the military momentum nor to realize Iraq's political ambitions. This led to tensions in Iraq's relations with its Arab neighbors; similarly, with Western interests extending into the Arabian Gulf, some Western states perceived Iraq's strength and political discourse as a significant threat. In 1990, the United States requested that Iraq reduce the size of its military and abandon its non-conventional capabilities.

This request was accompanied by several important transformations, some of which related to Iraq's economic situation and others to its relations within the Gulf. A definitive turning point

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[1] The Annual Statistical Report 2009, (Kuwait: The Organization of Arab Petroleum Exporting Countries, 2009), pp. 9-13.

occurred when Iraq invaded Kuwait, clashing head-on with Western interests in general and American ones in particular. After the invasion, the United States adopted an approach based on weakening Iraq's various capabilities, an approach which continued until 2003. It was reinforced in 1998 by the Iraq Liberation Act, which provided a special budget and outlined a host of policies aiming to overthrow the ruling regime. The rhetoric of the American administration became increasingly hostile following the events of September 2001, culminating in the decision to invade Iraq and overthrow its political regime. This decision was approved by Congress in November 2002 and carried out in March 2003.[2]

2. Overthrowing a Ruling Regime or Changing a Political System?

Following the success of the invasion in April 2003, the United States moved to disband all Iraqi public institutions, most notably the army, the security forces, and the ruling party establishment. Moreover, it imposed a ban on most of the members of these organizations from participating in the administration of the Iraqi state. The latter was managed directly by the US until June 2004, when various Iraqi organizations began to contribute to the reshaping process. More specifically, the United States replaced the existing political system in a series of steps, beginning with the formation of a Transitional Governing Council and the declaration of an interim law to manage the state. Later, at the end of 2004, Iraqis were granted temporary powers, and finally, a referendum was held in relation to a constitution that would adopt a federal-parliamentary system of governance.[3]

B. The Content and Characteristics of the Political System

Following the referendum over a permanent constitution, a new political system with distinct features was established in Iraq. The new constitution officially took effect in 2006.

1. The Content of the Political System

In 1998, the American administration discussed with Iraqi opposition forces the shape of the regime that should govern Iraq. The variables affecting the choice of a system of rule were:

-   The US' objective to establish a new Iraq, one that does not threaten American interests in the region.

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[2] For further information, see: Sattar Jabbar Allawi and Khader Abbas Atwan, Iraq, An Analysis of the State and its Future Relations, (Abu Dhabi: The Emirates Center for Strategic Studies, 2006), pp. 12-45.
[3] See: "Former Civilian Governor of Iraq Paul Bremer recalls his best and worst days in Baghdad", an interview conducted by Talha Jabreel, *al-Sharq al-Awsat*, issue 11121, May 10, 2009. Compare with: Wafiq al-Samarra'i, "Did Bremer obey the Kurds and disband the Iraqi army?", *al-Sharq al-Awsat*, Issue 11130, May 19, 2009.

- Israel, which seeks the creation of an Iraqi state (or 'statelets'), that would not present a threat to Israel's existence and interests.

- The Iraqi political factions, which carried heterodox Iraqi and regional agendas; however, the general point of agreement among these forces was the rejection of a political system which followed Saddam Hussein's model. In other words, these factions agreed to reject a central, one-party state ruling according to totalitarianism and absolute loyalty, both of which were hallmarks of the former regime. In opposition conferences in London in December 2002 and Salahuddin, in Erbil province (Kurdistan, Iraq) in February 2003, these factions agreed on the necessity of establishing a federal-parliamentary system of government.[4]

After the April 2003 invasion, the United States singled out several Iraqi groups and bestowed upon them the ingredients of influence in Iraqi political life. The objective was to then engage these groups in a dialogue to reach the most adequate formula for a political system capable of uniting Iraqis within consociational agreements that would provide the minimal guarantee for coexistence (the Governing Council). This necessity arose after the occupation caused social fissures and accentuated social divisions between Iraqis. The dialogue that took place in November 2003 led to the adoption of a law to manage the transitional phase in March 2004. Through this law, the political factions accepted the formula of a federal-parliamentary system; the same groups then held another dialogue after the first legislative elections (January 2005), producing drafts for a permanent constitution with similar content in August 2005, which was approved by the majority of Iraqis in mid-October 2005. This approval indicates that the constitution was trusted by most of the country, notwithstanding the fact that the referendum took place in the context of the occupation as well as escalation of sectarian rhetoric seeking to sway the population to vote according to sectarian principles. These factors, however, were not sufficient to lead to broad questioning of the constitution's legitimacy, particularly among those who voted in its favor.

2.   The Characteristics of the Political System

The occupation led to interaction and even merging of social and constitutional realities, causing a cluster of characteristics to emerge around the new political system. Some of these were decreed by the permanent constitution, others were imposed by the social reality, and still others were necessitated by the political status-quo. These characteristics are described below:

Political Pluralism: The Iraqi society is not governed by a single political ideology, and Iraq cannot be contained by a single political party no matter the amount of support it garners. The constitution decreed the existence of political pluralism, referring to it even in its basic

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[4] See: "The story of a long chase that changed the face of Iraq and destabilized regional balances…Ahmad Jalabi: The war began before its determined date because the opportunity to kill Saddam may not repeat itself." An interview conducted by Ghassan Sharbil, *al-Hayat Newspaper***,** March 21, 2009.

description of the political system (a "democratic parliamentary pluralistic system"). This pluralism went on to reach unprecedented - indeed, sometimes uncontrollable - levels. However, due to the nature of society and its dominant political currents, this pluralism could not assimilate all sectors of society; several social-political groups did not find a political representation responding to their interests under this system, including:

a. Arab nationalists.

b. Islamist Extremists, who are defined in several different ways by the various state factions. They do, however, enjoy a measure of support from the Iraqi state, albeit a meager one.

c. Several other groups that did not believe in the utility of a permanent political process given the conditions obtaining in Iraq; secular parties were not able to woo these factions, which thus remained quasi-isolated from political life.

d. Additionally, several somewhat less influential groups, such as apolitical organizations, that engage in social work and tend to wield considerable weight in the overall scene within Iraq.

This pluralism of political parties was reflected in the varying influence of different factions inside Iraqi institutions, such as the parliament and the Provincial Councils, with no single faction capable of maintaining a majority in either of these organizations. Even the largest parties obtained not more than 30 percent of parliamentary seats, despite the low level of popular participation. As a result, coalitions became the only viable formula for achieving a majority, whether simple (more than half) or absolute (more than two-thirds).

Political Power-sharing Deals (*Muhasasa*):   This was a term coined to reflect a social reality. Although some consider it to be a contrived expression artificially introduced into Iraq by the United States[5], a closer examination of the social reality suggests otherwise. Iraq has long been socially divided among myriad components existing side-by-side with varying degrees of conflict. The proof of this, firstly, is that the civil war of 2005-2008 took place with little provocation from the Americans; all that was required was mild incitement during 2004-2005 for multiple groups to engage in acts of violence against each other.

The second piece of evidence is that fear of *the other* in the social context has pushed more than three quarters of voting Iraqis who participated to cast their ballots in a manner consistent with sectarian-ethnic rhetoric – and not because this discourse seemed likely to produce effective state-building or the provision of public services.[6] In 2005, around 48 percent of Iraqis who

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[5] See for example: Katrina Stepanova, "Al-Qaeda operations in Iraq constituted no more than 15 percent of armed violence", *az-Zaman Newspaper*, issue 3243, March 16, 2009, p. 15. Also: Derek Adrian, "Beyond the Wikileaks Files: Fragmenting the Iraqi State", *az-Zaman Newspaper*, Issue 3776, December 22, 2010, p. 15.

[6] Compare with: Jabir Habeeb Jabir, "Approaching the Sectarian Conflict", *al-Sharq al-Awsat Newspaper*, Issue 11226, August 23, 2009.

participated in the vote elected the National Alliance list, which identified itself as a Shi'a grouping, while 17 percent voted for the Accord list that identified itself as Arab Sunni, with 18 percent of the vote going to the Kurdish Kurdistan Alliance list. The situation did not change much when the elections took place in 2010; a new sectarian coalition (the National Coalition) was quickly compiled that overtook 48 percent of parliamentary seats, with 17 percent voting for the Kurdistan and other Kurdish lists. The Sunni constituent mixed with the secular one to reap around 28 percent of the seats, which meant that sectarian coalitions controlled around 93 percent of the seats of the 2010 Parliament.

The result was a council of deputies that was incapable of engendering a majority, so it resorted to a formula introduced by the United States during the days of the Governing Council. This relied on the notion that both the mutual fear among sectors of the Iraqi population, as well as a deep historic sense of mistrust, necessitated the active prevention of any one political-sectarian group from ruling alone. This consociational model suggested that all groups should be assigned a political weight proportional to their size, and should participate, together, in managing the country. At the time, 55 percent of political and executive offices were given to self-described Shi'a parties, while factions identifying themselves as Sunni Arab were afforded 20 percent of these posts, and a similar percentage to the Kurdish forces; the remaining 5 percent were distributed among various other minority groups.

This formula became the norm for running state institutions, even becoming part of the Iraqi mentality. Eventually, its spread extended to the majority of state institutions, both in terms of employment and service provision. The web of political power sharing could be traced throughout the dominant Iraqi factions, regardless of their specific nature or the rhetoric they surrounded themselves with. Following the legislative elections in 2005 and 2010, political momentum gathered in the direction of forming an all-inclusive cabinet that would exclude nobody, thus undermining one of the basic precepts of the parliamentary system - the existence of an effective opposition.

The cabinet seats were divided according to the respective weights of the political constituents in the Parliament, leading to the creation of 34 ministries in the 2006 cabinet, and 43 ministries in the December 2010 cabinet. This arrangement was even practiced on the level of deputy-ministers (each minister having three deputies: a Sunni Arab, a Shi'a, and a Kurd), as well as that of the advisors chosen from among the political factions (according to respective parliamentary weight). Even the directorates within each ministry were partitioned along factional lines. The number of independent commissions rose to 14, each consisting of 7 to 11 commissioners endowed with the privileges of deputy ministers, and the chairman holding the rank of minister. All this was effected for the sake of political appeasement during the distribution process of Iraqi resources.

Weaknesses of Governmental and Executive Performance

The reality described above led to the creation of a government and an executive body that have proved incapable of performing their duties, most particularly the cabinets, executive apparatus, and provincial and military councils.

Cabinets are continually plagued by expansion of the number of ministries, as well as each minister's association with his political bloc – which, incidentally, provides him with a degree of immunity. Added to this are frequent ministerial threats to bring down the incumbent government, plausible in light of its shaky parliamentary majority. Exacerbating this situation is the fact that the government is essentially the product of myriad forces and currents, all holding specific opinions and political beliefs that often prove to be mutually conflicting.

Each ministry functions as an isolated island that is not subject to any supervision. In order for the Prime Minister to justify and solidify his presence, he surrounded himself with a host of mechanisms which afforded him a modicum of control over some security, economic, and social dossiers. At the same time, in order to avoid a sudden collapse of the government, there was a collective political cover-up of both of governmental weakness and deficiency and of the administrative, financial, and political corruption that had become rampant in the country. These two factors produced a discrepancy in the results of government performance and the general budget of the state, and questions were raised regarding the level of approval that garnered by the cabinet from its political constituents.[7]

The executive apparatus has suffered from the introduction of political power-sharing deals into its functioning, and the refusal to grant it a neutrality that would allow it to perform its administrative tasks and provide public services. Large-scale corruption of the administrative and service organs was effected at the hands of party factions and rent-seeking groups. This corruption was facilitated by a quasi-intentional political confusion whereby both organs appeared to receive support while the case was, in fact, otherwise. Officials were starved of the funds necessary to carry out their tasks, which made them incapable of providing basic services to citizens; the work of these institutions was further stymied through other methods as well.

The resulting discrepancy between capacity and responsibility brought the situation to a point where these institutions found themselves incapable of fulfilling their role toward the country and its citizens.[8] On the ground, an example of this came in the form of the electrical distribution units present in every little town, but largely incapable of providing two interrupted hours of electricity daily for each citizen (a figure that varies from one region to another). Thousands of

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[7]Marc Santora and Riyadh Mohammed **"**Pervasive Corruption Rattles Iraq's Fragile State", *The New York Times,* October 28, 2009

http://www.nytimes.com/2009/10/29/world/middleeast/29corrupt.html

[8] See: Salem Suleiman and Kheder Abbas Atwan, "Political corruption and administrative performance: a study in the dialectic relationship", **Shu'un Iraqiya Journal**, issue 1, Amman: The Iraqi Center for Strategic Studies, January 2010, pp. 120-135.

merchants were charged with providing goods to the citizens in exchange for the subsidized food coupons, yet with their access to flour and sometimes rice restricted and irregular.

In each street could be found more than one permanent security or military checkpoint, as well as many temporary checkpoints, which causes great stress to everyday life for citizens. Over 1.5 million recruits were serving in the army, the National Guard, the federal police, and units charged with counter-terrorism, national security, and riot prevention. Additionally, forces loyal to the ruling parties were permitted to deploy their elements inside Iraqi cities. Despite all this, Iraqi citizens did not experience an acceptable level of security in their individual and family lives, nor in relation to their property and employment. The government offered subsidies and support to five hundred thousand families inside Baghdad alone, as part of the social safety net (financial support provided to families living below the poverty line). Regardless, acute and glaring poverty remained widespread.

The function of **the provincial and municipal councils** was executive in nature, and concerned the provision of services. The provincial councils underwent a re-election process in 2009; as for municipal councils, their members were appointed in 2003 and 2004 without elections. However, the caliber of performance displayed by these institutions was not compatible with the level of funding provided to them. Not only did the councils fail to supervise the work of the state at the regional level, but all aspects of their performance were characterized by a notable sense of negativity and nonchalance – attributes that were clearly perceived by the citizenry at large.

Deficient Parliamentary Performance

The Council of Representatives has three main roles, which were inadequately fulfilled during the three legislative cycles. Shortcomings presented themselves in three primary areas: supervision, legislation, and politics.

Monitoring of the executive institution as well as the government's adherence to the program upon which it was founded should have been maintained. However, the Parliament, due in large part to the system of political power-sharing that has allowed all parliamentary factions to participate in the government, proved itself incapable of performing this function during the past phase.

A primary role of **legislation** is to provide laws facilitating the application of the constitution, distribution of resources, and the resolution of differences. The political conflict and infighting between the various factions in the Parliament have paralyzed its ability to carry out legislative tasks in a manner commensurate with the critical phase that Iraq is undergoing. Some pieces of legislation were never drafted but never enacted, while others were approved according to political decrees and the ambitions of individual politicians. These factors produced a body of laws granting politicians unprecedented privileges on the level of salaries, bonuses, immunities, and pensions.

Politically, the Parliament should provide its vote of confidence to the cabinet, approve the appointment of important figures in state institutions, and supervise the performance of its affiliated but independent institutions. The Parliament did not perform this role due to reasons also related to political power-sharing; indeed, even the formation of the cabinet surpassed the constitutional time-limit by ten months. More importantly, the appointment of senior officials and the supervision of independent institutions, political concessions, and other deals have occupied considerably more attention than the fulfillment of national interests or the needs of the citizens.

Second Axis: The Wave of Protests in the Region - Causes and Positions

As has already been examined, the Arab region has witnessed a generalized wave of protests for a variety of reasons. This wave has proved to be a highly energizing factor on the Iraqi street, inciting the expression of widespread dissatisfaction with governmental and executive impotence and the inability of state institutions to improve the situation of ordinary citizens. These elements provided the impetus for the outbreak of several mass demonstrations in Iraq. Political factions adopted varying positions toward these protests, as compared with the generally standard positions from abroad that have affirmed the right of the population to express itself. However, neither projects nor agendas for aid to dissenting Iraqis have been forthcoming.

A. Causes

There is no single cause sufficient to explain the demonstrations in Iraq; rather, a variety of catalysts stemmed from the complex existing social situation.

1. The Political Causes

During the period following the promulgation of the constitution, Iraq experienced bitter political conflict due to the contradictory and often irreconcilable agendas of the various political factions. To compound the issue, some of these factions had affiliated themselves with regional and foreign projects, often serving as vehicles for the execution of these projects within Iraq. The government thus found itself incapable of performing effectively, its incompetence being primarily manifested in five aspects of governance.[9]

    a. Political power-sharing deals.

    b. Political sectarianism; i.e., the supremacy of loyalty towards sects and ethnic and regional causes.

    c. A clear absence of an inclusive national project.

    d. The dominance of power-seekers and the (forced) absence of statesmen.

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[9] See: Kheder Abbas Atwan, "Towards a national strategy for the building of the Iraqi state, a study on the possibility of the formulation of such a strategy", a study presented to the Hammurabi Center for Research and Strategic Studies, Babel: The Hammurabi Center, January 2010.

e. The interference of neighboring countries in Iraqi affairs, and the existence of local powers facilitating these interventions.

These factors have contributed to the deterioration of conditions in Iraq as well as prolonged political conflict. This in turn has had resulted in:

- The formation of the cabinet exceeding the constitutionally stipulated time period during the last two cycles. This delay has exposed the constitution to a wide variety of violations.

- A sabotaging of the Parliament's capacity to supervise governmental and executive performance, especially on the levels of administration and service provision. Indeed, corruption has enjoyed considerable political protection. Additionally, a number of important laws that were to be passed according to the constitution have been delayed.

- Political power-sharing deals becoming widespread, reaching administrative and public service sectors and severely compromising existing standards of competence.

- State budget funds being misdirected in the absence of transparency; the objective of spending is neither reconstruction nor development, but rather the facilitation of political deals.

- The average citizen losing confidence in the democratic process of managing the country. Elections have ended in an impasse in the three electoral cycles; the programs for which voters cast their votes were not ultimately carried out, with political factions quickly realigning along sectarian lines. Furthermore, a cabinet could not be formed in the absence of a coalition, and a coalition, in itself, requires the formulation of a consociational political program between the competing political factions – no easy task under the circumstances.

2. The Security Causes

The United States' announcement of the end of the combat mission in Iraq in May 2003 heralded the beginning of a continuous deterioration in security that lasted until 2008. This long-lasting fragility in the security situation has led some analysts to doubt Iraq's ability to persevere as a unified country, predicting instead that eventual fragmentation is inevitable. The political issues discussed above have certainly contributed to this deterioration, as have the enduring questions as to the legitimacy of the political regime. Such questions arise because the system was the result of foreign occupation rather than of internal national dynamics. Furthermore, the drafting of the constitution and the ensuing political practices have excluded important sections of Iraqi society under political pretexts that found their way into the permanent constitution. Thus, the political system has been viewed as illegitimate by many, some of whom feel that political violence is therefore an acceptable form of expression against the regime.

The chaotic security situation has led to the disruption of social and economic life. The average citizen is aware of that phenomenon through the paralysis of services (inasmuch as they exist at all), the weakness of the expected features of civic life, and the escalating trend towards the militarization of society.[10] Moreover, after Iraq regains its stability, the fate of the 1.5 million people who have been recruited into the military and security forces remains an open question.

3. Economic Causes

In the years following 2003, economic indicators in Iraq were largely negative.

a. The revenues of the Iraqi state between 2003 and 2010 exceeded USD 400 billion.

b. The rationale behind the distribution of income was not devoid of political considerations, as was clearly evidenced in the rise in the salaries of politicians, as well as their bonuses and pensions. A political career in Iraq became a lucrative and attractive undertaking.

c. Facilities and institutions charged with production and provision of services received the least funds, especially when compared to the salaries and other perks awarded to politicians. Affected sectors included health, water, energy, refining, transportation, and various industrial concerns.

d. The budget for food subsidies (i.e., food coupons) saw a gradual shrinking from USD 4 billion in 2003 to USD 1.8 billion in 2010.This was a result of the conditions imposed by the International Monetary Fund and creditor states in the 2004 Paris Conference and the 2005 Brussels Conference, where continued support to Iraq was linked to the lowering and phasing out of government subsidies.

e. Poverty indicators saw a notable rise, with poverty rates rising from 20 to 35 percent between 2005 and 2009, according to the Planning Ministry. Independent statistics place that number at between 30 and 45 percent of the population. This occurred despite the fact that the government increased its support to households living below the poverty line from one hundred and fifty thousand targeted families to five hundred thousand. Unemployment also soared to between 25 and 35 percent.[11]

f. Financial corruption in the various bids, tenders, contracts, and projects increased to see 70 percent of the investment budget devoured by corruption (with clear administrative and political complicity), in addition to an undetermined amount of waste in the

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[10] See: Hameed al-Hashimi, "The militarization of Iraqi society: an anthropological perspective on its traits and negative repercussions", *'Ulum Insaniyya Journal*, issue 7, Tunisia: Center for Sociological Research, March 2006, pp.23-27.
[11] For a comparison, see: Kamal al-Basri, "Corruption wastes state revenues, and poverty afflicts half of the Iraqi population", *az-Zaman Newspaper*, issue 3360, July 30, 2009, p. 15.

operational budget.[12] This has made Iraq into one of the most corrupt regions in the world, with Transparency International placing the country at the bottom of its transparency index between 2005 and 2010. Funds earmarked for services and production were recycled for personal gain with political protection, making Iraq completely dependent on oil receipts and very limited tax and customs revenues.

On the other hand, what has been achieved in terms of infrastructure and production capacity throughout the period from 2006 and 2010 (the date of the emergence of a permanent government according to a political system approved by Iraqis in a general referendum) is hardly worth noting. Moreover, the Iraqi market was opened to foreign and Arab products, shifting the country into a mode of consumption in the absence of production; in fact, the Iraqi economy is shutting out its own sectors of production, in a context of political complicity whereby the necessary protection for these industries is not provided.[13]

4. Social Causes

Both the occupation and events related to politics and security have led to a widening of the social gulf between various Iraqi communities. The political division has led to multiple social repercussions that society has not been able to overlook; further compounding the issue are the deep historical roots of social division amongst Iraqis. The powers of the state regularly widen the social gulf through their constant stress on sectarian rights and possessions, and on the massacres of the former regimes that are perceived as acts of sectarianism. Both the highly edified media and the existing mode of political discourse tend to be highly sectarian in nature, which has encouraged social-sectarian polarization; similarly, mono-sectarian communities have been established in many regions of Iraq. These social fissures cannot be healed through intermarriage, tribal congregations, or reconciliation conferences. There is no escaping the fact that the government and the various political factions relate to citizens according to their sects when it comes to employment, the distribution of privileges and the provision of services; this is the reality in Iraq.

The causes mentioned above have coalesced to produce a state of political, economic, and social asphyxiation that currently forms a serious obstacle on the path to Iraq's transformation into a civic state; this is what allowed the regional wave of protests and demonstrations to reach Iraq. These protests began in a scattered manner through the Iraqi cities in the beginning of 2011, with the aim of achieving a host of demands:

On the political level, the demands consisted of:

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[12] Compare with: Wisam al-Shalji, "What is blocking the free economy in Iraq?", *az-Zaman Newspaper*, issue 3349, July 18, 2009, p. 15.
[13] See: Firas Na'im Amara, "The positions of the Iraqi press towards the phenomenon of the immigration of national scientific qualifications after 9-4-2003, an analytic study", unpublished MA thesis, Faculty of Journalism – Baghdad University, 2009, pp. 46-67.

- Reducing the size of the cabinet and making it into a technocratic one.

- Replacing some provincial council.

- Eliminating political protection of the corruption that has spread to all corners of the state.

- Reducing the privileges, salaries, and pensions of politicians.

- Ending extrajudicial arrests with political motives (on the basis of suspicion or regional affiliation); also, bringing closure to this issue (ongoing for seven years), with the government claiming the existence of 30,000 detainees, while rights groups and some political parties claim that the number in fact exceeds 150,000 in 336 official and secret prisons, some of which are run by powerful parties and militias that act as fronts for foreign agendas.

- Removing restraints on public freedoms and lessening the pressure on civil rights.

- Dismissing certain officials.

On the economic level:

- Addressing the problem of unemployment.

- Reducing poverty and raising the standard of living.

- Finding a solution to the problem of government food subsidies (food coupons).

- Providing adequate access to electricity and fuel.

- Fixing the transportation network and relaxing restrictions on travel between cities.

Social demands (such as the achievement of social peace before political and security stability), interestingly, have proved to be notably absent from the slogans and rhetoric of the protesting Iraqis.

B. Positions

The communications revolution (i.e., the widespread use of satellite channels, the Internet, social media networks, etc.) has imposed a new reality on both rulers and the ruled. Rulers go to great lengths to avoid allowing the new technological paradigm to disrupt their power structure, by imposing restrictions and censorship – often while using the same technology to expand their own sphere of influence and legitimacy. On the other hand, those ruled have turned enthusiastically to the new tools at their disposal in order to bypass the censorship of the state and to sensitize and mobilize public opinion in the face of authority.

During the course of recent events in Tunisia, Egypt, Libya, Yemen, Bahrain, Algeria, and Syria, the ability of new communications technology to advertise, mobilize, and promote the legitimate demands of citizens proved to surpass the repressive mechanisms of government – a turn of events that took the rulers of these countries by surprise and hastened the movement of change. Because these modern technologies are capable of transmitting events live from their locations, and even to allow users to interact and adopt positions in real time, this new form of communication should be considered radically different from those which preceded it.

In the past, the primary mechanisms of change were either military coups or, as was the case in Iraq and Afghanistan, direct foreign military intervention. This begs the question of whether a fundamental shift in the rules of the game, in terms of enacting change and its necessary conditions, has taken place. The fact is that the military and security establishments protecting the regimes have to some extent become– as a result of the change in the rules of the game - observers of the events on the ground, convinced that conventional weapons and techniques are no longer sufficient to confront the winds of change. The military leaderships also realized the extent to which they obtain their legitimacy from the people, rather than the rulers. As such, citizens themselves became the primary agents for change: mobilizing through social networks, taking to the streets, and facing a wide variety of challenges in an impressive manner. With the exception of Syria and Iraq, the national military establishments adopted the role of guardian of the social peace and sponsor of national unity, as opposed to acting as a tool of repression in the hands of the respective ruler.[14]

This change in perception was not absent from the dynamic in Iraq, but conditions were such that the momentum was not able to reach its full potential. This was largely due to the scale of sectarian entrenchment in the post-April 2003 phase, the fallout of which is still being dealt with in Iraq. The percentage of Iraqis affected by sectarian entrenchment has exceeded three quarters of the population, with the remaining quarter stranded in an uncomfortable position due to the lack of foreign support. Essentially, the project of reconstruction of the Iraqi state required the nation to enter into agreements with foreign powers regarding privatization of the productive and industrial infrastructure of the state and the lifting of government subsidies. This commitment was undertaken by all parties entering the political process in Iraq, even though they often pretend otherwise. Furthermore, foreign support for the process of change at this stage in Iraq would imply the failure of the American project in the country; would the United States accept that?

The primary domestic factor at play has been the ongoing solidarity between the various axes of power facilitated by the power-sharing process; any opposition is quickly slapped with one of several ready-made labels: e.g., links to terrorism, religious extremism, or affiliation with the Ba'ath party.

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[14] See: Ahmad Sabri, "When communication mediums become tools for change", *The Network of Iraqi Correspondents,* February 24, 2011.
www.murasleen.com/2011/02/24.

These factors together contributed to the unique circumstances of the Iraqi protests, with the United States quietly permitting the use of violence and the turning of a deaf ear to the demands of the protestors. In reaction to these circumstances, a number of political positions regarding the demonstrations have crystallized.

1. Political Positions Regarding the Right to Demonstrate

a. Grand Ayatollah Ali al-Sistani affirmed the right of Iraqis to peaceful protest, with his office pronouncing the ongoing demonstrations in Iraq as "an inalienable right". Moreover, the office also announced that Ayatollah al-Sistani views the citizens' suffering due to the lack of services and the corruption of state institutions as evidence for the failure of the government. He believes that demonstrations are a right for all people, on the condition that they do not lead to the death of other individuals or the destruction of property (public or private), as has occurred in previous instances.[15]

    A large number of Iraqi Shi'as have adopted Sayyid Ali al-Sistani as a source of emulation, regardless of their own political affiliation. al-Sistani expressed reservations regarding the possibility of public protests being manipulated by groups that he described as enemies of the Iraqi people. He feared that such interference would transform the demonstrations from a peaceful exercise of a right into a method of confrontation with governmental authorities.

b. Another Shi'a source of emulation, Mohammad al-Ya'qubi said in a statement that the demonstrations "raised doubts and suspicions due to the anonymity of those standing behind them".

c. As for the Sadrist Current, which has many supporters,[16] an announcement was made through its leader Muqtada Al-Sadr that demonstrating is a popular right. However, he also expressed his opinion that the government should first be given a grace period to improve its services, after which Iraqis would be justified in protesting against the performance of the government and the provincial councils.

d. The source of emulation Qasim al-Ta'i, who has relatively few followers among the Shi'a, stated that it was the Iraqis' right to protest; he even issued a fatwa explicitly permitting it, on the basis that the government and executive organs had not produced tangible improvement in the lives of the people.

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[15] Atallah Muhajarani, "al-Sistani: people have the right to protest", *al-Sharq al-Awsat*, issue 11780, February 28, 2011.

[16] The author estimates the Current's supporters in Iraq at 3.5 Million people. They were calculated based on the fact that Iraqis number around 32 Million, and that the number of seats in the Parliament is 325, with one seat for every one hundred thousand citizens; and that the Sadrist Current earned 40 seats in the 2010 legislative elections, which allows –with a margin of error due to the mathematical method used- an estimation of the Current's supporters in Iraq.

e. As for the Association of Muslim Scholars, it is difficult to arrive at an accurate estimate of its number of supporters among Sunni Arabs. This is because government authorities have accused it of terrorism owing to its lack of support for the incumbent body politic; as a result, there can be no public popular expressions of support for the Association. However, largely facilitated by its affiliated media outlets (particularly the al-Rafidein satellite channel), the Association regarded peaceful demonstration against the government as a duty.

f. As for the formally organized political forces in the Parliament, their position was pre-determined due to their collective participation in the National Unity Government (the partnership cabinet). As such, supporting the protests would signify condemnation of their own representatives and their actions. Nevertheless, politicians assumed a variety of nuanced positions toward the demonstrations. Iyad Allawi's Iraqi List supported the general right to protest while neither condoning nor calling for the particular demonstrations in question.

    Conversely, al-Hakeem's Supreme Islamic-Iraqi Council issued a warning against the exploitation of the demonstrations by those it described as Saddamists, Ba'athists, and extremists. Kurdish political forces abstained from making any statements regarding the protest, largely due to several demonstrations taking place in Kurdistan's cities (primarily Suleymaniya). Several individuals within Kurdish parties did, however, call on both the demonstrators and the government to avoid violence. Conspicuous in their absence were comments from several prominent secular movements, such as the Iraqi National Congress, the National Dialogue Front, and the Iraqi Nation Party.

g. In a common statement issued on February 24, 2011, the heads of the Shi'a, Sunni, and Christian endowments in Iraq called on protestors to stay their judgment of the general budget, in order to give the government a chance to gauge its effectiveness. They also called upon Parliament and security officials to guarantee the safety of the demonstrators and to respond to their demands, warning meanwhile against the presence of what they termed "intruders" within the protests.

    Their statement, read by the leader of the Sunni endowment Abd al-Ghafur al-Samirra'i at a press conference, stated that "many Iraqis view the demonstrations as a real chance to demand the improvement of their services and living conditions, and to achieve some of their objectives, which the government could not provide during the past phase. . . we stand with our citizens and share their legitimate demands reiterated in these peaceful protests, consisting in improving basic services and providing the necessary needs ; we state that protests and demonstrations are a legitimate right guaranteed by the constitution

and decreed by all earthly and divine laws". The statement also stressed the sacredness of the lives of Iraqis, and the necessity to protect their property.[17]

2. Stances and Measures of the Government and Provincial Councils

In the face of these statements, the government and its executive organs in the provinces exhibited a variety of responses.

a. Government

The government, represented by the Prime Minister, dealt cautiously with the protest: paying lip service to the right to demonstrate, while exhibiting through its actions a rejection of this right in practice.

- Constant warnings against the demonstrations were transmitted through meetings with sheikhs and other notables of the province of Basra as well as senior security officials in the provinces; elements deployed throughout Baghdad publicly threatened to kill or arrest anyone participating in the demonstrations. Civilian government vehicles brandishing loud speakers drove through the main streets and thoroughfares of the capital, especially in areas with a Shi'a majority, exhorting residents to refrain from participating in the protests.[18]

- Before the protests even began, the Prime Minister had accused the organizers and the participants of representing the remnants of the Ba'ath party and practicing Saddamist methods. He further predicted that the demonstrations would be subject to acts of violence by the extremists and those opposing the political process, necessitating the imposition of limitations on the manifestations. The first of these limitations came in the form of closure of certain streets, followed by the establishment of a short time period during which demonstrations would be allowed. Then came the decision to subject the right to protest to the condition of holding an official permit, and restricting protests to areas in which contact with the masses would be limited (the stadiums of al-Sha'b and al-Kashafa in Baghdad).

- The government intervened through various parties and political figures in order to abort the protests; some of these solicited channels proved successful in their attempts at intervention, calling upon citizens to grant the government a grace period before criticizing through protest its performance.

- Various measures hampering the right to protest were enacted:

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[17] "Government cars call on the residents of Sadr city and al-Shu'la neighborhood not to participate in the demonstrations", **az-Zaman Newspaper**, issue 3831, February 28, 2011, p. 2.
[18] Ibid.

- Widespread confiscation of identification cards from the young men took place in several cities, such as Abu Ghraib, mere days before the protest. This effectively deprived them of the opportunity to travel to downtown Baghdad for the demonstration, for fear of being prosecuted for not carrying identification documents.

- A comprehensive ban was instituted on the movement of vehicles, even in small cities, causing Baghdad to fall into a state of paralysis on the days for which protests had been organized.

- Roads leading to central Baghdad and other provinces were blocked using concrete barriers to stop vehicles, and temporary checkpoints were erected to prevent citizens from arriving on foot to relevant locations. For example, the bridges of al-Jumhooriya and al-Sink were blocked, thus separating the districts of al-Karkh from al-Rasafa in Baghdad and precluding the amassing of crowds for a large demonstration.

- Permits for demonstrations were refused, despite their clear permissibility by law. The Baghdad Governorate Council clearly stated that the right to grant permits falls within its jurisdiction.

- Media outlets were explicitly instructed not to cover the protests.

- Violent measures were taken against the protestors and those independent journalists seeking to cover the demonstrations. Citizens that attempted to participate were attacked even before reaching central Baghdad (Tahrir Square), and some protestors were killed. Attempts were made to disperse demonstrators by force (through the use of live ammunition, water, concussion grenades, and helicopters) before they were able to voice their demands. Some demonstrators and journalists were arrested and then assaulted.

- Propaganda was also invoked to thwart the protests, inciting fears regarding the participation of elements from the Ba'ath party in the demonstrations. Forces close to the political authority distributed photographs of the former Iraqi President Saddam Hussein as well as slogans glorifying the Ba'ath party to be raised during the protests in Baghdad, in order to provide a justification for security forces to open fire against those protesting corruption. These attempts were preceded by accusations from the Prime Minister, Nuri al-Maliki, that the Ba'ath party had incinerated the governorate headquarters of al-Qut (a Shi'a province). However, security forces in al-Qut said that there was no evidence linking any specific group to the torching.[19]

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[19] See: Karim Abd Zayer, "The intelligence services distribute slogans glorifying the Ba'ath to be raised during the Friday demonstrations", **az-Zaman Newspaper,** issue 3830, February 24, 2011, p. 15.

b. Provincial Councils and Local Security Forces

The measures adopted in the provinces were largely similar to those taken by the central government in Baghdad, the main difference being the higher toll of violence in the cities of Nineveh, Suleymaniya, al-Anbar, and Basra. Earlier, during a demonstration in the city of al-Qut, a disproportionate amount of violence was unleashed against protestors who had set fire to the governorate hall.

In total, the number of citizens martyred in the demonstrations of February and March 2011 reached 30; since March, however, the rate of protests has diminished, as has the severity of government measures in opposition to them.[20]

Third Axis: A Review of the Outcome of the Protests in Iraqi Cities
Both the invocation and the practice of the right to protest have led to several outcomes, despite the limited scale of the demonstrations and the reactions (both internal and external) to the government practices.

A. Achieving Immediate Results Related to the Demands of the Masses

Over the course of the popular movement demanding demonstrations, a number of developments emerged on the Iraqi scene.

1. The Sadrist Current, most prominent among the ruling parties, initially announced its support of the popular demands; it then raised the bar by calling for the acting Parliament to disband and new legislative elections to be held. It justified its extreme position on the grounds that the country needed to halt its plunge toward the unknown

Eventually, however, the Current backtracked, declaring that it would no longer participate in the protests, on the pretext of providing the government ample time to improve its performance. As the protests wore on, the government was forced to lessen its measures of harassment and the level of violence employed. The movement garnered the respect of several political forces, even those neither participating nor lending their support to the events.

2. The government announced a series of measures designed to contain popular anger and give the impression of responding to the demands of the public:

- Reduced electricity bills for the poorer sections of society.

- Promises to increase the salaries of state employees and civil servants by 20 percent (which had still not taken place at the time of writing).

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[20] See: Tara Abd al-Hadi, "Facebook activists call for demonstrations", *az-Zaman Newspaper*, issue 3833, February 28, 2011, p. 1.

- A proposal to lower the Prime Minister's salary by half, and those of ministers and MPs by 10 percent. In actuality, all that occurred was that the official salaries of the three presidencies were reduced by 30 percent, while their perks and other extra compensations (far exceeding the amount of their salaries) remained unchanged.

- The distribution of some basic items included in the terms of the food coupons; also, USD12 per citizen was granted as compensation for not honoring the food coupons by disbursing subsidized staples in prior years.

- The filling of 180,000 positions in state institutions was expedited, with priority given to transforming temporary employment contracts into permanent ones.

These measures reflected the level of concern among the members of the political class regarding the escalation and spread of the popular movement. They were also evidence of fear that the larger wave of revolutions in the Arab world could affect Iraq as well, with youth revolutions in Tunisia and Egypt having recently unseated two totalitarian regimes in a series of events unprecedented in the Arab region.

3. Other developments included the Prime Minister granting his cabinet ministers a 100-day grace period to improve their performance, affirming his own responsibility for the performance of the ministry[21]; however, the period ended on June 5, 2011 without significant signs of the promised improvement.

The governors of Basra, Babel, and Wasit resigned, as did the mayor of Baghdad, and the Prime Minister appealed to the governors of Baghdad and Nineveh to step down as well. Requests were made by the Prime Minister and the speaker of the Parliament for early provincial elections to be conducted, with the aim of forming more effective councils to deal with the demands of the masses. Ultimately, though, these proposals were abandoned on the basis that no political consensus existed regarding their application.

B. The Question of the Legitimacy of the Iraqi Political Regime and the Failure of the American Model for Democracy

Were the demonstrations in Iraq expected to lead to a broad popular rebellion along the lines of the Egyptian and Tunisian revolutions? Two scenarios emerge in answer to this question.[22]

- **First Scenario**

The wave of protests has moved from one city to another, in each location expressing relatively similar demands relating to the daily life of citizens (such as providing electricity, water, and

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[21] Noting that the Prime Minister has, thus, distanced himself from the collective responsibility of the cabinet in a parliamentary system; in the parliamentary system, the responsibility is shared between all members of the cabinet; the Prime Minister, however, has absolved himself from this responsibility.

[22] See: Abd al-Latif al-Sa'dun, "The uprisings in Iraq", *az-Zaman Newspaper*, issue 3828, February 22, 2011, p. 15.

nutritional goods, as well as improving other services). Some indications suggest that the ground is being prepared for the explosion of a popular movement, possibly evolving into a comprehensive revolution. Such a movement could pursue the achievement of national objectives as lofty as the overthrow of the existing political framework as well as its affiliated institutions and systems founded after 2006, replacing them with a transitional government.

- **Second Scenario**

An alternate, less optimistic, scenario states that one cannot ignore the elements that have (and will surely again) intervene to abort a movement such as the one described above. Chief among these elements is the foreign presence on Iraqi soil (more than 50,000 American soldiers and tens of thousands of private security personnel, in addition to over 5,000 diplomats and intelligence officers staffing the US embassy in Baghdad). This force could be mobilized at any moment to confront the Iraqi people or any other protesting group, if a real threat to the interests of the United States in the country is perceived.

Critics also point to the increasing weight of Iran's influence, which has taken root through intelligence and security institutions as well as religious and political projects that contribute to decision-making at critical junctures in Iraq. These groups are ready to mobilize at the right moment to abort any Iraqi movement whose motivation is purely patriotic. Another issue often pointed out is the fact that a large number of elements in Iraq in fact benefit from maintenance of the status quo: militias, political parties, and even individuals who stand to lose their positions – as well benefits accumulated over the years since April 2003 - if the situation gets out of control. These elements will devote all their influence and experience to avoiding this eventuality, even if it means casting aside their mutual differences or manipulating sectarian tensions.

It is worth noting that both of the described scenarios depict extreme outcomes. The ability of the people to foment a broad popular revolution is dependent on the capabilities of its individual citizens. They must be capable of designing plans to take the initiative and escalate the protests in a manner mobilizing all the forces of civil society and engaging them in the movement for change. The content of the slogans would undergo a shift from daily and immediate demands to larger and grander ones through engagement of mass activism. This activism would include strikes and civil disobedience, leading to the moment where the banner of change would be raised; this would then pave the way to the formation of a national transitional government.

The experience of the escalating protests in Baghdad and other Iraqi provinces has shown that the movement obtains its increasing momentum from the content of the demands put forth. The legitimacy of the claims has been acknowledged even by the ruling class, some members of which have attempted to ride the wave of popular support by endorsing the position of the protestors and calling for the enactment of their demands. This situation has also pressured the United States into recognizing the legitimacy of the demands and acknowledging their motivation.

British government spokesman Barry Marston declared: "the acts of violence that have flooded Iraq in the years following the 2003 invasion have prompted many to claim that Arab countries may be in need of a merciless powerful leader. The affirmations of an Orientalist such as Bernard Lewis, and those of an Islamist thinker such as Sayyid Qutb seem - in many cases - to converge in considering that the values termed 'Western', such as freedom, equality, and democracy, do not conform to Islamic societies. However, we have seen in recent days the acts of citizens who are proving everybody wrong; their objectives are clear and they act with an amount of courage that cannot be fathomed in Europe."[23]

Here, a question poses itself: why are the Iraqis protesting against the political system that they themselves recently chose and supported? And why hasn't the Iraqi government responded to the demands of the voters who elected it in 2005 and again in 2010?

Iraq's political regime, since the founding of the Iraqi state, has historically suffered from a crisis of legitimacy. In the period between 1921 and 1958, legitimacy was based on the Hashemite lineage, in addition to the referendum set up by the British to approve Prince Faisal as a monarch over Iraq. In the period between 1958 and 1980, legitimacy was based on the revolutionary thesis advanced by some forces and individuals (*de facto* legitimacy). As for the period from 1980 to 1990, the question of legitimacy was neatly side-stepped, as the logistical necessities of the Iraq-Iran war took center stage. The period between 1990 and 2003 saw a wholesale collapse of the basis the legitimacy of the ruling regime and the political system as a whole.

This crisis of legitimacy continued from April 2003 to June 2006, due to the temporary and transitory nature of the phase following the occupation of Iraq. Toward the end of 2005, the majority of Iraqis has agreed to recognize a new political system by way of a referendum on a permanent constitution, with elections being a tool for the establishment of a legitimate government. The concept was that the government emerges from the ballot boxes and that the will of the voters should shape the cabinet. However, if the political system was shaped through the will of the citizens, who also voted for the government and the provincial councils, then why did protests erupt so soon following the election?

Based on the features of the protests, five different hypotheses can be formulated regarding the legitimacy of the regime and the current political system.

1. The parliamentary elections, and before them, the constitutional referendum, falsified popular will. This theory was put forward by several parties at the time of the events.

2. The will of the people was misguided during the elections and the referendum, due to the spread of mutual fears and the incitement of divisive loyalties (sectarian, ethnic, or regional) on an unprecedented scale.

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[23] Barry Marston, "History sweeps across North Africa and the Middle East", *Alarabiya.net*, February 25, 2011
http://www.alarabiya.net/save_pdf.php?cont_id=139243

3. The electoral system adopted was inadequate and not representative of the will of the voters. Citizens were forced to choose between the "me" the "other" and the "void", which made voting a function of blocs, not individuals; furthermore, these blocs were voted for based on sectarian affiliation rather than their electoral platforms.

4. The existing political reality in Iraq has contributed to the collapse of some of the pillars of legitimacy of the ruling regime and the political system.

5. The political performance of the government, as well as that of the executive apparatus, have undermined the legitimacy of the ruling regime and the political system.

The credibility of these hypotheses notwithstanding, Iraq today is faced with two varying programs that question the entire legitimacy of the system:

A. Elements that chose non-participation in the political process, as well as those that abstained in response to the will of the United States and other political influences in the official arena.

B. Political factions that believe the government's performance to have robbed the entire political system of much of its legitimacy.

Since it was the United States that sponsored the Iraqi model of democracy and governance, the protests and doubts that have been cast upon the legitimacy of the political system have undermined the model that the US had hoped to introduce into other countries in the region.

C. The Thesis of Internal Reform - the Political System Adapting to its Surroundings

Another perspective suggests that the protests in fact had no bearing on the question of legitimacy; that they were related instead to the necessity of the political regime adapting to changing events. This view is justified by the observation that the citizens' faith in the political process and its factions is not commensurate with the performance of the government between 2006 and 2011. In other words, social-political structure has demands that the system has not been able to absorb and respond to; however, this does not negate its general legitimacy.

Citizens have not demanded the overthrow of the entire political system, nor have they called for the cabinet to be disbanded. Rather, the demands were for the size of the cabinet to be reduced and for the replacement of some of its members. Similarly, replacements of members of the provincial councils were called for, as was a general improvement in governmental and executive performance. The answer, then, lies in a process of internal reform that should be capable of bringing an end to the crisis. This process of reform implies measures to restrict the power of parties that have heretofore benefitted dubiously from the status quo, by targeting key aspects of corruption.

1. Segmentary legitimacy (based on sectarianism, ethnicity, or regionalism) has justified the rise of certain individuals in the system, without regard to their abuse of public funds and offices. This has led in turn to a startling discrepancy over the past years between the level of public services provided in Iraq and the massive state revenues.

2. Political legitimacy has been achieved by way of the citizenry, who installed the body politic through its votes. Due to the power-sharing system that is the lubricant of the political regime, political immunity has been virtually ensured for those practicing corruption.

3. Supporting political careers has proved highly draining to Iraq's national coffers. The salaries, compensations, and pensions of around 3,000 political posts consume a quarter of the country's annual budget.

4. Political inaction and lack of commitment are perceived to be characteristics of Iraqi citizens, as is unquestioning obedience to leaders without regard to their performance.

In light of these existing features of the Iraqi socio-political scene, reform will require the fulfillment of a number of steps.

a. The size of the cabinet should be slashed from its current 43 ministries to half that number or even fewer. This very project was proposed by the Prime Minister in February 2011, but he was unable to bring it to fruition due to its violation of the principle of political power-sharing.

b. There should be a move toward a government based on absolute majority, rather than the current consociational organization that produces an amalgam of all existing voices. This would facilitate the emergence of an opposition capable of providing oversight to governmental and executive performance. Some protest that the very structure of the parliament is divided along sectarian lines, which will preclude the conceptual separation between a political opposition and the representatives of specific societal groups. Be this as it may, a shift away from a pretending to represent all political powers, in the direction of a cabinet based on absolute majority, is imperative for the reform process. This could be considered an initial step toward the development of non-sectarian parties with political programs inclusive of all Iraqis.

c. There must be a clear separation between political and executive tasks; the unregulated combination of the two has led to a complete absence of neutrality and professionalism in the executive apparatus over the past years.

d. Political power-sharing deals must be abolished. This will not be possible without reforms to the electoral system in the direction of reducing political pluralism in the Parliament, facilitating the assumption of an absolute majority by a single bloc. One method for achieving this could be the adoption of two-stage elections: all political

powers would participate in the first stage, with the second being reserved for the candidates who received the highest rankings in the preliminary elections.

e. The rule of law must be reinforced, the independence of the judiciary confidently asserted, and constitutional principles unconditionally respected. Furthermore, detainees who have been arrested without trials for years must be released, in addition to the several thousands who are arrested each month with political or sectarian justification, or through the corruption of the security apparatus.[24]

f. Currently, the loyalties of military and security units lie primarily with the ministers of defense and the interior, respectively. These institutions must be re-organized to be affiliated with political groups and independent from the ministries in question. These units generally have their own system of prisons and salaries not subject to state regulation.

g. The timeline for improvement of services must be brought forward. Iraq still lacks a productive economy, and its ability to provide services, e.g., water, electricity, and municipal administration, remains extremely weak.

h. An ambitious plan for comprehensive national development must be undertaken, its agenda targeting the reduction of poverty rates on a national, rather than regional or sectarian,   basis.
    Waste of Iraq's resources, both human and natural, must also be drastically reduced.

The above points do not imply questioning of the legitimacy of the political system itself; rather, they speak to the necessity of the political system undergoing a process of adaptation. Internal reforms must be formulated and undertaken, before the crisis reaches proportions to produce genuine doubts as to the legitimacy of both the ruling regime and the political system.

D. The Thesis of Reform through the Masses

The possibility exists that the ruling political regime may not immediately respond to the demands of the citizens. This leads to another scenario consisting of the escalation of protests, demonstrations, and sit-ins, with the goal of forcing the government to either improve its performance or resign. In such a situation, a number of specific options would exist on the level of political action, and perhaps for the political system as a whole.

1. The protests could be revived, on an increased scale, which could in turn lead to generalized protest resulting in the disbanding of the government, including the Parliament, cabinet, and provincial councils. New elections would produce institutions with different political colorings, and a chance to recover from the failures of the figures

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[24] See: Karim Abd Zayer, "The leader of the US forces: the corruption of the security forces is the gravest problem facing the Iraqi regime", *az-Zaman Newspaper,* issue 3400, September 16, 2009, p. 2.

who have been managing the country since June 2004. This infusion of new energy may be capable of fulfilling the citizens' ambitions under an efficient democratic system.

2. Early elections may produce a democratic political system with an absolute majority; if the success of one of the political factions is overwhelming enough, there will no longer be a need for concessions and power-sharing in the formation of the cabinet.

3. Alternatively, the government and provincial councils may not respond to the demands for reform. This has in fact been the case since February 2011, with the coy reluctance to fulfill promises made to the masses. Iraq would then be plunged into a state of generalized chaos which may lead to the disintegration of the Iraqi state.

The Iraqi analyst and politician Jaber Habib Jaber commented at the time: "Protests in Iraq began at a moment when the political class had squandered all the remaining patience and hope among the people. It was fitting that the same moment was witnessing the wasting of time in futile debate regarding the number of vice presidents - with the president's position itself being one of protocol - and over the attributes of the Council of Strategic Policies – which is merely an additional excuse to spend budget funds and to confiscate the authority of the parliament. This meant that the political class was heading in the direction of aborting the remaining democratic mechanisms, with this tendency overlapping with some members of the provincial councils neglecting their real duties.

"However, in a country that has just exited massive chaos, and had paid a grave price that had not been suffered by any other people to be rid of dictatorship, including occupation, it appears that the protests – if they went out of control - would lead to a new disaster that may culminate in ending the very existence of Iraq. There is no doubt that the citizens have the right to protest the deteriorating services and the corruption of the political class, but what everyone must understand is that demonstrations are not an alternative to democratic mechanisms. . . as a result, in a country whose constitution affirms democracy, the alternation of power, and elections as a sole tool to choose the rulers, protests and demonstrations must be directed towards the reform of democracy and its practice, and not to overthrow democracy. Iraqi protests have no clear identity, and it appears that there are varying – and even contradicting groups - that wish to take to the street, with their sole purpose largely being the improvement of their living conditions.

"The question is: can this majority prevent the minority with the political agenda from stealing their protest and their movement in the street . . . if the protests went out of control, then the disorderly minority would have crushed the hopes of the majority that seeks reform; and when chaos takes root, everyone would be defeated and dominance in the street would be for those who can fill it with their armed militiamen who are being prepared for this day. In an Iraq with a weak central government, and a deficient institutional, democratic, and security apparatus, undermining the status quo and

announcing the communiqué number one will not be the ending, but rather the beginning of the separation of the peripheries from the center, in a preface for another civil war over who controls what." [25]

Conclusions

The following conclusions may be drawn.

1. The formulation of the political system and its promulgation has been tainted with doubts as to the legitimacy of the system that emerged after 2006, when the permanent constitution took effect. Most damaging was the promise made at the time to revise some of the controversial articles to facilitate their amendment within a specific time limit; this was offered in exchange for the approval of those who had initially rejected the constitution. The non-fulfillment of this promise has led to a strong feeling of having been deceived by those who ultimately approved the constitution (i.e., the politicians and their constituents).

2. The performance of the government and the executive apparatus has been tarnished with negativity over the course of legislative cycles both past and present. Reasons for this include corruption, political power-sharing deals, and the inadequacy of services (which has led to increased suffering on the part of the citizenry).

3. The widespread increase in poverty in Iraq is due to a variety of factors. Burgeoning unemployment, the reduced buying power of the Iraqi citizens stemming from the combination of rampant inflation and stagnant salaries, the skyrocketing number of families that have lost their breadwinner through death or arrest, the organized theft of Iraq's national wealth, and the inadequate distribution of income for political reasons, have all contributed to increasingly bitter public dissatisfaction with government policies.

4. This new social movement has exhibited new characteristics that the government and executive apparatus have proven unable to absorb or respond to. Society can no longer accept to grant legitimacy on sectarian, ethnic, or regional grounds, especially while suffering from the effects of deficient services and weak administration.

5. Social awareness in favor of change remains limited among members of civil society. These groups tend to be too weak to mobilize the street with enough momentum to change the status quo. At the same time, the powers of the state justify repression and coercion with the mantra of combating terrorism, finding broad sectors of society that respond positively to this rhetoric. Several key figures in political and religious establishments support the political process as an effective tool for achieving the influence they seek over the general populace. The Western world, including the United

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[25] See: Jabir Habib Jabir, "The Iraqi protests … reform or chaos?", *al-Sharq al-Awsat Newspaper*, issue 11779, February 27, 2011.

States, remains more concerned with attempts to influence the more radical changes in other Arab regions than with the events in Iraq.

The conclusions reached over the entirety of this study may be summarized as follows.

1. The Iraqi political system is in need of reform in order to be able to respond to the social, economic, and political change that has taken place in recent years. Reforms are also needed in order to treat the deficiencies that have accompanied the evolution of the political system since the promulgation of the constitution in 2005.

2. The level of awareness obtaining in Iraqi society, as well as its weakness, divisive tendencies, and the merging of the religious establishment with the political one, all diminish any sense of confidence in popular protest to bring about decisive results on the national level. Effectively, the protests in Iraq have all but died out since March 2011.

3. The protests expressed the existence of social demands and an internal dynamic. Absorbing the existence of these two phenomena requires revision of some aspects of the political process, such as reducing the scale of political power-sharing and raising the caliber of services offered to citizens. If today's government is not serious about achieving those goals, then it risks its own future, as well as that of Iraq as a whole, by allowing the neglect to continue.

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