Understanding the cause of Iraq's 'October Revolution' during the Adil Abdul-Mahdi administration

Zainab Mehdi

Introduction

In the wake of the US-led invasion of Iraq in 2003, the US invested billions of dollars to mould Iraq into the democratic society that the Bush administration envisioned. Without a doubt, the promotion of democracy was forcefully imposed[1] on Iraq and it did not substantially engage with the challenges associated with promoting democracy in post-conflict settings.[2] In contrast to author Robert D. Kaplan's argument that democracy "cannot be imposed overnight anywhere",[3] the Bush administration believed otherwise. In his speech on the 20th Anniversary of The National Endowment for Democracy in 2003, Bush asserted his confidence in democratisation in Iraq by saying that "Iraqi democracy will succeed".[4] The reality of this democratic 'experiment,' however, was quite different. Behind the mask of so-called democracy, Iraq evolved into a kleptocracy, which as this policy paper argues, led to the formation of an ineffective state. This argument further explores the role of Iraq's ineffectiveness as a state in the onset of the 2019 October protests.

This policy paper will first offer a summary of post-2003 Iraq by shedding light on how heightened sectarianism via the *Muhasasa Ta'ifa*, an ethno-sectarian quota system aimed at disseminating cabinet positions in the name of nationhood and stability, has hindered the democratisation process. Using two examples of the overlooked needs of protesters during the Adil Abdul-Mahdi administration in particular, this paper will then demonstrate that state ineffectiveness, deriving from the *Muhasasa*, caused the 2019 protests, also known as the 'October Revolution'. This study focuses on protesters' demands to end foreign intervention in the country and improve basic services in Iraq. In the course of doing so, it will clarify how militias' grip on Iraq undermined the Iraqi government's capability to function as an effective state and thus meet the protesters' needs. Finally, the paper will conclude by considering whether the revolution will succeed under the current administration of Mustafa Al-Kadhimi.

Iraq: Post-2003

Even though post-2003 Iraq notionally underwent democratisation via the US-led

---

[1] Katerina Dalacoura, "US democracy promotion in the Arab Middle East since 11 September 2001: a critique," *International Affairs* 81, no. 5 (October 2005): 963.

[2] Nicole B. Sedaca and Nicolas Bouchet, *Holding steady? US democracy promotion in a changing world*, (London: Chatham House, 2014) https://www.chathamhouse.org/sites/default/files/home/chatham/public_html/sites/default/files/170214DemocracyPromotion.pdf.

[3] Robert D. Kaplan, "Barren Ground for Democracy," *The New York Times*, accessed 8 January 2021, https://www.nytimes.com/2004/11/14/opinion/barren-ground-for-democracy.html.

[4] George W. Bush, "President Bush Discusses Freedom in Iraq and Middle East" (speech, 20th Anniversary of the National Endowment for Democracy, United States Chamber of Commerce, Washington, D.C., November 6, 2003).

invasion and the removal of Saddam Hussein from power, the country still lacks stability. Not only does this show the failure of US-led democratisation, but it also highlights the prescience of Bush's 20th Anniversary speech where despite his optimism, he predicted that the failure of democracy in Iraq would "embolden terrorists around the world, increase dangers to the American people, and extinguish the hopes of millions in the region".[5] By way of example, de-Ba'athification, a post-2003 US policy of removing Ba'ath party members from Iraqi government positions, encouraged unemployed Sunnis who once held professional jobs under Hussein's regime to join in the fight against occupied rule and gain access to a flood of arms and material.[6]

Placing the *Muhasasa Ta'ifa* and democracy promotion under the same umbrella has consistently been problematic. As Adrian Karatnycky argues, "Democracy has been significantly more successful in monoethnic societies than in ethnically divided and multi-ethnic states".[7] He further explains that "in ethnically divided and multi-ethnic societies, political parties tend to form around ethnic allegiances".[8] Quite evidently, this prioritisation serves as a barrier to the success of a country's democratic transition. In the context of Iraq, this prioritisation can be seen via the *Muhasasa*, a system of sectarian apportionment set up after the US-led invasion which has unofficially structured government establishment since 2005. Built around what can best be defined as an elite bargain, the political parties selected to represent the *Muhasasa* were handed over the responsibility of diverting politics away from dispute and moving the country towards steady coexistence. For such a transition to succeed, Stefan Lindemann states that elite bargains must be inclusive, and hence encourage stability.[9] In the case of Iraq, incorporating an inclusive elite bargain into Iraqi politics was going to be difficult because of the exclusionary nature of the *Muhasasa*. According to Lindemann, exclusive bargains, the opposite of inclusive bargains, eliminate a number of crucial politicians and their supporters, cultivating "antagonism and violent conflict."[10] The post-2003 political arrangement created by the US (the *Muhasasa*) produced exactly this outcome. In his words, Toby Dodge argues that the post-2003 settlement was created to dismiss indigenous political elites from government positions.[11] It was thus only inevitable that Iraq's elite bargain fell under the category of exclusive, especially if one bears in mind the sectarian civil war that followed after the *Muhasasa*'s implementation.

As expected, Iraq's consociational system sparked anxiety across Iraq's newly

---

[5] Bush, "President Bush Discusses Freedom."

[6] Russell Crandall, *America's Dirty Wars: Irregular Warfare from 1776 to the War on Terror* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2014), 374.

[7] Adrian Karatnycky, "Muslim Countries and the Democracy Gap," *Journal of Democracy* 13, no. 1 (January 2002): 107.

[8] Karatnycky, "Muslim Countries," 110.

[9] Stefan Lindemann, "Do Inclusive Elite Bargains Matter? A Research Framework for Understanding the Causes of Civil War in Sub-Saharan Africa", Crisis States Discussion Paper 15, Crisis States Research Centre, London School of Economics and Political Science, February 2008, https://www.lse.ac.uk/international-development/Assets/Documents/PDFs/csrc-discussion-papers/dp15-Do-Inclusive-Elite-Bargains-Matter.pdf.

[10] Lindemann, "Do Inclusive Elite Bargains Matter?" 2, 21.

[11] Toby Dodge, *Iraq: From War to a New Authoritarianism* (London: International Institute for Strategic Studies, 2012), 41.

emboldened civil society. For instance, there was much discussion on the potential harm that the new political arrangement would do to government proficiency; observers critiqued the part of the *Muhasasa* which allowed council representatives to be selected solely for their party allegiance rather than their professional abilities.[12] Unfortunately, initial anxieties about the system have become all too true today. Since the establishment of the *Muhasasa*, party members have colonized state institutions by taking advantage of access to economic capital, either by rapidly expanding the public sector payroll or stealing public funds.[13]

Against this background of rampant corruption that has destabilized Iraq, the ruling elite within the *Muhasasa* have adopted the following: control over participation, loyalty over merit, and private gains over the public good. In other words, the ruling elite has become too preoccupied with its internal struggles rather than fulfilling its duty of transitioning the country from a dictatorship to a democracy. As a result of this approach to nation building, Iraq has become a kleptocracy and, by consequence, an ineffective state. Commenting on the impact of state ineffectiveness in Iraq, Dodge adds that state institutions have now become fragile and incapable of providing essential government services to the bulk of the Iraqi population.[14]

Today, frustrations over this form of state ineffectiveness can be seen in the ongoing Iraq protests, which first broke out in Baghdad's Tahrir Square on 1 October 2019. Before drawing the link between state ineffectiveness as the cause of the October Revolution, it is important to define state ineffectiveness.

Defining State Ineffectiveness

According to Gizachew Tiruneh, state ineffectiveness refers to the fragility of the state or political leadership in fulfilling the needs and aspirations of the people. In addition, states that are ineffective and constantly susceptible to revolution deny public requests for political transformation and economic welfare and resort to brutality to suppress opposition.[15]

Using these characteristics as a means of measuring state ineffectiveness, Iraq's October Revolution has reflected the Iraqi state's inability to address protesters' demands: improved basic services and an end to corruption and foreign interference. During Adil Abdul-Mahdi's administration, such failures can be best understood via the examples described in the following paragraphs.

Ending *any* and *all* Foreign Meddling in Iraqi Affairs

The chant, "We want a homeland", repeated amongst Iraqi protesters highlighted the melancholic nostalgia for an independent Iraq and the belief that foreign intervention in

---

[12] Dodge, *Iraq: From War*, 42.
[13] Toby Dodge, "Muhasasa Ta'ifiya and its Others: Domination and Contestation in Iraq's political field," in *Religion, Violence, and the State in Iraq* (POMEPS Studies, 2019), 40-41, https://pomeps.org/wp-content/uploads/2019/10/POMEPS_Studies_35.1.pdf.
[14] Dodge, "Muhasasa Ta'ifiya and its Others," 38.
[15] Gizachew Tiruneh, "Social Revolutions: Their Causes, Patterns, and Phases," *SAGE Open* 4, no. 3 (September 2014): 8.

Iraq upheld Iraq's image as a failed and weak state.[16]

Focusing particularly on Iranian involvement in Iraq, one of Iran's post-Saddam Hussein policy goals has been to ensure that any subsequent Iraqi administration is frail and beholden to Iranian interests.[17] One means of achieving this goal has been through 'Lebanonisation,' a term that originated in 1983 that describes the process of a country's disintegration into civil war or failed state, thereby leaving a country ungovernable. Iran has been able to sustain this outcome via the expansion and entrenchment of a Hezbollah-like, Iranian-controlled militia, which includes militia groups such as Kata'ib Hezbollah (KH) and Asa'ib Ahl al-Haq (AAH). Through the strength of these militias, Iran's Lebanonization of Iraq enables the "utter paralysis of the political process, which in turn paralyses the wider governance and economic systems of the country".[18]

Hisham al-Hashimi, an Iraqi historian and researcher who has counselled the Iraqi government, conducted the most significant research on militia control thus far. Before his assassination by gunmen on 8 July 2020, al-Hashimi discovered that these Iranian-backed militias "have wrested pervasive control over much of the Iraqi economy: from airport customs, construction projects, oilfields, sewage, water, highways, colleges, public and private property, tourism sites, presidential palaces; to the extortion of restaurants, cafes, cargo trucks, fishermen, farmers, displaced families".[19]

Militias not only control much of Iraq's economy, but they also control much of the country's political and social sectors. This has "prevented the government from enacting and implementing many of the reforms that it promised",[20] said Omar al Nidawi, Programme Manager at the Enabling Peace in Iraq Center, during the first few weeks of the protest outbreaks across Iraq. These circumstances demonstrate how the presence of militias operating outside state control has further aggravated Iraq's state ineffectiveness under the *Muhasasa*. Indeed, as long as the militias continue to weaken the state via its process of Lebanonization, meeting protesters' needs will be challenging. Thus far, the state's inability to undermine Iranian-backed militias has enabled death squads in Baghdad and Basra to discharge snipers on Iraq's rooftops and to use dangerous weapons to target and assassinate Iraqi activists.

The Peaceful Call for Basic Human Rights

Seventeen years after the transformation of Iraqi leadership, Iraqi citizens are deprived

[16] Taif Alkhudary, "'No to America…No to Iran': Iraq's Protest Movement in the Shadow of Geopolitics," *Middle East Centre*, July 2, 2020, https://blogs.lse.ac.uk/mec/2020/01/20/no-to-americano-to-iran-iraqs-protest-movement-in-the-shadow-of-geopolitics/.

[17] Kenneth M. Pollack, "Prospects for Increased Iranian Influence in Iraq," Brookings, last modified November 15, 2011, https://www.brookings.edu/testimonies/prospects-for-increased-iranian-influence-in-iraq/.

[18] Kenneth M. Pollack, "Iraq Situation Report, Part II: Political and Economic Developments," Brookings, last modified March 29, 2016, https://www.brookings.edu/blog/markaz/2016/03/29/iraq-situation-report-part-ii-political-and-economic-developments/.

[19] Hassan Hassan, "How Iraq's Top ISIS Scholar Became a Target for Shiite Militias," SyriacPress, last modified October 9, 2020, https://syriacpress.com/blog/2020/10/09/how-iraqs-top-isis-scholar-became-a-target-for-shiite-militias/.

[20] Bilge N. Kotan, "Why Are Iraqis Angry at Iran?," TRT World, last modified October 16, 2019, https://www.trtworld.com/middle-east/why-are-iraqis-angry-at-iran-30527.

of their basic rights, including access to clean and safe drinking water, reliable electricity supply, and guaranteed employment. Focusing on the latter demand in particular, this paper considers J. Mac Skelton and Zmkan Ali Saleem's 2019 report on unemployment in Basra, particularly in the oil sector.[21] As mentioned in the previous section, al-Hashimi noted that amongst several other factors, militias have consolidated their control over Iraq's oil fields in the country's post-2003 political field. Such control has disrupted the recruitment of Iraqis within the sector; Skelton and Saleem found that those with militia or party affiliations gained employment much more easily.[22]

In an attempt to meet citizens' protest demands, particularly regarding employment in the oil sector, the former Minister of Oil Thamir Ghadhban said in 2019 that 3,200 further jobs in the sector would be provided. Those granted employment opportunities included graduates of specialized colleges, various engineering fields, and oil training institutes. Touching on the recruitment of Iraqis within international oil companies in particular, Harry Istepanian, Senior Fellow of Iraq Energy Institute, said that "international oil companies hired some Iraqis but not in thousands. The type of work that international oil companies are doing in Iraq's oil fields is not labour intensive".[23] Despite the hiring process, however, Istepanian added that a key issue still existed within the oil sector: most employment was still decided through either tribal or political groups affiliated with militias.[24] Given these circumstances, militias' sustained grip over job recruitment has and will further complicate governmental efforts to meet Iraqis' need for steady, sustainable employment.

Unless there is persistent and synchronized pressure from Baghdad, this second sign of state ineffectiveness, namely nepotism, is unlikely to change. Additionally, this form of state ineffectiveness will only escalate Iraqis' involvement in protest movements. Although the release of Iraq's new White Paper shows Al-Kadhimi's commitment to meeting the protesters' demands by implementing strategic reforms and creating sustainable job opportunities,[25] the Prime Minister must first complete the ongoing reorganization of Iraq's broken and disintegrated governance system. Upon completion, the Iraqi government may then gradually transcend its current ineffectiveness. Indeed, if Iraq were to become a more effective state, only then would the administration be able to consider successfully undermining the influence of militias, not only within the oil sector but across all other economic and social sectors as well.

Conclusion

The American attempt to democratise Iraq after the toppling of Saddam Hussein's Ba'athist regime failed in several critical regards. Under the *Muhasasa*, which was imported into the country with the backing of US forces, Iraq saw the intensification of

[21] J. M. Skelton and Zmkan A. Saleem, *The Politics of Unemployment in Basra: Spotlight on the Oil Sector,* (IRIS Policy Report, 2019).
[22] Skelton and Saleem, "*The Politics of Unemployment.*"
[23] Harry Istepanian, Email interview, November 24, 2020.
[24] Istepanian, Email interview.
[25] Ali Al-Mawlawi, "Can the White Paper Deliver on Economic Reform?," 1001 Iraqi Thoughts, last modified October 16, 2020, https://1001iraqithoughts.com/2020/10/14/can-the-white-paper-deliver-on-economic-reform/.

sectarian violence and the entrenchment of a ruling elite more concerned with gaining even more wealth than committing to internal cooperation. The persistent internal strife among the *Muhasasa*'s ruling elite in a country now considered to be kleptocratic has played a key role in the Iraqi state's ineffectiveness. This outcome, combined with the growth and strength of militia groups, has resulted in the negligence of Iraqi citizens' needs – among them, the end to foreign intervention in the country as well as the peaceful call for basic human rights – and the onset of the October Revolution in 2019 that continues today.

An important future consideration will be the range of possible outcomes to this new 'revolution' – to what extent will the protesters' demands be met by the current government of Mustafa Al-Kadhimi? Realistically speaking, Iraq's October Revolution will struggle to succeed if Al-Kadhimi does not dismantle the profoundly unpopular *Muhasasa*. Disbanding the *Muhasasa*, however, will be challenging and has already proven to be difficult. For example, before becoming the newly elected Prime Minister of Iraq, Al-Kadhimi backed down on this proposed reform when the Iran-backed Fatah coalition warned that they would reject Al-Kadhimi's candidacy.[26] As a result of Al-Kadhimi's decision to back down, corruption continued to siphon government funds and postpone the much-needed infrastructure plans. These thus led to restrictions with regard to access to the afore-mentioned basic rights of protesters, such as reliable electricity and clean water. Despite efforts to reorganize the system, the success of the revolution will be further complicated by the presence of powerful Iran-backed militias in Iraq. Although the Iraqi forces have been said to be weak and divided by factional infighting[27]; the Popular Mobilization Forces (PMF), an umbrella organization and a recognized branch of the Iraqi armed forces, comprise one of the most powerful groups in Iraq, including the aforementioned KH and AAH. Despite theoretically being under Al-Kadhimi's command, the PMF have taken advantage of their strength by acting alone as an autonomous leadership, thereby hindering the success of the revolution. If current tactics to control Iranian-backed militias are not pursued, state ineffectiveness will persevere, and by consequence, taint Al-Kadhimi's proposed strategy of reforming Iraq incrementally.

Bibliography

Alkhudary, Taif. "'No to America…No to Iran': Iraq's Protest Movement in the Shadow of Geopolitics." *Middle East Centre* (blog). July 2, 2020. https://blogs.lse.ac.uk/mec/2020/01/20/no-to-americano-to-iran-iraqs-protest-movement-in-the-shadow-of-geopolitics/.

Al-Mawlawi, Ali. "Can the White Paper Deliver on Economic Reform?" 1001 Iraqi Thoughts. Last modified October 16, 2020. https://1001iraqithoughts.com/2020/10/14/can-the-white-paper-deliver-on-economic-reform/.

---

[26] Nathalie Bussemaker, "Iraq's New Government: What to Know," Council on Foreign Relations, last modified August 11, 2020, https://www.cfr.org/in-brief/iraqs-new-government-what-know.

[27] Pesha Magid, "Islamic State Aims for Comeback Amid Virus-Expedited U.S. Withdrawal," Foreign Policy, last modified April 6, 2020, https://foreignpolicy.com/2020/04/06/iraq-islamic-state-comeback-coronavirus-us-withdrawal/.

Bussemaker, Nathalie. "Iraq's New Government: What to Know." Council on Foreign Relations. Last modified August 11, 2020. https://www.cfr.org/in-brief/iraqs-new-government-what-know.

Bush, George W. "President Bush Discusses Freedom in Iraq and Middle East." Speech, 20th Anniversary of the National Endowment for Democracy, United States Chamber of Commerce, Washington, D.C., November 6, 2003.

Crandall, Russell. *America's Dirty Wars: Irregular Warfare from 1776 to the War on Terror*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2014.

Dalacoura, Katerina. "US democracy promotion in the Arab Middle East since 11 September 2001: a critique." *International Affairs* 81, no. 5 (October 2005), 963-979. doi:10.1111/j.1468-2346.2005.00497.x.

Dodge, Toby. *Iraq: From War to a New Authoritarianism*. London: International Institute for Strategic Studies, 2012.

Dodge, Toby. "Muhasasa Ta'ifiya and its Others: Domination and Contestation in Iraq's political field." In *Religion, Violence, and the State in Iraq*, 35th ed., 38-46. POMEPS Studies, 2019. https://pomeps.org/wp-content/uploads/2019/10/POMEPS_Studies_35.1.pdf. Hassan, Hassan. "How Iraq's Top ISIS Scholar Became a Target for Shiite Militias." SyriacPress. Last modified October 9, 2020. https://syriacpress.com/blog/2020/10/09/how-iraqs-top-isis-scholar-became-a-target-for-shiite-militias/.

Istepanian, Harry. Email interview. November 24, 2020.

Kaplan, Robert D. "Barren Ground for Democracy." The New York Times. Last modified November 14, 2004. https://www.nytimes.com/2004/11/14/opinion/barren-ground-for-democracy.html.

Karatnycky, Adrian. "Muslim Countries and the Democracy Gap." *Journal of Democracy* 13, no. 1 (January 2002), 99-112.

Kotan, Bilge N. "Why Are Iraqis Angry at Iran?" TRT World. Last modified October 16, 2019. https://www.trtworld.com/middle-east/why-are-iraqis-angry-at-iran-30527.

Lindemann, Stefan. "Do Inclusive Elite Bargains Matter? A Research Framework for Understanding the Causes of Civil War in Sub-Saharan Africa", *Crisis States Discussion Paper No. 15*, February 2008.

Magid, Pesha. "Islamic State Aims for Comeback Amid Virus-Expedited U.S. Withdrawal." Foreign Policy. Last modified April 6, 2020. https://foreignpolicy.com/2020/04/06/iraq-islamic-state-comeback-coronavirus-us-withdrawal/.

Pollack, Kenneth M. "Iraq Situation Report, Part II: Political and Economic Developments." Brookings. Last modified March 29, 2016. https://www.brookings.edu/blog/markaz/2016/03/29/iraq-situation-report-part-ii-political-and-economic-developments/.

Pollack, Kenneth M. "Prospects for Increased Iranian Influence in Iraq." Brookings. Last modified November 15, 2011. https://www.brookings.edu/testimonies/prospects-for-increased-iranian-influence-in-iraq/.

Sedaca, Nicole B., and Nicolas Bouchet. *Holding steady? US democracy promotion in a changing world*. London: Chatham House, 2014. https://www.chathamhouse.org/sites/default/files/home/chatham/public_html/sites/default/files/170214DemocracyPromotion.pdf.

Skelton, J. M., and Zmkan A. Saleem. *The Politics of Unemployment in Basra: Spotlight on the Oil Sector*. IRIS Policy Report, 2019.

Tiruneh, Gizachew. "Social Revolutions: Their Causes, Patterns, and Phases." *SAGE Open* 4, no. 3 (September 2014), 1-12.