

The coming twilight of a petro-state? Traumatic decarbonization as a driver of political transformation in Iraq

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Abstract

Iraq is a compelling example of a state highly dependent on a singular source of rent, namely oil revenue. Since 2003, Iraq has also been characterized by a fractured, rivalrous elite without central control over organized violence. This formula represents a “rentier political marketplace” in which state funds for salaries and contracts are the essential lubricant of the political system. During 2014–2021, successive shocks to national oil revenues represented a partial and temporary, but traumatic, decarbonization of Iraq’s government and political finance. In turn, this triggered a series of governance and political reconfigurations including a nominal decentralization process and fracturing of sectarian power, followed by a nationwide civic movement demanding transformational change. This paper traces these changes and the abrupt return to business as usual when oil prices rebounded. In doing so, the paper further investigates the nexus between oil and democracy in Iraq and addresses the unanswered question of how Iraq can decarbonize and democratize in the future.

Keywords

Iraq, adaptation, governance, extractives, natural resources, violence, youth

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Introduction

Iraq is a petro-state *par excellence*. It is the world's fifth largest hydrocarbon producer and the national economy, government budget, and sources of funds for employment, private sector contracting, and corrupt activities are dominated by oil to an unrivaled degree. No other source of funds comes close. Depending on the price of oil on the global market, oil revenues typically constitute 25% to 50% of GDP, provide 77% to 93% of government revenue,¹ almost 100% of foreign exchange earnings, and, in turn, this money funds directly or indirectly about 75% of national employment (IMF, 2015). Moreover, oil money is the life-blood of the Iraqi political system. It funded the centralized dictatorship of Saddam Hussein, including his massive army and pervasive security apparatus, his regime's infrastructural and welfare programs, and his vast vanity projects. It was a classic rentier autocracy. Since Saddam was overthrown in 2003, oil money has funded an even larger public sector and a sprawling array of private sector contracts and militia. Over these two decades, by contrast, the political system has been fractious, rivalrous, and turbulent. Members of the political elite bargain over positions in government, party loyalties, and political services including security using a combination of money, violence, and intrigue. In this regard, it resembles a "rentier political marketplace" (RPM) (de Waal, 2015; Spatz et al., 2021).

In the rich literature on the political economy of petro-states, there is less attention to how those states manage the "bust" period of the boom-and-bust cycle. The working assumption is that oil price dips are temporary and will rebound (e.g., Karl, 1999). Scholars distinguish between the richer authoritarian rentier states, such as the Gulf monarchies, that have plentiful reserves of fat to weather a downturn, and the group of states that Gopalakrishnan and Miller (2023) call "fragile fossil-fuel producers" (FFFPs), which, as Gregory Gause notes, "live closer to the bone" (Gause, 2015: 5). While noting that such states will be stressed, there is, however, little attention to how those stresses will play out in the domestic political arena. There is still less focus on the long-term prospects for petro-states if the world fulfills its promises, enshrined in the 2015 Paris Climate Accord and COP28 outcome document, to transition away from fossil fuels. Thus, Scott Walker sketches "happy" and "unhappy endings" but concludes, "the long-term picture of what forms of economic and political change are likely to occur ... is extremely murky" (Walker, 2023: 4). The challenge of potential global decarbonization is preoccupying many of the world's leading oil and gas producers. States such as Norway, Saudi Arabia, and the United Arab Emirates are developing strategic plans for such scenarios. However, paths to a post-carbon future are varied and uncertain (Gopalakrishnan & Miller, 2023). But FFFP leaders are preoccupied with short-term political survival amid what sometimes appears to be a state of permanent political crisis, such long-term planning is far more difficult. Technical staff in government and advisors from academia are aware of the challenge but politicians are unable in practice to translate policy documents, including commitments to the energy transition, into real outcomes. In such cases, decarbonization is more likely to be unplanned and traumatic. Iraq is one such country.

Iraq has not decarbonized. However, its carbon rents have been volatile. The period 2014 to 2021 serves as a real-time experiment in traumatic partial decarbonization. In 2013, the IMF estimated the "breakeven" price of oil for Iraq to be \$102 per barrel (IMF, 2013: 14).² At this level, the government could meet its financial targets. Below it, it could not. In the years 2008 to 2013, the price averaged \$90 per barrel. In the subsequent 7 years, it was about \$50, before rebounding in 2022.

The first section of this paper elaborates on the intersecting lenses of “petro-states” and the “RPM.” This is then applied to post-2003 Iraq. The subsequent sections trace the evolution of these dynamics during these 7 years, 2014 to 2021, looking at how the reduced and volatile political funds available to the Iraqi elite impacted their dealmaking. The article then traces this impact through three evolutions: first, a nominal decentralization process; followed by the reconfiguring of sectarian-political power; third the breakdown of sectarianism among the Iraqi people; and finally the return to political business as usual. In the course of this journey, the paper seeks to provide insight into what may happen when a FFFP runs low on rent.

Petro-states and the RPM

For a century, oil has been wildly profitable and left governments flush with cash. Petro-states are paradigmatic rentier states. Not only are they dependent on fossil fuel rents for revenues but they also distribute those rents to secure power and seek legitimacy. The rents and their allocations thereby shape regime types and social classes, along with the institutions, frameworks for decision-making, and the decision calculus of policymakers (Karl, 1997). Government budgets do not rely on domestic taxation or foreign aid, thereby reducing demands for accountability, and can afford a state payroll that provides seemingly endless employment for citizens (Beblawi, 1987; Mahdavy, 1970). The government is the dominant purveyor of patronage and “citizenship becomes a source of economic benefit” (Beblawi, 1987: 386).

Petro-states are unlikely to transition to democracy (cf. Herb, 2005; Jensen & Wantchekon, 2004; Ross, 2001, 2015; Ulfelder, 2007), more likely than non-oil states to experience violent conflict and civil war (Collier & Hoeffler, 1998; Ross, 2004, 2006, 2015), and have an increased likelihood of corruption (Gillies, 2020; Ross, 2015).

Many oil-producing countries are no longer classic authoritarian rentier states. Some have transitioned to competitive electoral politics, and others have suffered insurgencies or state breakdowns. While many may hold elections, few are seen as truly democratic (Evie et al., 2023). There are longstanding debates over exactly what states this should be called, including electoral autocracies (Evie et al., 2023), competitive authoritarian states (Levitsky & Way, 2010), neo-patrimonial states (Bratton & Van de Walle, 1997), new despots (Keane, 2020), and hybrid political orders (Boege et al., 2009). Many are classified as “fragile states,” insofar as they score highly on indices of vulnerability across dimensions of violence, justice, institutions, and economic development (OECD, 2020). However, as critics note, this describes states by their deficiencies and shortcomings in comparison to a Weberian ideal, rather than describing how they function (Boege et al., 2009). “Fragility” may be a useful basket but a poor analytic for political logic or regime type.

Common to all petro-states are dominant patterns of rent-capture by those at the apex of state power and rent-seeking by senior and subaltern members of the political elite. Not only does the regime legitimize itself through rent allocation to jobs, subsidies, welfare, and symbols of national pride and progress, but bargaining over access to these funds determines the character of politics. Institutions are trumped by informal networks of power. The classic model of a rentier state fray when it loses its monopoly on violence, forfeits legitimacy in the face of popular discontent that it cannot effectively suppress, or its political arena becomes penetrated by foreign actors. Under these conditions, the transactional politics of patronage or clientelism becomes more dynamic, with established hierarchies open to challenge. As

more social and political transactions become monetized, these systems of exchange become akin to a marketplace. This is the framing of the “RPM” (de Waal, 2015).

The RPM introduces several key concepts that will be relevant in the discussion that follows. One is the distinction between public finance and political finance. The latter is the money available to a political actor to dispense for patronage, buying political services (such as private security, licit and illicit legal services, public relations), or simply for self-enrichment. It is hard to measure, but well understood by all political practitioners. Another is the “price of loyalty,” which includes among other things the prevailing purchase price for a private sector contract, a political office, a vote, or to rent a militia. In a petro-political marketplace, oil rents fund political budgets (Sarkar, 2023). As the flow of political finance increases, the price of loyalty is likely to rise due to the elementary laws of supply and demand. When those funds decrease, however, it is unlikely that the prices demanded by (for example) members of parliament or militia commanders, will fall commensurately, at least not rapidly. This, in turn, creates obvious political tensions. This paper uses the logic of the RPM as the main lens for analyzing contemporary Iraq.

The logic of the RPM is not the only factor explaining politics in such countries. There are sectarian and ethnic identities, political ideologies, and civic and democratic ideals, that intersect with the crude material logic of the RPM (Kaldor & de Waal, 2020; Kaldor & Radice, 2022). However, the lens of the RPM allows us to focus on the dynamics of a turbulent transactional system and on the roles of money in making such a system function.

Iraq’s emerging political marketplace

Saddam Hussein ran a “republic of fear” that was also a patrimonial kleptocracy with a centralized political and security apparatus (Makiya, 1998; Mansour, 2023). Paramount among the goals of the members of the Iraqi political class who took power following the invasion was dismantling this apparatus and introducing competitive politics. In this, they succeeded. Since 2005, Iraq has nominally been a parliamentary democracy, but in practice its politics can better be characterized as an emerging RPM (Al Kli, 2015; Dodge & Mansour, 2020). Controlling and distributing oil rents has been at the center of politics—defining the informal rules of the political system and shaping its formal structures.

Post-invasion Iraq remained a petro-state and the oil revenues continue to dominate export earnings, tax revenue, government contracting, employment, and all aspects of national economic life. If anything, as oil production ramped up after 2003 alongside year-on-year increases in the price of oil on international markets (rising from about \$25 per barrel in 2003 to over \$100 per barrel in 2011–2013), dependence on black gold increased.

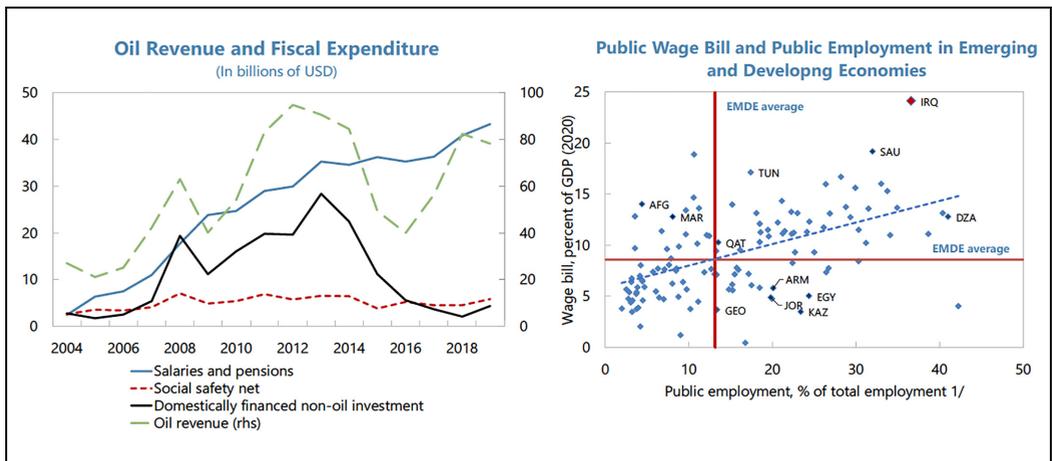
Iraq is also unique among petro-states. The constitution was designed to entrench competitive politics within an inclusive government; it has a decentralized security sector; and has been an arena for strategic rivalry between the United States and Iran.

Competitive clientelism and public spending

The system of government established by the Coalition Provisional Authority and consolidated in the implementation of the 2005 Constitution, known as *muhassasa ta’ifiya*, was leveraged by the Iraqi political elite for political control. *Muhassasa ta’ifiya* is a system of largely informal, ethno-sectarian power-sharing in which the dominant ethno-sectarian groups—Shia, Sunni, and Kurds – have control over different portions of the government.

While informal, the ethno-sectarian composition of the muhassasa system is shaped by the proportion of votes each group receives in the election (Dodge, 2024). In practice, this operated more as a system of apportioning government positions and resources rather than a true power-sharing arrangement. Indeed, constitutional provisions intended to encourage inclusive, consociational power-sharing have not been able to guarantee it, and they have been weakened over time. The constitution has been criticized as creating a power-sharing arrangement that is incomplete, informal, and largely voluntary (Bogaards, 2021, 191). While voluntary, this system of ethno-sectarian apportionment has defined the governments formed in the wake of every election between 2005 and 2021 (Dodge, 2024; O’Driscoll & Costantini, 2023).

In practice, *muhassasa ta’ifiya* divided the country three ways along ethno-sectarian lines, into Shia, Sunni, and Kurds. A competitive political arena was created within this framework. This generated extreme tension and violence. Central governments were, however, formed on the principle of ethno-sectarian inclusivity, with positions allocated to leaders of each different ethno-sectarian group. All had to have their stake in the system. This created a system of competitive clientelism in which senior government officials used their positions to reward their followers, through public sector jobs and commercial contracts, many of which are reportedly corrupt mechanisms to distribute funds to allies (Makiya, 2023). One senior official in Baghdad estimated that in his experience running a ministry, as much as 25% of the budget was spent on corrupt contracts and another 25% on crony appointments and “ghost” workers, whose names were on the payroll but did not in fact show up to work (Dodge & Mansour, 2021). Public service employment was a mixture of merit-based appointments, rewards for party members, bribery, nepotism, and “ghost” employees, including soldiers (Al-Mawlawi, 2019). Civil servants often answered to political party leaders, not necessarily officials within the civil service (Makiya, 2023). For a decade after 2003, the Iraqi public sector grew massively delivering contracts, privileges, and opportunities for political parties and militias, but failing to deliver basic healthcare, education, electricity, or even clean water for the population (Dodge, 2024, 14). This is not simply corrupt officials enriching themselves by breaking the rules. This was the system.



Source: IMF (2021, p. 5).

Iraq was an outlier among all emerging and developing economies in the proportion of all employment in the public sector and the size of its wage bill.

In 2003, approximately 1.2 million people were employed in the Iraqi public sector. By 2015, the number of permanent civilian employees had grown to more than 3 million (Al-Mawlawi, 2019: 8), almost a third of all jobs in Iraq.³ This becomes an even more striking picture when we also include the military and those on fixed contracts, which in 2013, totaled approximately 6 million people out of a workforce of 8.5 million. That year, more than 70% of jobs were directly funded by the government (Jiyad, 2015). Meanwhile, salaries also increased, with public sector jobs often offering more than the private sector. In 2007, households with a public sector worker had an average income that was 14% higher than a household without any public sector workers (Inter-Agency Information and Analysis Unit, 2011). From 2005 to 2019, employee compensation grew by more than ninefold from \$3.8 billion to almost \$36 billion (Al-Mawlawi, 2019: 9). From 2005 to 2010, the wages of public sector employees averaged 31% of total government expenditures and 18% of GDP (Al-Mawlawi, 2019: 9).

The logic of the RPM suggests that this system was not just rampant corruption. It was the direct outcome of competitive clientelism in which rival members of the political elite leveraged their positions in government to reward their followers. This was evident during the two terms of Prime Minister Nouri al-Maliki, whose political strategy centered on oil-financed political spending.

Al-Maliki took office in 2006 after the first elected prime minister, Ibrahim al-Jaafari, was forced to resign. He proved a more capable operator than his predecessor. His stratagems and effective tactical use of patronage were shown in the second parliamentary elections, held in 2010. As the election approached, Maliki's coalition of parties, the State of Law coalition, a Shia nationalist group, was favored but his coalition was thought unlikely to secure enough votes by itself to reelect him as prime minister (Chuloy, 2010). Maliki offered jobs (especially those in strategically placed "special grade" positions) to carefully chosen allies and potential rivals (Dodge & Mansour, 2021: 18–25). He paid off members of the Sunni opposition. He empowered certain militias (e.g., As'aeb Ahl al-Haq) to weaken his opponents.

Maliki utilized Iranian influence to regroup the fragmented Shia lists in favor of his grouping of Islamists, excluding the more secularist Shia and Sunni Arabs on the rival Iraqiyya list.⁴ At that time, the Obama administration's goals were to leave Iraq and to accommodate the Iranian regime, to encourage them to engage in the nuclear deal negotiations. The United States thus backed Maliki.

No political party won an outright majority in the election. Maliki and a rival coalition, the Iraqiyya list, comprising primarily Sunni parties led by a secular Shia politician, Ayad Alawai, faced off. Alawai, who headed the winning list, demanded the right to form the government. Maliki turned to the Federal Supreme Court, which was led by his ally, Chief Justice Medhat Al Mahmoud, and won a ruling in his favor (Ghanim, 2011). The Court held that the largest parliamentary bloc following an electoral result would decide who should form the government, not the winning list. Accordingly, Maliki won a second term. As noted at the time, this set a precedent that could lead to future post-election impasses and wrangles (Pollack, 2010).

A decentralized security sector

In a political marketplace, the use or threat of violence is a means of bargaining. A second element of Iraq's uniqueness was that the central government could not control the

organization of security and military forces, let alone possess a monopoly on the legitimate use of violence.

This paper will not discuss the complex, fraught, and controversial history of the internal conflicts within Iraq after 2003. Instead, it will make one key point, which is that the sustained and expensive effort by the United States to train, equip, and organize a new Iraqi army failed in part because the Iraqi political elite did not want it to succeed. As observed by Renad Mansour, none of them wanted to see a return to despotic rule by a military officer emerging from the senior ranks of the rebuilt national army, “Iraq’s political elite kept their paramilitary forces separate from the government as an insurance policy” (Mansour, 2023). However, unlike other states characterized by decentralized armed units or warlordism, the overwhelming source of finance for these groups remained the central Iraqi state.

The Popular Mobilization Forces (PMFs), known as *Hashed Al Sha’abi*, have been a political factor in Iraq since they first emerged in 2003 (Al Kli, 2019; Dodge & Mansour, 2021; Mansour, 2018). They are an array of about 50 paramilitaries, each under separate command. Units of the PMF have been able to carve out a poorly defined, but legal status within the security apparatus and benefit from huge budgetary allocations to defense (Al Kli, 2019: 231). Iran has backed important elements in the PMF. Members of this militia have sought public office within Iraq’s executive, legislative, and judicial branches, sometimes acting as Iranian proxies. The PMFs are classic RPM entities, occupying the liminal space between government and opposition, extracting resources from the state and licit and illicit commerce, and using violence to protect themselves and their activities, as vigilantes, and to stake their political claims.

An arena for strategic rivalry

Political markets are not confined within national borders. However, Iraq’s political marketplace is very expensive and the financial barriers to entering the political arena are very high. Only those who are part of a well-connected network can do so. Foreign powers and opposition actors need large political budgets to gain leverage inside the system.

Iraq has been an arena in which the United States and Iran have competed for influence. The United States spent tens of billions of dollars, to little ultimate effect. Iran spent far less but too much greater effect because it understood how to play the political market. Its relatively modest investment in selected political figures and their political budgets, alongside the PMFs with their calibrated use of violence, paid dividends. Consequently, as Jessica Watkins has observed, Iran “has gained extensive leverage over Iraq’s national security and political decision-making at both local and national levels ...[and] permeated grassroots institutions and the informal economy in ways that Western allies have neither the ability nor the inclination to do” (Watkins, 2020).

An overpriced, fragile political market

A decade after the invasion, Iraq’s politics was financially centralized, politically competitive and fractious, militarily fragmented, and extraordinarily expensive. This was not a formula for stability or effective governance (Dodge, 2024; Makiya, 2023). Maliki’s political-financial strategy had invited his allies to make ever-higher demands, while pricing the payouts too high, incentivized political rivals to follow other strategies, including violence. Maliki faced a problem familiar to other rulers of RPMs, which was pricing himself out of his market (de

Waal, 2015). Combined with intensified sectarian politics, this contributed to the ISIS rebellion and growing discontent among the Shia establishment as well as international pressure for reform.

Even with oil prices at record highs in 2013 into the election period of early 2014, Maliki struggled. More than a decade of patronage hires in the civil service had devastated the state's ability to provide public goods, services, or even basic security-increasing frustrations among Iraqis (Alkhudary, 2023; Dodge, 2024). ISIS took over several of the northern oil fields and shut down most oil exports from that region. Maliki needed to fund the war against ISIS while also paying his ever-inflating political bill (Al-Mawlawi, 2019: 9). In the April 2014 elections, Maliki increased his party's seats in parliament but could not secure enough members of parliament to constitute a winning bloc. Parliamentarians formed a sufficient bloc to install the moderate Shia Haider al-Abadi as prime minister (Shmitli, 2014).

Just weeks after the election, the price of oil collapsed, falling from over \$100 to about \$45 in a few months. This threatened the government with insolvency and meant that the al-Abadi government was unable to replicate its predecessor's financial politics. This represented the unplanned-for, traumatic, but only partial decarbonization of the Iraqi political economy.

Governance reforms

The 2014 economic crisis caused a budget crunch. The government's first step was turning to the IMF, which provided a \$5.34 billion loan (IMF, 2016). This came with certain conditions, beginning with spending cuts followed by governance reforms, including decentralization. From 2014 to 2015, government expenditures dropped by approximately \$22 billion (12%) while also accommodating a \$2.7 billion increase in military expenditures to fight ISIS (a 38% increase) (World Bank, n.d.). The budgetary deficit rose from 5.3% of GDP (2013) to 18.4% (2015) (IMF, 2015, 1). The debt-to-GDP ratio increased from 32.9% (2014) to 56.9 (2015) and 84.2% (2020) (IMF DataMapper, 2022).

One stated priority area for budget cuts was public employment. This began with a hiring freeze (exempting the health, electricity, and security sectors) followed by a downsizing of the public sector (Al-Mawlawi, 2019: 6). For the first time since 2003, there was a drop in public sector employment. However, the action did not match the stated intent. Federal employees fell only slightly, from 3.03 million (2015) to 2.89 million (2018) (Al-Mawlawi, 2019: 6). There was also a cutback in private sector contracting, and by 2019, the unemployment rate was 16% but estimated to be 36% among youth (Al-Mawlawi, 2019: 9).

Alongside these (modest) cuts came an attempted decentralization of power from central to provincial and local government. This agenda was driven in part by loan conditions imposed by the IMF. It was a response to popular frustration after ISIS seized almost a third of the country and over poor service delivery, to regain some legitimacy among the Iraqi people (Al Kli, 2019).

The decentralization process formally began in 2015 with Executive Order 34 which mandated the transfer of administrative powers to provinces and tasked the High Commission for Coordinating among Provinces Secretariat to oversee the transfer and resolve issues (Al-Mawlawi & Jiyad, 2021). The Federal Government delegated fiscal authority to nine south and south-central provincial governments. However, the institutions established to handle the fiscal and provincial power transfers either proved to be inadequate for the task, lacked the political support needed, or simply became inactive (Al Kli, 2019: 190–195). Instead of

improving governance and satisfying citizens' expectations, decentralization exacerbated already poor governance. Three years later, parliament reversed the decentralization process. As well as responding to chaotic implementation and popular discontent, parliament had been reluctant to decentralize in the first place (Al-Mawlawi & Jiyad, 2021: 8–12). In 2019, further recentralization took place when parliament suspended provincial and district councils, which were seen as “riddled with corruption and paralyzed by political infighting” (Al-Mawlawi & Jiyad, 2021: 12).

Militias had been benefitting from oil rents. Now they took advantage of gaps and uncertainties in local governance to extract money from other sources, such as checkpoints on internal and international borders, and other forms of coercion, shakedown, and racketeering (Al Kli, 2019; Gaston & Derzsi-Horváth, 2018; Skelton & Saleem, 2019). In Basrah, militias used public land to develop political constituencies and threatened to destabilize the province when the governor tried to implement reform policies (Al Kli, 2019: 196). In areas newly liberated from ISIS where Sunnis were largely concentrated in camps for internally displaced people, militias manipulated the voter lists to distort Sunni representation in later elections (Al Kli, 2019: 196). At the same time, the Iranian government used this as an opportunity to offer funding, training, and arms to militias that swore their allegiance to Khamenei instead of Sistani (Akbarzadeh, 2017).

Overall, decentralization was disjointed and incomplete in planning, confused in implementation, reversed whenever the opportunity arose, and provided openings for PMFs to entrench themselves in local power structures. Nonetheless, the decentralization agenda still has its champions and may yet be revived.

Reconfiguring sectarian-political power

The 2014 crisis reshaped the sources of political finance, reducing the role of oil rents, and consequently reconfiguring the political marketplace. The following years saw a shift from political patronage based on sectarian affiliation to intensified competition for political office and key positions in ministries, based around political parties and factions.

As mentioned, from 2003 onwards, government positions were apportioned along sectarian lines in accordance with an informal quota system based on *muhassasa ta'ifiya*. Capturing the top post in a ministry was key to being able to provide jobs and contracts for one's ethno-religious group. For example, Shia political parties dominated the Ministry of Oil contracts, whereas the Sunni parties exploited contracts from the Ministry of Electricity. Similarly, contracts for the Basra port docks were distributed among the al-Hakim faction, Badr organization, and al-Sadr movement. The oil shocks not only reduced the funds available but also changed the relative value of different positions thereby rearranging which groups could allocate the most money and the best jobs. As sectarian patronage struggled to deliver to its supporters, clientship relations began to break down with all actors seeking out better deals, regardless of ethno-sectarian identities. This new type of bargaining has become known as *muhassasa hezibiya*, meaning political party apportionment.

As a system of patronage, *muhassasa hezibiya* differs from *muhassasa ta'ifiya* in three key ways. First, ethno-sectarian considerations were replaced with bargaining based on business calculations between political parties and prominent new businessmen. Second, with lower oil rents, deals often focused on trade deals especially the communications sector rather than oil. This shifted which positions were the most lucrative. During the oil boom, the Ministry of Oil was the most prized post. After 2014, however, the Ministry of Communication was

valued because it issued mobile and internet licenses, and controlled how communication networks could be used for intelligence on opponents and activists. Third, as localized or low-level sources of political finance became more important, positions in the bureaucracy became more influential relative to the top political appointees such as ministers. Bargaining for these positions was done “underground” out of view of the public eye (Dodge & Mansour, 2021). These officials were targeted by militias wanting to maximize their rent extraction, for example by exploiting loopholes in contracting regulations or revenue collection mechanisms at border checkpoints. For example, border crossings between Basra and Iran were largely administered by militias that levied taxes on licit and illicit items. Having the power to appoint bureaucrats provided legal cover for political parties and militias profiting from this. At times, such bureaucrats were even more powerful than the ministers who were technically in charge, but who could do no more than rubber-stamp their subordinates’ decisions (Dodge & Mansour, 2021).

The decentralization of the political market also played out in electoral politics. The electoral rules were changed from a proportional representation party list system to a single non-transferable vote (SNTV) in multi-member constituencies. The proportional representative system had given enormous power to the larger party machines to reward chosen members by putting them at the top of the list. The SNTV system gave more power to the constituency level of party organization and those parties whose candidates had more local popularity, or which had the skills and discipline to game the new system, by selecting the appropriate number of candidates for each constituency and avoiding the scenario in which candidates on the same party list competed against one another. This gave an electoral advantage to Muqtada al-Sadr, who threatened to overturn the practice of a consensual, all-inclusive government following his party’s strong performance in the 2021 election.

Civic challenge

It will be clear from the above that the oil shock was a key factor in shifting the nature of elite negotiations, breaking down sectarian alliances, and weakening the grip of the senior-most ministries. These changes rippled through the broader public. The crisis energized civic movements demanding an end to corruption and sectarianism and a new political order of democratic civic nationalism.

From 2005 until 2014, the Maliki government had not faced the challenge of austerity (Patel, 2018). Dysfunction and corruption mattered less when ordinary people’s living standards were improving year on year. The military offensives by ISIS, the sudden shortages of essentials, and breakdowns in basic services caused popular outrage and a crisis of government legitimacy. Baghdad could not spend its way out of this crisis (Crisis Group, 2021). Citizens took to the streets to demand their rights. Protest chants such as *nurid watan* (“we want a nation”) articulated a new vision for Iraqi politics, no longer defined by an elite division of spoils.

The foundational event for the protest movements had in fact occurred several years earlier. Thousands took to the streets on the “Day of Rage,” February 25, 2011, to protest corruption, sectarianism, and nepotism within Maliki’s government (Ali, 2021). Protesters transcended ethno-sectarian identities in their calls for reform, though over time the salience of these identities would begin to change (Alkhudary, 2023). Maliki responded swiftly and brutally, momentarily ending the protests.

New, bigger, and more sustained protests began in July 2015. On every Friday for months, protestors gathered in major public squares across Iraq to protest. The demonstrators protested against the entire religious-political establishment, captured in the slogan, *bism al-din bagona al-haramiya* (“in the name of religion, the thieves have robbed us”) (Ali, 2021). For the first time, protesters were increasingly united in their criticism of the failures of the muhassasa system, explicitly anti-sectarian and showed signs of a shift from identity to issue-based politics (Alkhudary, 2023; Jabar, 2018). Most protesters were educated young men in the lower middle class and middle class, though the leaders were older men who had experience as activists or were part of civil society or political organizations (Ali, 2021: 536). The protest movement had internal tensions demonstrating how ethno-sectarian dynamics were in flux. They began as a grassroots movement, but as they grew, they were seen by some as being co-opted and exploited by political parties and especially the controversial religious figure, Muqtada al-Sadr, an al-Mahdi Army militia leader⁵ (Mustafa, 2022) (see below).

In 2018, protests broke out in Basra. Despite being a major center of oil production, the city was suffering a water shortage and power cuts during a heatwave. Demonstrators denounced the government’s failure to provide essential services and what they saw as politicians’ mixed loyalty—that is, their links to Iran—highlighting their “Iraqiness” of their own identity (Mustafa, 2022: 5). They showed their determination despite a violent crackdown, chanting, *nmut ‘ashra miya, any qaful al’qadhiya* (“10 of us would die, or 100 of us would die, I won’t give up the cause”) (Mustafa, 2022: 6). With repression failing, Prime Minister Haider al-Abadi promised \$2.93 billion for immediate development projects in Basra and 10,000 new oil industry jobs (Patel, 2018: 1).

Al-Abadi was able to make these promises because the price of oil had rebounded briefly above \$70 per barrel and Iraq’s production had increased surpassing the original 2018 budget benchmarks. This would have been the first significant expansion of the government payroll since the 2016 hiring freeze (Patel, 2018: 7). It was a short-term solution that did not address the much bigger national problem.

In October 2019, people across Iraq took to the streets in what would become the largest protests in Iraq’s history. Known as the *Tishreen* (“October”) movement, these protests were a continuation of the Basra protests (Mustafa, 2022: 6). These were triggered by the removal of General Abdul-Wahab al-Saaedi from his post as Commander of the Counter-Terror Service, a key official in the fight against ISIS. Many saw this as another example of politicians removing officials so they could fill the post with a family member or political supporter. Grievances focused on unemployment, poor public services, endemic corruption, and a political class seen as more loyal to Iran or the United States than to Iraqi citizens (France 24, 2020: 24). The protesters’ central demand was for a new national identity free of sectarian divisions and foreign influence. They condemned the politicization of Islam and sectarianism. Slogans and protest chants included *nurid watan* (“we want a nation”) and *Iran barra, barra* (“Iran, out out”) (Crisis Group, 2021: 6). Across the country, people gathered in public squares setting up tents and staging sit-ins. Support came from across society. In addition to ordinary citizens, politicians, political parties, and organizations sponsored tents and kept supplies flowing to them. These sit-ins also became platforms between activists and established political parties to discuss reforms and make demands of the government. Public squares became centers of grassroots democracy. Symbolic of the disconnect between the elite and the people in the broader political system, however, many activists

were suspicious of political parties' involvement. Wary of the government's history of co-opting or intimidating protest leaders, the *Tishreen* movement was intentionally leaderless.

The *Tishreen* Movement differed from the earlier protests in several ways. First, they were the first that did not happen during the summer months when electricity cuts occurred amidst stifling temperatures (Bencks, 2019). The Movement began when conditions were not at their worst, but people were still frustrated enough to take to the streets in large numbers. Second, the *Tishreen* faced much higher levels of government and paramilitary-led violence. More than 400 protesters were killed and 20,000 injured in the first 6 months of protests alone. Much of the violence was attributed to paramilitary groups and Iranian-backed militias, which were seen as fighting on behalf of the government to maintain the sectarian system (Crisis Group, 2021: 12–22). Lastly, the *Tishreen* represented a significant shift in the salience of ethno-sectarianism within Iraqi politics. As mentioned, protests since 2011 included critiques of the *muhassasa* system and its inability to deliver public goods, services, and jobs, in the *Tishreen*, protest narratives had coalesced around calls for a new Iraqi identity beyond ethno-sectarian lines and a rejection of the *muhassasa* system. Protesters wanted to transform Iraq from a “state of parties” to a “state of citizens” where ethnic or sectarian affiliations did not matter (Alkhudary, 2023, 13). While calls for a new Iraqi identity had emerged in previous protests, this was the dominant narrative of the *Tishreen* movement. This call sent shockwaves through Iraq's political establishment. As previously discussed, younger generations were particularly disillusioned with the political elite and paramilitary groups that had integrated themselves into the government while also exploiting the people (Crisis Group, 2021: 7). Young people were calling for change and showed they were willing to keep marching until it came—and signs of contentious change began emerging after the first month of protests.

As the protests continued and their support deepened, the government realized it did not have the resources to buy them off with the promise of jobs. It offered some concessions to the protestors, such as cabinet reshuffles and welfare programs, but these fell far short of the demands for early elections, constitutional amendments, an end to the *muhassasa ta'ifiya* system, and a balanced foreign policy (limiting Iranian influence) (Crisis Group, 2021: 17). The government attempted to negotiate with protestors, but they could not agree on acceptable reforms. More than 600 protesters were killed in violent repression. Activists reported that the main difference between their positions was that the government wanted to fold the protest movement into the existing power-sharing system, while the protesters wanted to change the system itself (Crisis Group, 2021: 17).

After the first month of protests, Ayatollah Sistani gave a sermon in which he encouraged parliament to act to stop the bloodshed and even suggested a no-confidence vote. Within a few days, out of options and under intense pressure, Prime Minister Adil Abdel Mahdi resigned, setting off what would become a 3-year struggle to form a newly elected government. On May 5, 2020, an interim government led by Mustafa al-Kadhimi was installed and elections were scheduled for the following year. Due to a combination of the violent crackdown, the cooptation of some leaders, and restrictions on public assembly due to COVID-19, the *Tishreen* protests faded without achieving the intended political transformation (Crisis Group, 2021). Nonetheless, the lead-up to the election provides additional evidence of the declining salience of ethno-sectarian identities.

Throughout this period, and increasingly so after the *Tishreen* Movement, political parties and elite figures began dropping ethno-sectarian platforms in favor of ones that appealed to broader coalitions. As political parties sought the support of the public, sectarian and

religious titles were not as successful in mobilizing support as they had been in previous elections. Political parties using Islam as core to their party platform, renamed or split into a new party. For example, former Prime Minister Abadi dropped the Dawa party name from his list during the 2018 election campaign (Hasan, 2018). Similarly, Ammar al-Hakim split from the Islamic Supreme Council of Iraq, and established the al-Hikma movement, dropping politicized Islam (Mouzahem, 2017). The coalition between al-Sadr and the Communist Party and civil society activists during the 2019 protests is another example (Cambanis, 2018). These political maneuvers divided the protesters. Some thought that al-Sadr was co-opting the *Tishreen* for his political ambitions, while others believed that it was necessary to broaden the civic movement to incorporate diverse ethno-sectarian groups. Al-Sadr himself oscillated between supporting the protests and siding with the government. There is evidence both for how ethno-sectarianism was discredited among the public and how those same ties proved resilient among the political elite.

Political business as usual

In October 2021, Iraq held parliamentary elections to choose a government to replace the interim government established in the wake of the *Tishreen* protests. There was hope that the elections might prove to be a critical moment, but few Iraqis believed the process would be free or fair. Turnout was at a record low with only 36% of eligible voters participating (Higel, 2021). Nonetheless, it shook up the political arena. All Iranian-backed militias and political factions lost while al-Sadr's political party increased its share, winning 73 seats, the single largest number. Notably, Imtidad, a party that came out of the *Tishreen* movement, won nine seats, a substantial number given the *Tishreen* boycott of the poll. A new parliamentary coalition emerged as a potential government, *Tahalef Inqath Waten* (Coalition to Save the Country). It was made up of the Sadrist, the Kurdistan Democratic Party, and the Al Siyadah Sunni Coalition.

An opposing coalition, the Coordination Framework (CF), was also formed, made up of Shia parties, including Maliki's State of Law alliance, the Fatah Coalition, and major militias. Iran's fingerprints were all over the CF. For over a year, parliament was gridlocked and al-Sadr's coalition was not able to form a government. The deadlock was tightened by a controversial ruling in February 2022 by the Federal Supreme Court that required a two-thirds quorum for the Council of Representatives session to meet to select a president, who would in turn nominate a prime minister. This handed a veto to the CF.

In a political marketplace, violence can be used to signal strength in bargaining. During the protracted stand-off, PMFs associated with the CF staged attacks in various parts of the country. Renad Mansour observed, "This violence was not necessarily aimed at killing opponents but rather at sending a message: PMF-aligned groups would not be removed from Iraqi politics" (Mansour, 2023). It was a show of force that the Sadrist could not match, and which left the *Tishreen* movement as bystanders.

Most crucial, however, was the re-carbonization of the Iraqi political economy. Russia's invasion of Ukraine pushed oil prices above \$100 per barrel for the first time in 8 years. The rebound suddenly made the old style of petro-politics viable again.

Realizing that the game was up, al-Sadr surrendered his bloc's parliamentary seats. These were swiftly replaced by CF-aligned candidates, enabling the CR to form a majority coalition and engineer the selection of Mohammed Shia al-Sudani as prime minister. Al-Sudani made senior appointments across the board based on ethno-sectarian quotas, reviving what Iraqis

called the “deep state” from the Maliki era. Crisis Group commented that this marked “the return of politics as usual [and] represents the system’s triumph over the protests” (Crisis Group, 2023).

Al-Sudani’s governing formula was a division of the spoils. His attempt to return to the pre-2014 centralized, sectarian RPM can be seen clearly in the 3-year annual budget for 2023 to 2025. It is Iraq’s largest ever at about \$153 billion with a deficit estimated at 18% to 25%, which is far more than the 3% maximum permitted under the Public Finance Management Law. More than 40% of spending is allocated to an increased public payroll, with about 500,000 new employees to be added to the payroll, bringing the total to as many as 5 million. In addition, the budget provides for as much as a 95% increase in the number of PMF fighters, a striking development (Al-Kaabi & Knights, 2023). It is a move toward an Iran-aligned, self-perpetuating kleptocracy backed by its sectarian militia.

Conclusions

The framework of the RPM has explanatory power for understanding the power strategies of Iraq’s political leaders. During the years of the oil boom (2003–2014), oil funds allowed for both a massive public sector payroll and associated private sector contracting and centralized political funds that made it possible to sustain a centralized polity despite the divisive political logic of the *muhasasa al-taiifa* ethno-sectarian system and the decentralization of control over violence into the private and sectarian militia. Under Prime Minister al-Maliki, the Iraqi government essentially bought its way out of otherwise insoluble political challenges including civil war, popular discontent, and unresolved political rivalries.

The years of partial decarbonization (2014–2021) saw a struggle between the determination of the senior political elites who had benefitted the most from the previous system, to keep that system functioning, and subaltern elites who wanted to reconfigure it, and the citizenry who wanted to transform it. The first repercussion was a reconfiguration of political bargaining, manifest in the emergence of the *muhasasa al-hezbiya*, a much more flexible system of bargaining akin to a competitive market in political positions, loyalties, and the award of contracts, that saw inter-sectarian alliances of opportunity and new political spaces. Alongside this was a decentralization program, albeit uneven in implementation. The second outcome was nationwide civic protests in the form of the Tishreen movement, in which citizens asserted a common Iraqi identity and demanded an end to corruption, ethno-sectarian and foreign meddling completely, and the allocation of the national patrimony to meet the basic needs of ordinary people. This disparate set of reformist actors posed a serious challenge to the defenders of the status quo, who, deprived of their plentiful political funds because of the low price of oil, were forced onto the defensive. The outcome of this momentous contestation hung in the balance during and after the elections of 2021.

Those who made use of the *muhasasa al-hezbiya* opening were always going to be susceptible to the bigger rewards on offer should government coffers once again become flush with oil money. This was likely part of al-Sadr’s calculation when he finally abandoned his bid to form a government in 2022. The civic protesters who camped out in the squares of cities demanding transformational change had higher ideals, but lacked significant political funds to compete in the political marketplace should they have wanted to do so.

At no time during the oil recession did the government seriously contemplate the kinds of political and economic reform that might be necessary for Iraq to face a post-carbon future. Even when the price of oil was low and the prospects of an accelerated global timetable for

decarbonization loomed, the government was consumed with short-term political and security priorities that overruled any systematic effort to address structural vulnerabilities consequent on oil rent dependence. When confronted with popular protest at a time of low revenues, they did not take the path of restructuring the economy or reducing their political modus operandi of political spending on patronage. On the contrary, they doubled down on established practices, and as soon as oil prices rebounded, they returned to business as usual as if the world would never decarbonize. Meanwhile, one of the challenges facing Iraqi citizens dedicated to the values of the *Tishreen* movement is how to move from protest to power in a future likely marked by a reluctant, traumatic decarbonization of their national economy, re-running the turmoil of 2014 to 2020, with even higher stakes the next time around.

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Data availability Statement

This article is based on existing secondary data and analyses which are cited throughout.

Notes

1. Author calculations based on Iraq Ministry of Finance Data of final oil revenue and mineral wealth collections from 2015 to 2020. See Republic of Iraq 2022.
2. For comparison, the UAE's breakeven price in 2012 was approximately \$80 per barrel and Saudi Arabia's was approximately \$70 per barrel. See IMF (2013), 14.
3. In 2015, total employment in Iraq (ages 15 +) was 9.4 million people. See World Bank Data. Iraq Country Data. Total Employment, Accessed 28 April 2022. <https://databank.worldbank.org/reports.aspx?source=jobs#>
4. The lists referred to here are coalitions of political groups.
5. Al-Sadr exemplifies how PMF militia leaders benefitted from the lucrative budgets stemming from the Iraqi defense system and how they intentionally kept command and control of the fighters outside the government.

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