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Family Rule in Iraq and the Challenge to State and Democracy

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With an afterword by David Schenker

Composite image of Iraqi power players (left to right): Muqtada al-Sadr, Mohammed al-Halbousi, Bafel Talabani, and Masrour Barzani. Original images from Reuters, Shutterstock, Wikipedia.

After the fall of Saddam Hussein's dictatorship in 2003, Iraqi political parties proliferated in an indication of enthusiasm for the country's emerging democracy.* But that enthusiasm has been coopted in recent years by a handful of personalities and families, who have commandeered parties to advance their own power and interests. Political families and charismatic leaders are no doubt common in the Middle East, and factors contributing to their rise in Iraq include the tribal structure of society, an oil-dependent economy, state weakness resulting from decades of conflict and sanctions, and interference from neighboring countries.

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Executive Summary

The post-Saddam political norm in Iraq has entailed a Shia politician in the prime minister role—reflecting the national majority—a Kurdish leader in the presidency, and a Sunni leader as parliament speaker. This paper attempts to account for all three blocs and their constituents.

The Iraqi Shia political landscape centers on the Dawa Party, still dominated by Nouri al-Maliki, the country's longest-serving prime minister (2006–14), who commands a wide-reaching network within the national bureaucracy. His former internal rivals have been purged from the party. Elsewhere, the al-Sadr and al-Hakim families anchor their respective Shia political movements. Although Muqtada al-Sadr never formed an official party, he heads the umbrella Sadrist Movement, whose political and militia arms have appeared under different names since 2005 (e.g., Sairoon on the political track; Jaish al-Mahdi and Saraya al-Salam for militias). Personal names in Iraq tend to be more familiar than the parties over which they preside. The Islamic Supreme Council of Iraq thus was founded in 1982 in Iran and is closely associated with the al-Hakim name. ISCI's latest leader, Ammar al-Hakim, later appended his family's allegiance to the new Tayyar Hikma al-Watani (National Wisdom Movement; *Hakim and Hikma* have the same root), in part to create distance from Iran. Meanwhile, other Shia political luminaries such as Ayad Allawi have failed to make the transition to family dominance.

The Iraqi Sunni leadership, which has labored to avoid the taint of Hussein-era Baathism, has mainly operated from within the Iraqi Islamic Party—which has furnished three of Iraq's six parliament speakers and one vice president. But the party's fortunes have waned lately, allowing for the rise of personalist leaders Khamis al-Khanjar, a businessman, and Mohammed al-Halbousi, who served as parliament speaker from 2018 until late 2023, when a Federal Supreme Court ruling rendered him ineligible.[1]

The Kurdistan Regional Government (KRG), whose democracy predates Baghdad's by a decade and was long heralded as a Middle East beacon, has hardened in recent years into two-family rule under the Barzanis (Kurdistan Democratic Party, or KDP) and Talabanis (Patriotic Union of Kurdistan, or PUK); other KRG players include the New Generation Movement (under real estate and media mogul Shaswar Abdulwahid) and the now largely diminished Gorran Party (formerly led by the late charismatic politician Nawshirwan Mustafa).

Iraq's 2021 presidential contest illustrated the role of prominent families in the country's politics. Both candidates—incumbent Barham Salih and challenger Abdul Latif Rashid—were implicitly affiliated with the PUK, but the challenger held an advantage: his marriage to the sister-in-law of the late president Jalal Talabani. And on October 13, 2022, the Iraqi parliament elected Rashid president, despite Salih's incumbency and credentials.

This study sets out to examine the growing dominance of political families and strongmen and their effects on the Iraqi state. Spanning Iraq's ethnosectarian landscape, the paper tracks how political cliques and networks engage in corruption and lawlessness, and argues that strongmen and political clans are becoming the main political units in Iraqi politics, a trajectory that threatens the state's future and runs counter to Washington's vision. Finally, it outlines the numerous implications this emerging trend has for U.S. goals and objectives in Iraq, and suggests steps to restore democratic balance.

Two decades ago, U.S. policy aspired to "democratize and liberalize" Iraq,[2] but today it holds the more modest goals of promoting basic stability and sovereignty.[3] To address a precarious, changing Iraq, U.S. and other world leaders must understand the inner workings of Iraqi parties and those of its Kurdistan Region, and know the main personalities involved. They must also identify the best potential interlocutors to advance both Iraqi and U.S. interests. These include cabinet members such as those running the Health and Education Ministries, parliamentary committee heads, apolitical military commanders, and business leaders.

A flowering of political parties as occurred in Iraq after Saddam Hussein's ouster is typical following a period of authoritarianism. After General Franco's downfall in Spain, for example, more than five hundred political parties were established. With time and elections, however, those numbers inevitably diminish as parties fade or fuse together.[4]

The Iraqi political system may be fragile two decades after the U.S. invasion, but parties still predominate, with the post-Saddam system resting on power sharing among Shia, Sunnis, and Kurds, with some representation for minority groups. Rather than consolidate or converge, however, Iraqi parties are being commandeered by clans and strongmen, who are using them as fronts to advance their own interests.[5] Whereas in a functioning democracy parties pursue policy interests and work through institutions in predictable ways,[6] today's Iraqi parties are eschewing unifying narratives and structures in favor of the narrow interests of boss or family. The weight of sect, tribe, and ethnicity, while still playing some role, has diminished in this new reality. Overall, the current trend has weakened the democratic character of Iraqi parties and exacerbated existing risks in the country. It also has the perverse effect of punishing ethical behavior from politicians, who are rendered skittish and ineffective. Nondemocratic parties, as a rule, undermine the state, hinder democracy, burden the economy, and enable militias. A regional parallel can be found in Lebanon, where the personalization of politics over decades has decimated state institutions and demoralized the Lebanese people. And in the region more broadly, the toppling of strongmen during the Arab Spring uprisings drew attention to the dangers of subordinating state institutions to a leader's whims.[7]

In Iraq, personality- or family-led parties seek to preserve their interests by controlling parts of the economy, maintaining private militias, building social and political patronage networks, and securing official government titles, positions, and prerogatives. These parties, unlike modern Western counterparts, can be said to operate based on antique structures like the fiefdoms that dotted the Safavid and Ottoman Empires.[8] In both federal Iraq and the Kurdistan Region, such reemerging attributes are seriously affecting politics, the economy, and the state. Thus, relics are ascendant while modern concepts such as constitutions, bureaucracies, and rule of law founder.

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This study sets out to examine the perseverance and growing dominance of political families and strongmen and their effects on the Iraqi state. Spanning Iraq's ethnosectarian landscape, the paper tracks how political cliques and networks engage in corruption and lawlessness, and argues that strongmen and political clans are becoming the main political units in Iraqi politics, a trajectory that threatens the state's future. Finally, it outlines the numerous implications this emerging trend has for U.S. goals and objectives in Iraq, and suggests steps to restore democratic balance.

Background on Iraqi Politics

The trend whereby Iraqi political parties have slowly morphed into structures revolving around a person or family is most evident in Kurdistan, where one sees dynastic attributes—power being passed down to the children and grandchildren of the major families. Elsewhere in Iraq, which initiated competitive, multiparty politics following the 2003 U.S. invasion—ten years after Kurdistan did—recently ascendant political families and strongmen have stamped out an initial flowering of diverse political life.

For most post-invasion Iraqi parties, sustained success has necessitated jettisoning ideological or organizational foundations in deference to the personalist leader or family. The Dawa Party, for instance, is dominated by former prime minister Nouri al-Maliki.[9] And the al-Sadr and al-Hakim families remain anchors of their respective political trends: the Sadrist Movement and Tayyar Hikma al-Watani (National Wisdom Movement; *Hakim* and *Hikma* have the same root), with al-Hakim formerly linked to the Islamic Supreme Council of Iraq. Such personal names are more familiar in Iraq than the parties over which they preside. Meanwhile, other political luminaries, such as Ayad Allawi, did not succeed in making the transition to family dominance.

When a party effectively belongs to a personality, the name or program may change, but the core principle remains: fealty to the presiding leader.[10] For instance, Muqtada al-Sadr is still central to his movement, despite the multiple transmogrifications of his political and military groupings. Likewise, Kurdish real estate and media mogul Shaswar Abdulwahid is better known than the New Generation Movement he formed or any of its members or programs.

In Iraqi Kurdistan, the Talabanis' Patriotic Union of Kurdistan (PUK) has followed in the dynastic footsteps of its rival, the Barzani family—which heads the Kurdistan Democratic Party (KDP)—passing the leadership torch from one family member to the next.[11] Historical precedent and social position grant other Iraqi parties this distinction as well. Iraq's recent presidential contest illustrates the role of family in Iraqi politics. Both candidates—incumbent Barham Salih and challenger Abdul Latif Rashid—implicitly affiliated with the PUK, even though Salih was the formal PUK candidate, a decision forestalled until hours before the vote. But the challenger had an advantage: his marriage to Shanaz Ibrahim Ahmed, the sister of Hiro Ibrahim Ahmed—wife of the late president Jalal Talabani. And on October 13, 2022, the Iraqi parliament elected Rashid president despite Salih's incumbency and credentials. The Talabani family candidate thus won thanks to behind-the-scenes lobbying and implicit Iraqi support—with the expectation of reciprocity from the Talabanis and other Kurdish power brokers. In a striking example of familial exceptionalism, former Iraqi finance minister Ali Allawi took personal offense when the parliament summoned him for questioning in April 2021,[12] claiming that the action violated not only the dignity of the government, but also his ministerial role and the honor of his family name. Allawi's invocation might come as a surprise given his education at Harvard and the Massachusetts Institute of Technology, eventually followed by his ministerial career, but it reflects a real tendency in today's Iraq. Very loosely, one might imagine a Kennedy or Bush sharing similar sentiments in the U.S. context—but American political dynasties have maintained their position within democratic rules, and are elected by voters.

The emergence of personality-driven politics in Iraq runs counter to Washington's vision.

The emergence of personality-driven politics in Iraq runs counter to Washington's vision. Whereas U.S. policy aspired two decades ago to "democratize and liberalize the country,"[13] today it holds the more modest goals of promoting basic stability and sovereignty.[14] But even these outcomes have proven elusive amid a breakdown in consensus building, manifested by the yearlong 2021–22 delay between holding elections and forming a government. As for sovereignty, regional patronage relationships have contributed to Iraqi timidity in the face of outside interference, such as when Iran and Turkey conduct drone strikes in Iraqi Kurdistan.[15]

In the current climate, political families drive the political narrative through their outsize media presence and seek wealth through the state. As a result, survival and short-term gain are the distinctive features of Iraqi politics rather than service to the public and national interest.

From Parties to Families and Strongmen

The dominance of political strongmen and families in Baghdad and Kurdistan can be observed to varying degrees across the country. Often violent, family leaders are compelled to vie politically because they have not amassed enough power to dominate their rivals by other means. Furthermore, today political rivalries play out more often within rather than across ethnosectarian lines, given the power-sharing system already in place. For instance, the two ruling Kurdish families have been expending more political capital to dominate the Kurdistan Region than to compete with Arab parties in Baghdad. In one self-destructive case, the PUK controlled the city of Kirkuk and the KDP held its oil fields. When both sought to play spoiler during the 2017 referendum on Kurdish autonomy, they lost control altogether of the city and its oil to federal authorities.[16] And post-2021 government formation was held up primarily by a Shia house divided between Sadr and his rivals, with Masoud Barzani siding with Sadr and the Talabanis backing the Coordination Framework, which is linked to Iran-backed militias and whose members oppose Sadr.

Today's situation contrasts dramatically with Iraq's first post-Saddam elections, when big-tent ethnosectarian coalitions formed to maximize the power and representation of the respective communities. In the January 2005 elections, all major Shia parties fielded their candidates under the United Iraqi Alliance, Kurdish parties did so under the Democratic Patriotic Alliance of Kurdistan, and Sunni parties did the same in the December 2005 vote under the Iraqi Accord Front.

Family Politics and the State

Like the state itself, Iraq's ruling families employ various tools to consolidate their control: name, religious and national symbolism, money, and arms. This is happening within all the major Kurdish and Iraqi parties. Akin to the KDP and PUK, which have enshrined Kurdish symbols as well as narratives of history and struggle, Sadr and his rivals vie to profit from previous Shia suffering under Saddam Hussein and correspondingly from the victory against the Islamic State.

The relationship between Iraqi political families and the state contains a paradox.[17] On the one hand, the families depend on the state for their livelihood and are therefore willing to defend it against existential threats, as exemplified by the unity of purpose demonstrated by the Kurdish Peshmerga and many Iraqi military and militia actors who liberated Iraq from the grip of the Islamic State.[18] On the other hand, a strong, law-bound state poses a threat to their patronage enterprises, which often verge on the kleptocratic, denying these actors access to state wealth and the ability to control police, military, and border forces. To thrive, the political families and their strongmen need an extant but weak state. This cooperation-competition dynamic maintains the families' survival while severely limiting the power and authority of the state, as embodied in the *ladaula* (non-state or anti-state) concept, whereby the primary goal of political actors is to weaken the state to the point that it cannot hold them accountable.[19] This concept likewise encapsulates the desire by militias for a state lacking a monopoly on the use of force. But the concept misses the reliance by families and other actors on the state for financial sustenance and a regulatory framework.

> To thrive, the political families and their strongmen need an extant but weak state.

Iraq has rarely known stability since becoming a state roughly a century ago. Whether under a monarchy or a republic, the state has been synonymous with power and authority, meaning that the collapse of a given leadership has inevitably led to a fundamental restructuring of the system. Those in power have thus sought to control the state rather than compete to govern it temporarily. A perennially weak state has offered opportunities for control to families and parties alike, whether political, religious, or military in nature.

Even the Baath Party, despite its socialist ideology, fostered family rule in Iraq. Although organized according to a strict hierarchy, it became the personal vehicle of the Hussein family—and in Syria the vehicle of the Assad family. A study by the Iraqi scholars Faleh Jabar and Hosham Dawod located the center of power in Saddam Hussein's person, while elements of his kindred group were called upon according to need and function.[20] For example, the Iraqi leader entrusted the war with Iran to his cousin (and brother-in-law) Adnan Khairallah, who served as defense minister, and Iraq's elite forces to his sons.[21] Others have described the party as neotribal, meaning it was held together by emotion and shared experience rather than ideology.[22] Tribalism has undoubtedly resurged since Hussein's fall in 2003.

Under his authoritarian rule, opposition groups had to operate in secrecy and anonymity, but Iraq's shift to competitive politics changed the situation, allowing other political families and strongmen to emerge. In the first post-invasion elections, candidates sought recognition by joining parties that had opposed him from exile. With every subsequent election, however, political stardom required more than mere party affiliation or a history of anti-Saddam activism. Moreover, as sectarianism deepened and political rivalry intensified within each community, political families and strongmen either took over existing political parties or created new ones.

Except for Muqtada al-Sadr, all party leaders who came to power after 2003 had lived in exile during the Hussein era and most used aliases. Upon returning to Iraq and running for elective office, they emphasized their family names to assert their sectarian or tribal identities and overcome any initial lack of popularity. For example, former prime minister Nouri al-Maliki, who had used the pseudonym "Jawad," resumed using his original name and often told audiences that his grandfather was a poet and a minister under the monarchy. Maliki, the Dawa Party leader, has feuded bitterly with Sadr, son-in-law of the party's founder. During the U.S. occupation, Maliki even tried to kill his rival, whose forces ultimately surrounded the prime minister, requiring him to seek U.S. assistance to escape. Mohammed Shia al-Sudani later became Iraq's first prime minister not to have been exiled during Saddam's rule.

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The head start on competitive politics in Iraqi Kurdistan, beginning in 1992, has facilitated a more stable, educated, urbanized society. Today's residents tend to care more about services and consumer goods than about nationalism.[23] Yet even in Kurdistan, power has shifted markedly since the post-Saddam period, with political families and strongmen eclipsing political parties, subverting democratic aspirations. The contrast between a non-nationalistic polity and a retrograde leadership explains the wide gap between government and society. And the move from parties to families and strongmen has pushed the Kurdistan Regional Government (KRG) farther away from its desired national statehood and full self-governance.

Map 1. Iraq and the Kurdistan Region

Enablers

Factors contributing to the emergence of personalist and family rule in Iraq include the tribal structure of society, an oil-dependent economy, state weakness resulting from decades of conflict and sanctions, and interference from neighboring countries:

- **Tribal society.** Iraqi political families often have tribal backgrounds and use tribal resources and norms to gain support and legitimacy. But they also try to supersede tribal authority, following a pattern dating to Ottoman and then British rule. For instance, the Ottomans often appointed tribal figures to lead various emirates, and these figures in turn used their connection to Istanbul to enhance their local power and wealth.[24] Political families have survived political upheavals across Iraq's history, and successive regimes have balanced appeasing and coopting them with limiting their influence.

- **Social and political fragmentation.** The Kurdish civil war (1994–97) split Iraqi Kurdistan into two sectors, each encompassing its own political party, security forces, and territory. In federal Iraq, post-2003 Sunni-Shia sectarian violence mobilized parts of Iraqi society that later became large militias, many falling within the state-backed Popular Mobilization Forces (PMF) and receiving religious and legal recognition as part of the state security apparatus.

- **Oil-dependent economy.** Iraqi oil revenues account for more than 90 percent of the government budget, creating a "rentier state" that serves as the country's main employer and economic engine. Whereas no single family has replaced that of Saddam Hussein since 2003, competing parties exploit state resources to build and underwrite patronage networks, hiring their supporters in government offices and diverting funds to their interests. For instance, recognizing that control of the entire country was beyond his capability, Muqtada al-Sadr has since 2005 steadily homed in on the vital Ministries of Health and Electricity, where his acolytes hold powerful positions and hand out lucrative contracts to Sadr-run businesses. Should such interests face jeopardy, Sadr's media outlets and militias would come to the rescue.[25]

- **State weakness.** In a departure from the centralized Baathist dictatorship, Iraq's new ruling class opted for a parliamentary and federal polity. The coalition governments that emerged from competitive identity-based contests soon fell into corruption and patronage politics to the detriment of the state, which struggled to bring accountability to elected leaders.

- **Interference from neighbors.** Iraq's neighbors have an interest in maintaining manageable fragmentation within the country. They both engage with Iraqi officials and intervene in the country's political and social affairs. Iran, for example, has ties with parties, groups, and personalities ranging from Badr Organization head Hadi al-Ameri, who fought for Iran against Saddam Hussein's forces in the 1980s, to Christian militia leader Rayan al-Kildani and many others. When Iranian foreign minister Mohammad Javad Zarif visited Iraq in 2019, he met not only with officials but with tribal leaders, the latter a violation of basic diplomatic decorum.[26] Turkey's energy relationship with the KRG has a notably personal hue, underlain by the relationship between Turkish president Recep Tayyip Erdogan and the Barzani family. Dealing with the strong Barzanis is likely easier than dealing with a strong state.

- **Ideological malaise.** The era of modern, ideology-driven Iraqi parties is waning,[27] with political Islam and nationalism alike having lost their draw. Moreover, no strong intellectual or moral opposition to family rule has emerged in either federal Iraq or Kurdistan, helping reinforce the trend.

Political Families in Iraqi Kurdistan

Political players in the KRG can be divided into three general groups: the KDP and the Barzani family; the PUK and the Talabani family; and a bloc including the Gorran Party and the New Generation Movement.

The KDP and the Barzani Family

For more than a half century, the Barzani family has been at the center of the KDP, and it has played a similar role in the KRG since 1992. The Barzanis' rupture with the Talabanis dates back to 1964, when the strong KDP politburo rebelled against party founder and leader Mustafa Barzani, accusing him of monopolizing power and favoring his family members over party lieutenants. Leading the opposition were Ibrahim Ahmed and Jalal Talabani, who later defected to form the PUK.[28]

The split still haunts the KDP and shapes its world-view within Iraqi Kurdish politics.[29] A tribal leader, Mustafa Barzani founded the party and rallied wide-spread public support for his military campaigns against Iraq, such as those in 1946 and 1961, aimed at securing Kurdish rights. His leadership was empowered by an urbane, internationally connected, leftist politburo. But the split challenged his national preeminence and convinced him that blood ties were thicker than those of party or ideology. On a personal level, Talabani's defection stung particularly, since Barzani had regarded him as a sort of adopted son. After Mustafa's passing in 1979, his true son Masoud Barzani assumed the KDP leadership.

The Masoud-led KDP was aided by a new politburo and intelligence organization (Parastin) unquestion-ingly loyal to the family leadership. Once powerful entities, the KDP Leadership Council and politburo found themselves sidelined, no longer enjoying their previous freedom to debate issues and present ideas—even if a Barzani had the last word. Up until today, Barzani simply expects these entities to implement his commands. The power of the Barzani family, not extending to the wider tribe, is embodied in terminology changes: from "Kak" (Big Brother) to "Sarok" (President) Masoud, along with his assumption of the secularized "Marja" (Supreme Leader) title.

Eventual succession from Masoud (b. 1946) could see a further shrinkage of the circle of power, with his oldest son, Masrour, and nephew/son-in-law, Nechirvan, viewed as the top contenders. The rivalry between Nechirvan (KRG president and KPD vice president) and Masrour (KRG prime minister *and* second vice president) has intensified over time. In 2019, when Masoud placed his son in the prime minister role, he simultaneously diminished the powers of the presidency, which he passed on to Nechirvan. With his father's support, Masrour—who like other Iraqi politicians has retained U.S.-based lobbying services to burnish his image and broaden his network—is consolidating power and chipping away at his cousin's network of influence. Amid this maneuvering among three power players, the KDP Leadership Council and politburo remain sidelined and will back whomever Barzani names as his KDP successor. Meanwhile, Barzani family members already hold key political, security, and commercial positions. As the family grows, so does the need for more wealth, titles, and government jobs to dole out. (Judging from the prophecies of the medieval historian-philosopher Ibn Khaldun, this could foretell future risks for Barzani hegemony.[30])

The PUK and the Talabani Family

The Patriotic Union of Kurdistan's formation in 1975 marked a revolt against family-led rule in the KDP. But ironically, family rule has solidified in today's PUK, with Bafel Talabani—the oldest son of Jalal Talabani—heading the party. In granting power to Bafel and his younger son, Qubad, the family patriarch effectively mimicked the Barzanis in building a proto-dynasty. Moreover, Jalal did not relinquish party control even when he was critically ill and unable to rule, showing the difficulty of replacing a central personality prior to death.

IRAQI KURDISTAN LEADERS

Kurdistan Democratic Party (KDP)
Founded in 1946

BARZANI FAMILY

Founder: Mustafa Barzani (1903–1979)

Masoud Barzani (b. 1945)
son of Mustafa
KDP leader since 1979
KRG president, 2005–17

Masrour Barzani (b. 1969)
son of Masoud
KRG prime minister and second vice president

Nechirvan Barzani (b. 1966)
cousin of Masrour
KRG president and KPD vice president

Patriotic Union of Kurdistan (PUK)
Founded in 1975

TALABANI FAMILY

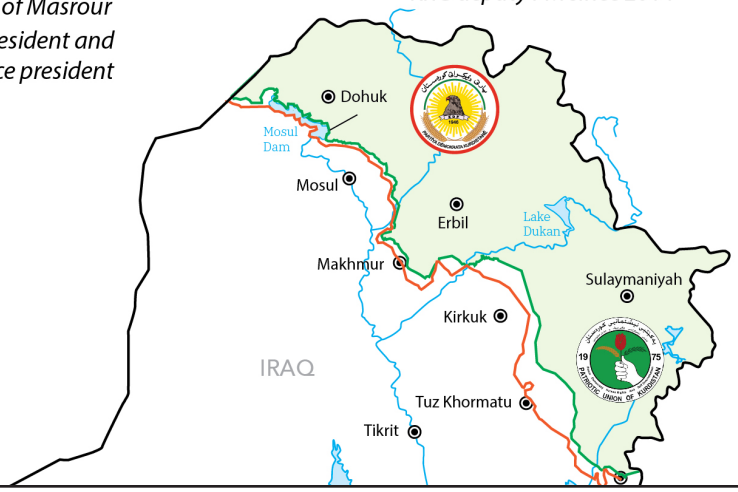
Cofounder: Jalal Talabani (1933–2017)

Bafel Talabani (b. 1973)
son of Jalal

Lahur Talabani (b. 1975)
cousin of Bafel, Qubad

PUK co-presidents since 2020

Qubad Talabani (b. 1977)
son of Jalal
KRG deputy PM since 2014



Initially, the PUK sought to distinguish itself as a left-leaning urban party versus the more traditional KDP. It emulated Russia's early-twentieth-century Bolsheviks in its jargon and structures, thus empowering the party's own politburo—a usage commonly applied by Kurdish parties—and a secretary-general rather than a president. Two types of factions tended to operate within the PUK: one seeking to maintain group interest, and another fighting for power. Talabani demonstrated savvy in playing factions off each other and outsmarted challengers to his own leadership. As former Iraqi prime minister Adil Abdulmahdi, a longtime friend of Talabani, put it, the PUK leader was seen as "shifting from one principle to another [given] the need to confront sometimes contradictory challenges—to survive."[31] As Talabani's health deteriorated, power shifted first to his wife, Hiro, and later to his son Bafel and nephew Lahur. In a 2021 family "coup," Bafel sidelined his cousin Lahur, and at the party's 2023 convention, he was elected unopposed as president.[32]

In the past, entry to the PUK politburo required years of service and victory in a fierce convention contest. As with the KDP, family primacy has won out, and Bafel Talabani unilaterally appointed a politburo member with the stroke of his pen. Setting aside the areas of Kurdistan they control—the KDP in Erbil and Duhok, the PUK in Sulaymaniyah—the two blocs lack any genuine ideological or policy differences.

The Gorran Movement and the New Generation Movement

The KPD-PUK civil war erupted in 1994, a mere two years after the formation of the first KRG cabinet, and frustration with the two blocs' mismanagement, corruption, and monopoly motivated the opposition to organize. Thus, in 2009, Talabani's deputy and lifelong friend Nawshirwan Mustafa left the PUK to form the Gorran (Change) Party, having failed to bring about changes in his existing party.

Unfortunately, even as Mustafa identified dynastic rule as the principal malaise in Kurdish politics, Gorran merely replaced one cult of personality with another. Mustafa, a charismatic political veteran who helped create the intellectual underpinnings of his movement, was Gorran's dynamo but also its Achilles' heel. He was consumed by countering the Barzani and Talabani sides and thus failed to advance from a compelling party leader to a builder of resilient institutions. Even when Mustafa was ill and living in London, the party looked to him for key decisions. Gorran managed to defeat the PUK in the 2013 KRG elections, but upon Mustafa's death in 2017, his sons—Nma and Chia—took effective power and ran the party into the ground. By the 2021 elections, Gorran had completely dissolved.

Regarding the Nawshirwan Mustafa saga, political theory indicates that a charismatic leader can be useful in the early stages of party building but that charisma minus institutionalization deepens personalist rule.[33] One wonders how much he and Jalal Talabani were aware of Nietzsche's warning—paraphrased here—that those who fight monsters must be careful lest they become monsters themselves.[34]

Finally, the trend toward personalism has been evident with Kurdistan's latest political entrant, a populist outfit known as the New Generation Movement, established in 2018. The personality in question is Shaswar Abdulwahid, a member of the nouveau riche who made his money in Kurdistan's booming real estate market and has sustained his party financially.

Shaswar Abdulwahid with his sister Serwa Abdulwahid, a fellow member of the New Generation Movement who is currently serving in the Iraqi parliament.

Shia Political Families and Strongmen

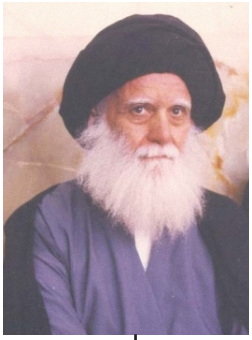
Like their Kurdish counterparts, Arab political parties are being steadily eclipsed in various ways by strongmen and political families in both the Shia and Sunni communities.

Religious Personalities as Politicians

Iraq is a majority Shia country, and this branch of Islam correspondingly lies at the heart of national politics. Shia shrines dot the country, and Najaf has long been a holy city[35]—not only a center of Shia learning, but also a base for political action and the dissemination of ideas.[36] The highest Shia religious authority (grand *marja*), Ayatollah Ali al-Sistani (b. 1930), dwells in the city, which houses his *hawza* (seminary). *Marjas* have been involved in politics since the events surrounding Iraq's national birth, beginning with Kadhim al-Yazdi's participation in the 1917 Najaf Revolt,[37] and continuing to this day with Sistani's suprastate role in guiding key decisions and appointments, such as the drafting of a constitution, a fatwa against the Islamic State, and opposition to a third prime ministerial term for Maliki.[38] Even as the *hawza* honors scholarly achievement, not dynastic tradition, some *marjas* have used their position to enter politics and thus gain wealth and standing for their families. Historically, such figures have included the late Mohammad Bahr al-Uloom, Abu al-Qasem al-Khoei, Muhammad Baqr al-Sadr, and Muhammad Baqr al-Hakim. Such activity has helped normalize the family and personality as a centerpiece of modern Iraqi politics.

Muqtada al-Sadr is a unique figure in Shia politics, his own national stature fused with that of his martyred father, Dawa Party founder Muhammad Sadiq al-Sadr—who was killed at the hands of the Baath Party in 1999. Comparatively young for a religious leader, Sadr is a *sayyed* (descendant of the Prophet Muhammad) who has social, symbolic, and religious capital transcending that of many peers. Muqtada, who remained in Iraq during Saddam's rule rather than go into exile, has emerged as a political strongman with a religious cultlike following thanks to his personal renown and patronage efforts. He operates parallel to the state, independently and according to his own power structure. This grants him a measure of freedom.

Sadr's centralization of power and grand ambition to control Iraqi politics—paired with his touted autonomy from Iran's Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps and warnings against Iran—have drawn a divide-and-conquer response from both Iranian and Iraqi actors. Iranian meddling, for example, split Sadr



Muqtada al-Sadr, pictured here, is a longtime Shia rival of former prime minister Nouri al-Maliki, who served from 2006 to 2014.

Left: Muqtada's father, Grand Ayatollah Muhammad Sadiq al-Sadr, who was murdered by Baath Party agents in 1999.

from his former political disciple Qais al-Khazali, who in one earlier video was shown serving water to Muqtada,[39] but later defected to form the Iran-backed Asaib Ahl al-Haq militia.[40] Then, following Sadr's path from militia leader to politics, Khazali oversaw AAH's rise from holding one seat in parliament in 2014 to amassing fifteen in 2018. In December 2019, he was given a terrorism designation by the U.S. Treasury Department.[41]

Sadr started where other Iraqi political actors seem to be ending up—as an exclusively personalist political force. By the 2021 elections, power had become so centralized within the Sadrist Movement that Muqtada did not even deign to form a party. As Iraq analyst Nibras Kazimi put it, "Relevance is Sadr's primary motivator"—and relevance is an intrinsically personalist goal.[42] Sadr loyalists, for their part, often vanish from the public eye as quickly as they appear, quite in line with his desire to keep power consolidated in himself without any challenges. After the 2021 vote, to avoid the embarrassing specter of defeat after he failed to sideline his Shia rivals, Sadr asked his seventy-three aligned members of parliament to resign.[43]

The Case of the al-Hakim Dynasty

Ammar al-Hakim likewise exemplifies the centrality of family in Iraqi politics. He is the grandson of Ayatollah Mohsen al-Hakim, a Shia Najaf *marja*, and the son of Abdulaziz al-Hakim, a key figure in post-Saddam Iraq. According to one Iraqi Shia scholar, he represents a Najaf family that "politicized Shiism and shifted their clerical status from the nuances of jurisprudence and ecclesiastical excellence to power politics."[44] He thus finds himself a competitor to other Shia families, such as al-Sadr.

Following his father's death in 2009, Ammar assumed leadership of the Islamic Supreme Council of Iraq, but when consolidating power proved difficult,[45] he founded the more agile Tayyar Hikma al-Watani (National Wisdom Movement). Ammar's 2017 exit from ISCI once again demonstrates the preeminence of leader over party in today's Iraq and of family-based leaders' intolerance for any internal challengers. In this landscape, parties may disappear but individual leaders endure. Moreover, roots in theology, politics, and a quest for status—as well as martyrdom—can inspire the rise of personalist actors. In this way, the situation in federal Iraq resembles that in Kurdistan.

The al-Hakim Dynasty

First generation

Grand Ayatollah Moshen al-Hakim
(1889–1970)
Shia Najaf marja

Second generation

Abdulaziz al-Hakim
(1952–2009)
theologian, politician, and leader of the Islamic Supreme Council of Iraq

Third generation

Ammar al-Hakim
(1971–)
head of the National Wisdom Movement

The Sunni Community

Since 2003, the rise of Sunni political dynasties and strongmen has been simultaneously more visible and more volatile than for Shia and Kurds. One could attribute this partly to the lack of a top authority (*marja*) in Sunni Islam.

As noted earlier, Iraq's Baath Party served as a model for today's personalist politics. Soon after assuming power in 1968, the Baath evolved into an ideological Arab nationalist movement, aided by militancy.[46] Yet party loyalty and meritocracy soon gave way to primacy for Saddam's extended family and tribe from the city of Tikrit and village of Awja.[47] After the 1991 Gulf War, however, when the survival of Hussein's rule became a more acute concern, he increasingly confided only in his two sons, Uday and Qusay. Saddam, like many other strongmen,[48] grew weaker and more isolated as his circle dwindled. He was surrounded by yes-men who dared not convey any displeasing facts amid the U.S. military invasion.

Iraq's majority Shia population and its Kurdish population felt largely excluded from Sunni-led Iraq in the decades before the 2003 U.S. invasion. Sunni ties to the state deepened especially in the latter years of Baath Party rule, today evoking memories of perceived prosperity for Sunnis, alongside suppression for the Shia community and war and persecution for Kurds. Such memories shape how these communities see themselves, the state, and others. Since Saddam Hussein's ouster, pressures facilitating the rise of Sunni strongmen include government crackdowns—including those against Sunni areas shortly before the rise of the Islamic State—along with internal divisions and geography. Bitter personal rivalries have also played a role amid challenges to Sunni leadership. For example, the day after U.S. troops withdrew from Iraq in December 2011, then prime minister Maliki issued an arrest warrant for Vice President Tariq al-Hashimi,[49] a prominent Sunni figure from Baghdad who formerly headed the Iraqi Islamic Party. Sunni political vacuums have created additional opportunities for strongmen, such as that wrought by Islamic State control of Sunni-populated areas and the associated reliance on Shia militias to liberate them.

After the U.S. invasion, Sunni elites and communities at first resisted their loss of power, but they later adjusted by necessity. While some participated in the political process, others boycotted or fought it outright, with the first anti-U.S. insurgencies occurring in Sunni areas. Today, the memory of Saddam and deepened sectarianism keeps Shia elites wary of strong Sunni leaders, a mindset stoked by Tehran. Iraq's former prime minister Maliki, in one example, feuded with his Turkish counterpart, Erdogan, over the latter's support for Sunni groups. One outspoken Shia parliamentarian described Turkey as a "lawyer for the Sunnis."[50]

The Iraqi Islamic Party, the main Sunni opposition group in exile during the Baath years, has wielded significant political influence in the years following the U.S. invasion. Since 2005, it has furnished three of Iraq's six parliament speakers and one vice president. The speakership has been practically designated for Sunnis since Iraq's new sectarian system was established. But the Iraqi Islamic Party has seen its fortunes wane in general, especially since Prime Minister Maliki forced Vice President Hashimi, along with Deputy Prime Minister Rafi al-Issawi, to flee the country in 2011 under the claim that they ordered anti-Shia violence.[51] The party also suffered under de-Baathification (*ijtithath al-bath*), a process aimed at eradicating the legacy of Saddam Hussein's party but that targeted other Sunni elites as well. Unlike the bureaucratic-sounding English translation, the Arabic term refers to uprooting a noxious weed.[52] Compounding these pressures are Sunni terrorist groups such as al-Qaeda and IS, whose main battleground has been the Sunni-dominated provinces.

Further, tainted by association with Baathism, Iraq's post-invasion Sunni parties have found themselves marginalized, lacking the cohesion, popular support, or international backing necessary to challenge Shia and Kurdish dominance.[53] In the new order, the Sunnis have largely reverted to their old regional and tribal affinities, echoing observations from Gertrude Bell, the famed writer and British colonial officer,

a century ago. Political dynasties and tribal chiefs have thereby flourished, competing with one another for influence and resources. They owe their ascent to personal charisma, wealth, and legacy, not to the state or its institutions. Today's prominent Sunni leaders—former parliament speaker Mohammed al-Halbousi and tribal and political chief Khamis al-Khanjar, the latter of whom is under U.S. Global Magnitsky Act sanctions—fit this description.[54]

In considering Sunni politics in Iraq, one must first acknowledge the diversity of the community, encompassing numerous regions and interests. For example, the predominantly Sunni Anbar governorate, which stretches along the Syrian border, is different from Diyala, which has a mixed Sunni-Shia population and borders Iran. Competition for influence likewise pits the Sunni elites of Anbar against those of Mosul, Iraq's largest Sunni-majority city. Before the Islamic State seized Mosul in 2014, the city was dominated by the wealthy, landowning al-Nujaifi family. But the family lost most of its seats in the 2021 elections amid factors such as the rise of IS and corruption.[55] Now it must answer to the Barzani clan and the militias that uphold the city's security. Another prominent Sunni figure, Salim al-Jabouri, the former speaker of the Iraqi parliament, disappeared from the political scene amid his alleged ties to Iran and clashes with Khalid al-Obeidi, a rising Sunni leader from Mosul who previously served as defense minister.[56]

The Sunni political leader Khamis al-Khanjar, a member of the Siyada alliance, is under U.S. sanctions for corrupt practices.

Iraqi president Abdul Latif Rashid meets with then parliament speaker Mohammed al-Halbousi on July 4, 2023.

Ascendant since have been wealthy businessman Khanjar and Halbousi. Of late, the two leaders have joined forces under the Siyada (Sovereignty) alliance, but their frequent sparring over power and perks has been serious enough to necessitate Turkish mediation.[57] The impressive rise of Halbousi, still in his early forties, epitomizes the current family-personalist trend in Iraq. He embraces no particular ideology and has not voiced opposition to Baathism. For his part, Khanjar was already a tribal sheikh and businessman before entering politics. The rise of Khanjar and Halbousi has shifted the Sunni center of gravity to Anbar, home to both, and time will tell if they stay resilient—especially since Sunni leaders who lack armed militias must rely primarily on elections and coalitions with Shia and Kurds.[58]

Another indication of the retreat from grand ideology involves Sunni party-naming tendencies. Receding are monikers like the Arab Project and Islamic Party, vestiges of an era when Sunnis imagined themselves as part of a larger group, whether ethnic or religious. Instead, today's Sunni leaders use less grandiose nomenclature, such as *progress, resolution, sovereignty,* or simply the name of their home governorate. The focus on personality has reemerged today, including from Iraq watchers—who now track the activity of individual leaders (e.g., Maliki or Sadr) rather than the ever-changing party and militia names (and acronyms) with which they are associated.

Implications for U.S. Policy and Iraqi Politics

To address a precarious, changing Iraq, U.S. and other world leaders must understand the inner workings of parties in the federal and Kurdistan regions, and know the main personalities involved. In a complex ethnoreligious country, the shift from traditional to personality-based politics will have serious implications for democracy, governance, stability, and Iraq's relations with other countries. Understanding this shift, and knowing what players to talk to, can help Washington craft a more effective approach to dealing with Iraq.

U.S. Policy

Over the past two decades, the United States has expended significant blood and treasure to democratize and stabilize Iraq. But for a slew of reasons, recent administrations including that of President Biden have espoused more modest goals such as "right-sizing" and "normalizing" the bilateral relationship. As America's military presence and political influence in Iraq shrink further, Washington should be mindful of the shift from ethnosectarian political parties to personality-led politics—which is making Iraqi governance less predictable, transparent, and rational.

Long gone are the post-invasion days when generals and officials visiting from Washington would meet with a lineup of party leaders. In turn, today's efforts to normalize relations with Iraq mean that Washington should engage directly with government officials only, while diplomats from the U.S. embassy in Baghdad and consulate in Erbil talk with a broader array of figures. According to Joey Hood, a former U.S. charge d'affaires in Iraq who currently serves as ambassador to Tunisia, the United States engages in "constructive conversations with those who are working in the interests of their country," but not those "working in the interests of other countries or exclusively to enrich themselves."[59] Iran, by contrast, still sends its top brass to hobnob with Iraqi party bosses. Unlike the Iraqi public, many Iraqi elites prefer the Iranian approach, which seems to acknowledge and buttress "real power" over officialdom.[60] But America's approach should aim to bolster the Iraqi state and its legitimacy. In pursuing this goal, the United States should demonstrate consistency and stop making exceptions for old friends.[61]

Iraq watchers have a role to play here too, given the impact of the current changes on Iraq's stability, democracy, and economy. Specifically, they can focus analysis on the shape and character of political parties, and how they affect competition. A broad area for scrutiny is the widening gulf between leaders and their constituents, which is diminishing elite accountability, even as politicians claim all credit for success. Iraqi leaders likewise eschew dialogue and engage in public tirades against their rivals. And with Lebanese political elites,[62] they share an interest in avoiding any reinforcement of state institutions, accountability, and rule of law.

The hardening personalist system, while allowing for the façade of modern government—including bureaucracy, parliament, and national military—seeks actually to subvert modern institutions and repurpose the state to serve leaders' parochial interests, not those of the public. This is patently contrary to U.S. objectives. Furthermore, although not as baldly predatory as a dictatorship, today's Iraq allows for systemic pilfering of the state and gutting of its institutions. Notable examples include the "heist of the century," a massive scheme that played out over months and involved the theft of $2.7 billion in tax revenues,[63] and the beefing up of the PMF budget while slashing health funding during the Covid-19 pandemic.[64] The embezzlement came to the government's attention in summer 2021 and reached the public the next year. The fog of chaos allows human rights abuses to continue and perpetrators to go unpunished. Such a system is inherently brittle, as Iraqis learned when the Islamic State captured one-third of its territory within weeks in 2014.

To stanch their bleeding, Iraqi institutions desperately need attention and reinvestment. In one related line of effort, former Iraqi president Barham Salih

called for amendments to the 2005 constitution amid dismay over feeble post-Saddam governance and inability to place blame on any single leader or group.[65] Whatever the merits of such arguments, no constitutional amendment has passed over nearly two decades. A more practical alternative to such a disruptive move, or perhaps a prelude, would be to faithfully implement the constitution in its current form. In particular, specific laws need to be passed (e.g., a hydrocarbons law) and institutions need to be built (e.g., a proper Federal Supreme Court).[66] Other elements are sociocultural, such as the state's lip service to a market economy, even as the actual rentier economy and public expectations remain rooted in Saddam-era socialism.

The KRG, meanwhile, has failed to produce a constitution after thirty years of self-rule, thus allowing a core institution like the presidency to simply be manipulated to serve the desires of power players. Whereas Masoud Barzani was elected by popular vote, the system reverted to a parliamentary vote for his successor, Nechirvan Barzani—whose presidential powers were in turn reduced. Whereas the KRG parliament once commanded the respect of various parties who sent their members to serve, today two ruling families run the show, installing only their loyal functionaries. Despite holding both the KRG presidency and the prime ministership, the Barzani family refuses to cede control of the KDP Peshmerga to the government—even though the Barzanis also run the government. And despite the threats of IS and of losing U.S. stipend funding, the Peshmerga remains largely partisan and unaccountable to the KRG.[67] The so-called strongmen have grown even more powerful amid weakening parties, and the KRG has thus lost clout vis-à-vis Baghdad along with the sheen it formerly enjoyed in Western capitals. As the centrality of the parties wane, Washington should be wary of security and military commanders acting increasingly like local warlords.

Washington, meanwhile, has been subject to Iraqi sleight of hand. As the United States expended significant political capital on voicing support for Iraqi prime ministers, the actual locus of power has slowly moved elsewhere. Prime ministerial accountability reached its nadir with the tenures of Adil Abdulmahdi (2018–20) and Mustafa al-Kadhimi (2020–22), who as nonpartisan candidates had no constituency in parliament. Rather than demonstrating their promised independence, they ended up buttering everyone's bread. Abdulmahdi stood by as militias killed or maimed thousands of protesters in 2019, and Kadhimi allowed the PMF budget to bulge. As the state shed legitimacy, the power of clans and unchecked strongmen grew. Such changes require that Washington shift its attention from the players to the game itself. Washington should make demands of the entire system, focusing on power nodes beyond solely the prime minister—with such actors including the parliament, president, military, and KRG, along with the business and nonprofit communities. Washington would also be wise to craft its policy based on actions and results, not the promises or prospects of individual leaders.

Washington faces a dilemma in dealing with a state where the most influential actors operate outside officialdom, and must walk a fine line between articulating that a system based on democratic norms will be rewarded and recognizing actual power brokers. It is always preferable for the "puppet master" to hold an official title and be subject to rules and laws. U.S. leaders must likewise show, through word and deed, that real access will be reserved for formal officeholders. In practice, with the exception of U.S. diplomatic stations in Iraq, visible engagement by Washington with Baghdad and Erbil should be state-to-state, an approach that will support the goal of achieving democratic accountability. Up until now, U.S. officials have better adhered to this norm in their interactions with Baghdad than with the KRG. For instance, whether he is KRG president or not, Masoud Barzani often elicits a trip from U.S. officials to the outskirts of Erbil. To project relevance in an ever-changing political climate, Iraq's insecure strongmen crave face-to-face meetings with U.S. officials. Sometimes, the result is stark embarrassment, such as when Christian militia leader Rayan al-Kildani photobombed the Pope and later claimed he had enjoyed a private audience with the cleric.[68] A meeting at the Oval Office is the ultimate prize for

any Iraqi or KRG leader, giving Washington a carrot to be dangled strategically.

Likewise, Washington should use its sticks strategically, recognizing that targeting individuals inflicts more pain than simply criticizing a party or state institution. While some militia leaders may shrug off sanctions under the Magnitsky Act, most politicians know that a U.S. corruption designation could keep them out of public office, with its many perks. Targeted sanctions and exposure of stolen assets could also curb the political ambitions of Iraqi warlords, money launderers, and kleptocrats who seek to weaken state institutions. In one notable case, Mohammed al-Halbousi has retained a lobbying firm for $600,000 a year to avoid the U.S.-sanctioned fate of his fellow leader, Khamis al-Khanjar.[69] But the threat of sanctions can be more effective in some cases than their actual use. All told, the United States should not expect to stop Iraq's current trajectory, but by helping strengthen state institutions and targeting bad actors, it can narrow the gap between actual power and formal office.

Iraqi National Politics

When political parties are effectively private enterprises, membership becomes like participation in a family business, wherein actors may not share common beliefs, ideologies, or interests at all. The primary goal becomes earning a wage or gaining access to a public-sector salary, irrespective of who is in charge. This mode changes what it means to be a politician or constituent, inevitably narrowing active participation, representation, and the public space. The Iraqi political system faces specific challenges on these fronts:

Money and political engagement. In Iraq's emerging model, political parties require large sums of money to survive, tightening the interdependence of party and state. This symbiotic relationship has elevated party cadres in government, even though they often lack policymaking talent or any particular desire to govern, let alone to reform the system, in either Baghdad or Kurdistan. Such political figures tend to lack initiative, strong beliefs, courage, or stature,[70] making a transactional relationship between leaders and constituents ever more likely.

Factionalism. Two cases exemplify the role of factionalism in Iraqi politics: the 2017 KRG referendum on independence and the general instability created by Muqtada al-Sadr's decisions. Both show the transcendence of strong personalities over state-building based on institutions. In the referendum, independence advocate Masoud Barzani was seeking foremost to secure his personal legacy. And Sadr's bitter rivalry with former prime minister Maliki sucked up political oxygen, discouraged participatory democracy, and increased the general likelihood of violence during transitions of power.[71]

Quest for power above consensus. For the top leadership positions in today's Iraq—president, prime minister, and cabinet minister—the personality/family connection is primary. The Talabani family may no longer hold the presidency, but it is determined to maintain effective control of the office, as observed during the recent competition between Abdul Latif Rashid and Barham Salih. As also noted earlier, running on the PUK line was not adequate for the incumbent Salih to defeat Rashid, who benefited, among other things, from family support.

Abuse of public spaces. The personality/family dynamic has furnished a sense of entitlement over public spaces, affecting politics, socioeconomics, and culture. In today's Iraq, individual officials are not afraid to personally seize public buildings or engage in corrupt acts to protect their private interests,[72] including by inviting the assistance of external actors.

Closed media space. A media machine is integral to burnishing the position of a strongman. In Iraq, neutral or objective media is almost entirely absent, and most aspiring journalists must work for a personality or a family. Media professionals fawn over their Facebook pages, X (formerly Twitter) accounts, and WhatsApp groups rather than producing reliable, rigorous reporting. More and more often, "likes" and "retweets" of leaders' posts serve as metrics of loyalty applied to party followers. Outliers face the specter of fading away for lack

of funding or protection. The satirical *Albasheer Show* can crack jokes about any and all targets only because it broadcasts from outside Iraq.[73]

It is worth noting here that current KRG president Nechirvan Barzani (KPD) owns the Rudaw news network, which still provides some real coverage, as opposed to K24, which is owned by his family rival Masrour Barzani (also KDP). So contentious is the intrafamily dynamic that patriarch and KRG president Masoud Barzani has attempted to shut down Rudaw and has actually barred KDP members from appearing on it.

All this occurs in a society where one of the most frequently invoked concepts is *istishhad* (martyrdom), which in principle should imply pure altruism but in practice often involves identification with other martyrs, as was the case for militia groups after Kataib Hezbollah leader Abu Mahdi al-Muhandis was killed in a January 2020 U.S. airstrike. Sadr never fails to remind his audience of his family's sacrifices, while the PMF is turning Muhandis and Qasem Soleimani, the late chief of Iran's Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps–Qods Force who was killed in the same strike, into symbols of "resistance."

Regional Politics

Elites in today's Iraq sense that they need external patrons to sustain their political viability, a function of the country's internal weakness that, in turn, erodes its sovereignty.[74] An unstable Iraq also inevitably risks further destabilizing the wider region. Examples of outside interference include the following:

- **Iran.** The main meddler in Iraq's domestic affairs is Iran, and most Shia parties view the Islamic Republic as their chief patron and protector, enabling their continued rule. Some militias openly declare allegiance to Tehran. Before the 2018 elections and during the subsequent government formation process, these militias sought support from Qods Force head Soleimani to ensure they could win and form a majority. His successor, Esmail Qaani, has not proven as effective, lacking Soleimani's charisma, personal connections, and personal history with Iraq's political and militia leaders. He also does not speak Arabic. Tehran, meanwhile, was agitated when U.S. ambassador to Baghdad Alina Romanowski used a lull in violence to visit political figures, including Maliki and Hakim. Whereas the October 2019 anti-corruption protests quickly set their sights on Iran, the 2021 elections returned to power many temporary casualties of the protests. Today, a secure Iran continues its meddling, albeit less visibly to avoid more public backlash.[75]
- **Turkey and the Gulf monarchs.** To withstand Shia dominance, some Sunni and Kurdish groups seek backing from Ankara and the Gulf monarchies, often flying to regional capitals for photo ops or cash handouts. The Barzanis have thrown in their lot with Turkey, allowing for the export of Kurdish oil and pressure on the Kurdistan Workers Party (PKK)—a Turkey-based KDP rival sanctioned by Ankara and Washington for terrorism. In a balancing move, the Talabanis remain closer to Iran and its Iraq-based allies. One sometimes encounters surprising bedfellows, as with the earlier-noted Rayan al-Kildani, who leads a Nineveh-based Christian militia loyal to Iran.

State and Stability

The noble goal of integrating the intricate patchwork of Iraqi groups and interests requires institutions that transcend family loyalty. But such institutions, such as a formal military accountable to the state, face stiff resistance in the current political climate. Rather than building a modern bureaucracy rooted in the rule of law, personality- and family-based parties cultivate informal and patronage networks that grant access and resources to their followers and communities.

Iraq's informal networks are not new, issuing from a system based on *wasta* (roughly, clout)—getting things done through personal connections. They are entangled with the government, state security apparatuses, and wider society, and ultimately limit direct contact between citizens and the state. Yet given the public's familiarity with this informal system, it has faced little opposition so far.

A paradox governs Iraq's personality- and family-driven politics. Even as this dynamic erodes institutions, leading figures depend on the state to regulate them and limit conflicts. Political consensus has proven elusive in this system, as demonstrated by the protracted government formation process after the 2021 elections. Still, even as political families and leaders jostle for power, indulging their egos and emotions, they rely increasingly on the state as a bureaucratic entity, with militias exemplifying this dilemma. Entities such as the Popular Mobilization Forces, while preying on state weakness, simultaneously depend on it for the cloak of legitimacy, along with salaries for their militiamen. In short, they want a feeble state that they can both suckle and plunder.

Similarly, Muqtada al-Sadr behaves as if he is above the state but nevertheless competes for its rewards by running a powerful political bloc. He is the hero in many songs and slogans on media platforms, and he speaks the language of the common people—but he also invokes his holy lineage and his family's role in Iraqi Shia history. Sadr has no particular ideology, but he has a myth that emanates from his persona.

Rather than promote a modern democratic culture, today's leading families in Iraq and the KRG breed a feudal, ultimately confrontational dynamic in which each party tries to dominate the state and crush its rivals. The ensuing disorder carries high risks, as Iraqis learned from the fight against the Islamic State—and even as international anti-IS efforts have inadvertently subsidized today's zero-sum Iraqi politics.

Iraqi Democracy

The emergence of strongmen is a global phenomenon but one with different causes in different places. Whereas in the West "economic grievance" and "cultural backlash" are cited as drivers,[76] the story is different in Iraq and Kurdistan, where each personality- or family-based political bloc has a distinct story but a similar trajectory. All figure in Iraq's democratic backslide. Still, today's parties—while arguably disdaining democracy—find it useful to engage in "managed democracy" since the current system improves their chances of keeping power, their only authentic goal.

Increasing public distrust of democracy—demonstrated by opinion polling[77]—is likely to further weaken Iraq's current parliamentary system and amplify calls for a presidential system and a strong centralized state. Since liberal democracy cannot exist in the absence of true political parties, the hollowing of Iraq's parties is undermining the democratic process and jeopardizing the long-running, already-tortuous transition to democratic governance. The parties share sovereignty with the state and, as a result, weaken the state, capture its revenues, and promote disorder.

Conclusion

In Iraq and the country's Kurdistan Region, the central role of personality and family in society is not new, but the political prominence of such families has changed dramatically, including their armed power, wealth, and role in external affairs. The changes can be traced from Kurdistan democracy in the early 1990s and Iraqi democracy a decade later.

The current parties differ from warlords by going beyond a certain demarcated territory, in part impelled by the predominance of oil in the Iraqi economy. Relatedly, this study has omitted smaller fiefdoms that resemble those of warlords because of their relatively limited roles and links to other families. It has focused instead on personalities, families, and dynasty-based parties, trends that reflect a shift away from community, society, and country.

Iraqi political parties, despite their weakness and unpopularity, are primary tools for governing the country. When they have effectively been seized by personalities and families pursuing self-enrichment and entrenchment of power, they foster corruption and an antidemocratic slide. Unfortunately for Iraq, such parties have shown themselves equally damaging regardless of their ethnic, cultural, or religious affinities.

One finding from the research for this paper was that newer parties have moved with particular speed toward family/personality preeminence, thwarting post-invasion aspirations for open democracy and pluralism. These include all Sunni factions, including Halbousi's Taqaddum alliance, along with Abdulwahid's Kurdistan-based New Generation Movement and the Shia blocs led by Muqtada al-Sadr and Qais Khazali. In Kurdistan, the major parties only evolved into their current family-based form after years under a Soviet-style politburo system, with Jalal Talabani adopting the title of secretary-general rather than president. Thus, in those earlier years, the PUK specifically did not belong to an individual or a family; only after Talabani's death in 2017 did the family emphasis harden. In other Iraqi parties, too, the lure of appealing to actual constituencies has diminished in favor of consolidating the family's power and wealth.

Personality-based parties can be seen as inevitably evolving into family-based parties, given the intermingling of finances and the desire to hold power. And such parties can be seen as less open than privatized businesses, resembling instead earlier aristocratic, monarchical regimes wherein cliques formed around specific noblemen who sparred with their rivals.

Regrettably, Shia and Sunni parties elsewhere in Iraq are following the same personality/family trend as that prevalent in the KRG. These parties are influenced by both Shia and Sunni religious ideas, albeit in distinct ways. To distance themselves from the Islamic State, for instance, Sunni leaders increasingly present a secular image. Numerous prominent Shia actors, such as Sadr and Hakim, reference ties to their associated religious families and institutions. Those like Hadi al-Ameri and Qais al-Khazali, who lack such family and religious credentials, cling to their record fighting the United States on the one hand and IS on the other, or to their friendship with the late Shia icons Soleimani and Muhandis. Politics is thus mixing with the sacred on various planes. Sunni groups, for purposes of comparison, have struggled for various reasons to found political parties, allowing highly placed tribal Sunni figures to dominate the political space. The rise of personality-based rule, however, may be observed in the rise of former parliament speaker Mohammed al-Halbousi—and Shaswar Abdulwahid in Kurdistan.

All these trends hold ominous signs for Iraqi democracy, with one grim indicator being the control by families of their own private media channels—amid the lack of a perceivable independent media in Iraq. The primacy of self-centered family narratives thus obscures other important national events and social issues, while demonstrating that such groups fail to prioritize broader civic or national goals. While publicly the parties may compete with each other, they are in fact similar in character. In Kurdistan, family control over government has occurred in part because of the high costs of purely public maintenance. And in both Baghdad and Erbil, personalities are flouting the rule of law, threatening the openness and accountability of the system.

In response to Iraq's current political course, the United States and other world actors must tread a fine line between recognizing the state's leaders for their actual power and spotlighting their role in eroding the country's democracy. Dealing with these elites could perhaps damage the U.S. reputation as a bulwark of freedom and democracy. But taking a longer view, recognizing the personality/family model in the first place at least offers a useful lens for navigating Iraqi politics. More specifically, effective Iraqi governance and a cohesive Peshmerga, two stated U.S. interests, will require communication with actors other than those currently in power, such as the opposition parties, the business community, and civil society. And hope might be found in the 2019 Tishreen movement, whose partisans took to the streets chanting, "We want a country"—not self-serving rivalries like those between the Maliki and Sadr factions and between the Barzanis and Talabanis. An Iraqi opposition does exist, but it has, to date, been hindered by lack of organization and resources, along with violent counter-reactions and the maneuvering of power brokers who want the current system to persist. ❖

Afterword: A Narrow U.S. Path for Supporting Iraqi Democracy

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In 2004, the year following the U.S. invasion of Iraq and toppling of President Saddam Hussein, then deputy secretary of state Paul Wolfowitz told the Senate Committee on Armed Services that Washington's objective was "a democratic Iraq that truly respects the wishes of the people of Iraq." Notwithstanding a prolonged insurgency, an Islamic State takeover, and continuous interference by Iran, Iraq today boasts perhaps the most robust democracy in the Arab Middle East. To be sure, Iraqi democracy is not as hearty as it was even a decade ago. Still, the Biden administration recognized the headway made by Baghdad by including Iraq as a participant in its March 2023 Summit for Democracy[78]—the only Arab state to receive an invitation.

As noted by this study's authors, however, even Iraq's modest democratic progress is threatened today. The growing dominance of family dynasties and strongmen is eroding democratic institutions in Iraq. In addition to fueling corruption and patronage politics, this trend is undermining political parties, enabling militias, and weakening the writ of the state. This phenomenon first appeared in Iraqi Kurdistan, but over time it has begun taking hold in Baghdad.

Increasingly, the Iraqi political situation is resembling that in Lebanon. The so-called Za'im system of clan political clientelism has proven calamitous for Lebanon; the trend does not bode well for Iraq either. Iraq's growing tendency toward personality- rather than interest-based politics also has implications for Washington. Successive U.S. administrations have already had to contend with the messy tribal politics of Kurdistan. A pro-Western enclave of Iraq, the Kurdistan Regional Government at one time embodied enormous potential for democratic and economic progress, in Washington's view. But as the Barzani and Talabani clans have grown more powerful, those hopes have dimmed.

Today in the KRG, freedom of expression and economic opportunity are limited, elections have been postponed, and outmigration is reportedly spiking. Meanwhile, the region's security services and Peshmerga armed forces have become highly partisan, serving their respective clans rather than the KRG. In 2022, a security official who defected from Talabani's Patriotic Union of Kurdistan to Barzani's Kurdistan Democratic Party was assassinated in the KDP stronghold of Erbil.[79]

This polarization complicates Washington's efforts to reform the Peshmerga and

improve its capabilities, which in recent years have been critical in the fight against the Islamic State. It also raises the specter of a resumption of intra-Kurdish violence, a development that could threaten U.S. lines of communication, the critical logistics hub between Iraq and American troops deployed in Syria. More generally, the growing internal rift between KRG political families threatens to undermine stability and security in the region, providing new opportunities for the revival of a currently diminished Islamic State.

The apparent trend toward political strongmen and family dynasties in Baghdad is likewise regrettable. To be fair, Iraq is long accustomed to this kind of leadership—from 1979 to 2003, the country's politics were dominated by Saddam Hussein, the tribal-based dictator who undoubtedly would have passed his office on to one of his sons. Already facing severe governance challenges, Iraq's prospective return to the domination of political strongmen such as Nouri al-Maliki does not bode well for the country. If the trend is not reversed, it is likely that corruption will metastasize, militias will further proliferate, foreign investment will stagnate, Iran will gain more influence, and Baghdad's record of anemic service provision will persist. In short, the outlook for a democratic Iraq will be bleak.

The United States has an abiding interest in Iraq's success. A strong, democratic Iraq that is responsive to its electorate will be a better neighbor to Jordan and the Gulf countries and enhance regional stability. Conversely, if Baghdad is controlled by hereditary party bosses more interested in staying in power than representing the will of Iraqi citizens, then policy decisions will reflect narrow and parochial concerns, precipitating domestic ferment and inviting foreign meddling.

To be sure, it will be difficult for Washington to curb this problematic development in Iraqi politics. In its future diplomatic representations to Baghdad and Erbil, the Biden administration can and should continue to emphasize the importance of good governance—even if, to date, this tack has not worked. A more robust approach could involve less engagement with these strongmen and even, when warranted, their designation under Global Magnitsky Act or International Emergency Economic Powers Act sanctions for corruption, human rights abuses, or contribution to the breakdown of the rule of law. Washington could likewise condition the $240 million per year in U.S. salary payments to the Peshmerga on the force's unification and depoliticization. Successive U.S. administrations have discussed conditionality as a tool to incentivize this reform, but they have balked on implementation.

While these economic and engagement measures would better reflect U.S. policy objectives in Iraq, they are not without risk. Less U.S. funding for the Peshmerga, for example, could increase the threat of an IS resurgence. Less engagement with certain problematic but key power brokers could hamstring U.S. diplomats. In the end, this kind of approach could also drive the KRG and Baghdad further into the arms of Tehran, which has no concern for good governance or the success of Iraq. The policy options for Washington are less than optimal. Still, absent an effective U.S. policy to counter the trend of family/strongman politics, the risks for Baghdad and Washington could be consequential.

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