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The Politics of Iraq

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Introduction

Iraq occupies a pivotal position in the Middle East, not only geographically but also politically and culturally. Its history is marked by ancient civilizations, conquests, and periods of both unity and division. In recent decades, the trajectory of Iraqi politics has shaped, and been shaped by, waves of conflict, social upheaval, and intense external intervention. The aftermath of the 2003 US-led invasion, which ended decades of Ba'athist rule under Saddam Hussein, opened a transformative but tumultuous chapter. Iraq has since set out on the difficult path of establishing a representative, democratic, and federal system—one anchored in a new constitution, yet continually tested by internal and external challenges.

The political system that emerged after 2003 is a complex tapestry of federal structures, power-sharing arrangements, and tenuous compromises among Iraq's numerous ethnic, sectarian, and ideological communities. The 2005 constitution enshrined the principles of federalism and parliamentary democracy, granting wide-ranging rights and an ambitious vision for national governance. However, the practical realities of politics in Iraq often diverge sharply from these ideals. Deep-rooted sectarian and regional divisions, combined with the legacy of violent conflict and Washington's continued influence, have meant that true democratic consolidation remains a work in progress.

A defining feature of modern Iraqi politics has been the Muhasasa system: an informal, yet powerful, arrangement that allocates political power, key offices, and government resources among the country's major ethno-sectarian groups. While intended to ensure representation and prevent domination by any single bloc, Muhasasa has become heavily criticized for institutionalizing division, fostering patronage networks, and contributing to endemic corruption. As new protests, political parties, and civic groups have begun to challenge this status quo, the contours of Iraqi politics are once again shifting.

The dynamics of political power are shaped not only by formal institutions but also by the proliferation of armed groups, many with transnational backing. Powerful Shi'a militias, Kurdish Peshmerga, and local tribal forces have added layers of complexity to governance and security. The unresolved questions regarding the relationship between the federal government in Baghdad and the Kurdistan Regional Government underscore tensions around resource sharing, autonomy, and identity.

External actors—chief among them Iran and the United States—continue to play outsized roles in Iraq's political process. Their competing interests intersect with those of Iraq's diverse population, influencing everything from policy formation and security

to economic prospects and regional alliances. At the same time, the Iraqi people themselves, weary of violence and hardship, are increasingly pushing for accountable, transparent, and effective governance.

This book seeks to provide a comprehensive guide to Iraq's politics and political system. From the foundational historical currents to the present-day complexities of electoral competition, militia activity, and international diplomacy, each chapter aims to illuminate the realities and possibilities of political life in Iraq. By exploring the structures, actors, and forces that shape Iraq, the book offers readers an accessible yet rigorous understanding of a nation at a critical crossroads—one whose political future will ripple far beyond its borders.

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CHAPTER ONE: The Long Shadow of History

Iraq, a land often referred to as the "cradle of civilization," boasts a history stretching back millennia, to the earliest human settlements in Mesopotamia. This deep past, rich with empires, innovations, and cultural exchange, casts a long shadow over its modern political landscape. While the focus of this book is on the post-2003 era, understanding the political currents that shaped Iraq for centuries is crucial to grasping the complexities of today. From ancient city-states to vast empires, the region between the Tigris and Euphrates rivers has always been a nexus of power and influence, a place where diverse peoples and competing interests converged.

Before the modern state of Iraq came into being, the region was a collection of provinces within larger empires. For centuries, it was a contested territory between powerful neighbors, notably the Safavid Empire in Persia (modern-day Iran) and the Ottoman Empire, which eventually came to dominate the area. This extended period under Ottoman rule, from the 16th century until the end of World War I, profoundly shaped Iraq's social and political fabric. The Ottomans divided the territory into three provinces or *vilayets*: Mosul in the north, Baghdad in the center, and Basra in the south. These divisions, though administrative, reflected existing demographic and geographic distinctions that would continue to play a role in Iraqi politics.

Under Ottoman administration, a system of governance evolved that often saw a mix of direct rule from Istanbul and a degree of autonomy granted to local leaders, particularly tribal sheikhs in rural areas. This created a complex web of allegiances and power structures that sometimes challenged central authority. While the Ottomans introduced some reforms, particularly in the later period, their rule was also characterized by periods of instability and conflict, often exacerbated by their rivalry with the Safavids, which intensified the Sunni-Shi'a divide within the population. The Sunnis, generally favored by the predominantly Sunni Ottomans, gained administrative experience, while the Shi'a population, particularly in the south, often remained marginalized from the political process. This historical disparity in political inclusion would have lasting consequences.

The end of World War I brought the collapse of the Ottoman Empire and a new era for the territories that would become Iraq. British forces had occupied the three provinces during the war, and their victory led to a reshaping of the Middle East. At the San Remo Conference in 1920, the League of Nations granted Great Britain a mandate over Mesopotamia, tasking them with preparing the region for self-governance. This decision, however, was met with significant resistance from Iraqis who had hoped for immediate independence. The Great Iraqi Revolution of 1920, a widespread armed revolt, demonstrated the strong desire for sovereignty and challenged British control.

In response to the uprising and the costs of maintaining direct control, the British opted for a policy of indirect rule. They decided to establish a monarchy and, in 1921, installed Faisal I, a leader of the Arab Revolt and a member of the Hashemite family from the Arabian Peninsula, as King of Iraq. This was a pivotal moment, marking the birth of the modern Iraqi state as a unified political entity encompassing the former Ottoman vilayets of Mosul, Baghdad, and Basra. The new kingdom was established under a treaty with Britain, which, while formally recognizing Iraq's sovereignty, retained considerable influence and control, including military bases.

The period of the monarchy, from 1921 to 1958, was a time of nascent state-building and evolving political dynamics. A parliament was established, and political parties began to emerge, though many were initially based on alliances among the existing elites, including landlords and those with nationalist leanings. The political system was, in many ways, an attempt to navigate the complex social landscape, which included a Shi'a Arab majority, a significant Sunni Arab population, and a distinct Kurdish population in the north. The British, in their efforts to establish stability, were seen by some as favoring a Sunni-Kurdish alliance in the early political structure, potentially sidelining the Shi'a majority who had less experience in the Ottoman administration. King Faisal I, however, reportedly sought to engage with the Shi'a population to build support for the new state.

Despite achieving formal independence in 1932 and joining the League of Nations, British influence remained a significant factor throughout the monarchical era. Iraqi nationalists often viewed the treaties with Britain as an impediment to true sovereignty. This period also saw the increasing involvement of the military in politics, setting a precedent that would have profound consequences in the decades to come. Coups and attempted coups became a recurring feature, reflecting underlying political instability and power struggles. The monarchy, particularly in its later years under King Faisal II, faced growing discontent due to perceived disconnect between the ruling elite's policies and the aspirations of the populace, coupled with continued British influence.

The monarchy was dramatically overthrown in a military coup on July 14, 1958. This event, led by a group of nationalist officers known as the Free Officers, was a brutal and decisive break from the past, resulting in the death of the King and other members of the royal family. The 1958 revolution ended the Hashemite monarchy and ushered in the era of the Republic of Iraq. This period was marked by a shift towards more populist and ideological politics, a departure from the more elite-driven politics of the monarchy. The army moved to the center stage of Iraqi politics, becoming a key player and often intervening in the political process.

The republican era, particularly in its early years, was characterized by significant political instability and a series of coups and counter-coups. Ideologically driven

parties, such as the Ba'ath Party and the Iraqi Communist Party, gained prominence, leading to intense political competition and at times, violent confrontations. The Ba'ath Party, advocating for Arab socialism and pan-Arab unity, steadily increased its influence. After a brief stint in power in 1963, the Ba'ath Party, under the leadership of figures like Ahmed Hassan al-Bakr and later Saddam Hussein, seized power again in a bloodless coup in 1968, establishing a one-party state that would rule Iraq for over three decades. This marked the beginning of a highly centralized and authoritarian regime, fundamentally reshaping the relationship between the state and society in Iraq.

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