Taking Democracy Seriously in Iraq

Eric Davis
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Introduction

What does it mean to take democracy seriously in Iraq? Answering this question is important not just for Iraq’s future, but for the entire Arab world, which is said to suffer a “democracy deficit.” Possessing a rich civilizational heritage, a highly educated populace, ample water resources, and one of the world’s largest reserves of oil and natural gas, Iraq is a potential leader of the Arab world, if not the entire Middle East. A democratic and stable Iraq could harness tremendous economic energy and provide a model of multi-ethnic tolerance for the countries of the region. Consequently, how we study and understand the democratization process in Iraq is one of the central problems in the study of contemporary Middle East politics.

Likewise, the study of Iraq has significant implications for existing theories of democratic transitions, especially in non-Western countries. In the post-1990 euphoria that followed communism’s collapse, the fall of military dictatorships, and the United States’ new status as a global superpower, expectations were high that the world was about to experience a massive transition toward democracy, increased personal freedoms, and market economies. Unfortunately, this “end of history” perspective was conceptually flawed. Many efforts at democratization in non-Western countries have stalled and resulted in illiberal, quasi-authoritarian rule, markets distortions by corrupt regimes, and the curtailing of personal freedoms.

Political, social, and economic developments in Iraq since 2003 have important implications for U.S. foreign policy and America’s broader role in the world. After the military success of “shock and awe” and the toppling of Saddam Husayn’s Ba‘thist regime, President George W. Bush famously declared “mission accomplished” aboard the U.S.S. Abraham Lincoln in the Persian Gulf on May 2, 2003. The Iraqi insurgency that developed in the summer and fall of 2003 led to the rude awakening that the mission was not, in fact, accomplished. Iraqis did not trust Bush administration promises to bring democracy to their country, perhaps remembering similar promises made by General Stanley Maude after British forces entered Baghdad in March 1917. Only when the top-down — and, many would argue, arrogant — Bush administration policy in Iraq was reversed, at the urging of General David Petraeus and Ambassador Ryan Crocker in 2006, did Iraq begin to move toward ending the vicious conflict that had begun in 2003. Whether we are concerned with Iraq’s political development, how democracy can be established and institutionalized in former authoritarian states, or how to develop a more effective foreign policy, there are many lessons to be learned from Iraq.

In the Arab world, democratization has proceeded at a glacial pace. An exception to this pattern is Iraq, which, despite having faced considerable violence — some would say a civil war — began the process of a democratic transition following the toppling of Saddam Husayn’s Ba‘thist regime in April 2003. To ascertain whether Iraq will be able to implement a democratic
transition, and to study the processes associated with it, requires a proper normative, analytic, and policy framework. What normative, analytic, and policy frameworks do we need to take democracy seriously in Iraq?

To answer this question requires addressing five core issues. First, are the prevailing conceptual frameworks that have been used to interpret Iraqi politics and society sound? Second, when we speak of Iraqi democracy, how do we define the term? Third, can democracy be externally imposed on non-Western societies through a “one size fits all” model? Fourth, can democracy develop in the context of a weak or deteriorating political economy? Fifth, can the success (or failure) of democratization be understood solely within the boundaries of a nation-state, or do we need to place more emphasis on the impact of exogenous variables, particularly “neighborhood effects”?

How then do we conceptualize and explain efforts at democratization within this complex configuration of contending democratic and authoritarian tendencies? What can we learn from a case study of Iraq about theories of democratic transitions?

Before addressing these conceptual and empirical questions, let us consider the following. What if Iraq, a country with abundant resources in the form of oil, natural gas, agriculture, and human resources, were able to establish a functioning democracy? What if a system of free and fair elections and constitutionally informed governance produced widespread prosperity and political stability? What if this were not a utopian dream but an eventuality within the realm of the possible? And what if existing theories of democratic transitions proved to be weak in explaining Iraq’s political dynamics since it began the process of a democratic transition following the ousting of Saddam Husayn’s regime in 2003, especially in ignoring important conceptual issues and failing to take seriously forces that were encouraging democratic change?

Despite thirty-five years of brutal dictatorship under Saddam Husayn, and inept and destructive U.S. policies following his ouster in 2003, Iraq made significant strides toward a democratic transition between 2005 and 2010. National and provincial elections were characterized by a large number of candidates and party lists, high voter turnout, minimal violence, and an assessment — domestic and international — that they were free and fair. A new constitution was written and ratified, and a parliamentary structure put in place. Numerous public opinion polls showed strong support for democracy.¹

Following the 2010 national parliamentary elections, Iraq’s initial efforts at a democratic transition began to unravel as Prime Minister Nuri Kamal al-Maliki manipulated the constitution — with Iranian support and U.S. acquiescence — to remain in power for a second four-year term. Contradicting the democratic reforms he had promised before the election, al-Maliki

¹ In November 2010, a Rosner, Greenberg, and Quinlan poll showed rates of 64 percent to 70 percent when respondents were asked, “Do you think democracy will improve the delivery of social services and improve the quality of life in Iraq?” That the understanding of democracy is intimately linked to a notion of social justice is clear from the phrasing of the question.
instead sought to build a new authoritarian regime. Nevertheless, there was significant pushback against these efforts from opposition members of Iraq’s political elite, the Parliament, and a wide variety of civil society organizations. At the same time, sectarian strife reemerged after the 2010 elections, largely in response to al-Maliki’s policies, which sought to marginalize the Arab Sunni and Kurdish populations.

Then, in a lightning attack on June 9, 2014, the so-called Islamic State of Iraq and Greater Syria (ISIS) attacked Mosul, Iraq’s second-largest city, and seized large swaths of northern Iraq. The attack took the government and Prime Minister al-Maliki completely by surprise. Despite $25 billion spent by the United States and Iraq to train a new army, its units failed to confront ISIS forces and fled Mosul in disarray, leaving the city defenseless against the terrorist attack. What was particularly shocking was that between 800 and 1,000 ISIS fighters were able to defeat two divisions of the Iraqi army and capture large amounts of sophisticated U.S. weaponry.

The capture of large areas of the country by a radical extremist group has turned Iraqi politics on its head. It raises an important question about the dynamics that led Iraq to seriously deviate after 2010 from its trajectory toward democratization, and even face the possibility of partition into three separate “statelets.” At the most immediate level, why were more than 30,000 well-armed troops with modern weaponry and heavy armor unable to fend off the ISIS attack? Who gave the orders for army units to leave their posts and withdraw from Mosul? Why did the Iraqi Army’s general command perform so poorly?

At a much broader level, the army’s collapse constitutes one in a series of “critical junctures” in Iraq’s post-2003 political development. As such, it provides an opportunity to focus on the larger process of governance in Iraq. The events leading up to the Iraqi military’s defeat in Mosul serve as a metaphor for all that is wrong in post-Ba’thist Iraq and a counterpoint to the efforts to develop a democratic nation-state.

Two central questions emerge from the ISIS crisis. Will Iraq remain a unitary state? Is there still any possibility for Iraq to make progress toward democracy, or was the idea of a democratic transition after 2003 always a chimera? The tentative formation of a national unity government on September 8, 2014, by Prime Minister Haydar al-Abadi, suggests that the crisis created by ISIS’s seizure of Mosul may lead to important changes in the Iraqi political system.

Iraq highlights the tension between the idea of the country as a site of violence and civil war, juxtaposed to the idea of Iraq as one of the few nation-states in the Arab world struggling to establish democratic governance. After all, it is one of the few countries in the region where

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2 Maliki had been informed that ISIS fighters were mobilizing in pickup trucks outside Mosul at least a week before the attack, but dismissed the threat and did not call in reinforcements.

3 “[Al-Abadi’s ministry gains a vote of confidence with 24 cabinet portfolios in a heated session]” (al-Mada, September 8, 2014), http://goo.gl/QaD8jt.
electoral outcomes were not known prior to parliamentary elections, and one of the few that has experienced a peaceful transfer of authority following a national election, namely in 2014.

To answer the questions posed thus far, we first need to clearly define the concept of democracy. While many Westerners may think that the definition is self-evident, the term democracy has assumed a meaning in the minds of Iraqis that differs from that held by many Westerners. For Iraqis who raised the banner of democracy in the early part of the twentieth century in the context of nationalist opposition to the Hashimite monarchy and its British overlords, it was largely understood to mean “social democracy.”

As understood here, a theory of democratic transitions must encompass three essential components. First, a democracy must be structured according to constitutionally defined rules of the game. These rules include free, fair, and periodic elections, unrestricted political participation, accountable governance, transparency in decision-making, and protection of minority rights.

Second, a theory of democratic transition must include the concept of social justice. Following World War II, some of the most influential early studies of democratization in the West were based on the idea of “social requisites of democracy.” Recently, this concern has reemerged as theorists have increasingly examined the relationship between inequality, income distribution, and the sustainability of democracy. Although this relationship is still empirically contested, it is increasingly clear that political instability and authoritarian rule are associated with income inequality and lack of economic opportunity. Expanded opportunity and a sense that a society is based on norms of equal opportunity, as opposed to nepotism and corruption, tends to strengthen a polity’s legitimacy — namely, citizens’ identity with those who govern them.

Third, a democratic transition must be based in a shared national identity built around a political culture of tolerance, pluralism, and negotiated, rather than violent, solutions to contested political issues. Only this type of political culture can create the feelings of trust among citizens that are necessary to offset the negative legacies of authoritarian rule and contribute to establishing a strong sense of national identity.

Put differently, in the majority wing of the Iraqi nationalist movement that developed in the wake of World War I and the British occupation of Iraq, many, if not most, Iraqis argued that democracy in the Iraqi context could be successful only if it were tied to the provision of social

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services to the populace at large. Seen in the context of this legacy, it is understandable why the notion of the “night watchman state,” which the Bush administration envisioned for Iraq after the U.S. invasion of 2003, was roundly rejected by the vast majority of Iraqis who supported a transition to democracy. The so-called neo-conservative model of Iraqi political institutions, which the United States sought to impose, was alien to Iraq’s political traditions. There had never been an Iraqi government run by apolitical technocrats or one that was committed to remaining largely detached from the nation’s social problems and regional affairs.

Under the Hashimite monarchy (1921 to 1958), the mantra of the majority wing of the nationalist movement was always the need to take the “social question” (*al-qadiya al-ijtima‘iya*) seriously. In other words, democracy could only be successful if it provided the educated middle classes and the less fortunate with social services, ranging from employment to subsidized food. Following the July 1958 Revolution that overthrew the Hashimites, the state became the provider of a wide variety of such services, including education, public housing, agrarian reform, health care, and mandated higher wages. In the 1970s, the provision of extensive social services expanded dramatically under the second Ba‘thist regime (1968 to 2003) as oil prices increased twentyfold between 1972 and 1980. Increasingly, it became a given that the state would provide extensive employment opportunities and social services to the populace at large. In post-2003 Iraq, the term “employment” (*al-wathifa*) has taken on the meaning of government employment.

Having defined the core concepts of a theory of democratic transitions, we need to construct an appropriate conceptual framework. Of particular concern is the delineation of causality, particularly those elements that trigger the democratization process. The factors that enervate a democratic transition can be fortuitous and idiosyncratic. The Arab uprisings, which were sparked in late 2010 by the self-immolation of Tunisian youth Muhammad Bouazizi and subsequently led to the removal of Arab autocrats in Tunisia, Egypt, Libya, and Yemen, are a good case in point. In other instances, the main causal factor can be a combination of the fragmentation of authoritarian political elites, as occurred in the Soviet Union and its Eastern Bloc satellite states prior to the collapse of communism, coupled with the emergence of widespread social and political discontent, such as the Solidarity Movement in Poland. The death of a dictator can be the spark that ruptures authoritarian rule, such as that of Spain’s Francisco Franco in November 1975. In the case of Iraq, war was the causal agent that ended the Ba‘thist regime.

As we shall see, the U.S. invasion of Iraq played a significant role in establishing the necessary but not the sufficient conditions for a democratic transition. A series of decisions by the Bush administration following Saddam Husayn’s ouster, especially during the first three years of the

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8 Note the phrasing of the 2010 public opinion survey cited above: “Making Iraq more democratic will likely improve services and our quality of life,” as opposed to, “Making Iraq more democratic will hurt services and make our quality of life worse.” 61.

9 Davis, *Memories of State*.

10 An example of the concern with social justice is the Diyafat al-‘Ataba al-Sharifa in the Shi‘i shrine city of al-Najaf, which feeds, *gratis*, more than 3,000 residents of the city each day. I had the pleasure of eating lunch there in February 2014, during a conference on inter-religious dialogue at the University of Kufa.
American occupation, created serious impediments to a democratic transition. How we integrate the idiosyncratic factors that initiate the democratization process into a broader theory of democratic transitions is a key concern of this essay.

What these initial considerations suggest is the problematic nature of any theory of democratic transitions that purports to be “general” in nature, meaning applicable to all cases across space and time. This position does not argue against theory-building. Rather, it is an expression of a deep skepticism about conceptual frameworks and theoretical approaches that fail to contextualize their knowledge claims in concrete empirical examples of democratic transitions.

We need to begin by differentiating among (at least) three phases of the process of democratization. First, there is the collapse of authoritarian rule, either through case-specific (idiosyncratic) causes or in response to anti-authoritarian sociopolitical movements in different regional-cultural contexts that may or may not resemble one another in ideological content and in their social bases. Second, there is the period of actual transition. This period is the focus of this essay. Finally, there is the consolidation of democracy (realizing that even in a consolidated democracy, there is always contestation that may, under certain circumstances, lead to a return to authoritarian rule, such as occurred following the collapse of Weimar Germany in 1933).

Democracy certainly has universal qualities. It must entail free and fair elections, representative and accountable governance, transparency in decision-making, the rule of law, and concern for minority and human rights. However, I also stress the notion of “local democracy,” which requires us to be sensitive to the manner in which citizens of individual countries or regions conceive of democracy and the manner in which it reflects their specific cultural norms and heritage.

Even assuming that most Iraqis who support democracy think of it as social democracy, on what basis should we assume that Iraq can make progress toward democratization? What type of conceptual framework can help us best assess Iraq’s prospects for democracy? First and foremost, any framework must take history seriously. This means situating all efforts at a democratic transition within a socio-historical context and periodizing that process as it evolves over time. In Iraq, “taking history seriously” requires conceptual sensitivity to the tension between authoritarian and democratic legacies, because this tension plays a critical role in our ability to predict whether a nation-state can successfully transition to democracy.

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11 One can think, for example, of the difference between the movements to overthrow communist rule in Eastern Europe between 1989 and 1991 and the Arab Spring that began in late 2010 and has — except in Tunisia, where it began — collapsed at the time of this writing.


13 The inclusion of a large number of concepts and variables in the study of democratic transitions might seem to some analysts to transgress the methodological axiom of parsimony. However, as Michael Coppedge comments in Democratization and Research Methods (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2008), “parsimony is often misunderstood. It is not a rule that we should always prefer the simpler of two theories; properly understood, it is a rule that if two theories explain a phenomenon equally well, then we should prefer the simpler one. In my experience, simplifications almost always sacrifice some accuracy. I see no reason to prefer a simple but less accurate theory over a complex but more accurate one.”
Many analysts have focused on the negative legacy of Saddam Husayn’s regime as the main impediment to Iraq’s efforts at democratization. However, Saddam’s legacy is not the only one that existed before 2003. Between the early nineteenth century and the late 1960s, there were democratic impulses, civil society building, a powerful press, a highly literate intelligentsia, and many professional associations. Unfortunately, the linear and one-dimensional models that characterize many studies of democratic transitions, such as those that focus on socioeconomic (pre)requisites or political cultural variables, fail to capture this temporal variation and complexity. They tell us little about process and change and exclude many other important causal variables. In avoiding the development of a structured, comparative historical conceptual framework and methodology, they fail to engage the tensions between authoritarian legacies and efforts at democratization, or the competition between authoritarian and democratic historical memories that themselves have a powerful impact on the democratization process.

The idea that democracy was alien to Iraq prior to the U.S. invasion of 2003 is historically inaccurate. Iraq enjoyed a form of parliamentary government between 1925 and 1958. While elections in rural areas were manipulated by tribal shaykhs and large landowners, there were a substantial number of electoral districts in urban centers such as Baghdad, Basra, and Mosul in which the electoral process was fair and transparent. Between 1958 and 1980, Iraq lacked a Parliament. Yet even Saddam Husayn felt the need to bolster his legitimacy by creating a new Parliament in the spring of 1980. Thus, the notion of voting on a national scale, even if in a context of state control of the process, was not unknown to (older) Iraqis.

Having argued that the understanding of democracy in Iraq assumes a specific form and that Iraqis experienced forms of democratic practices before 2003, what other elements of our conceptual framework need to be brought to bear when situating the possibility of a democratic transition within a historical context?

A decisive historical factor is the extent to which the citizens of a nation-state share a common identity. In a seminal essay, Dankwart Rustow argued that the sole prerequisite for a transition to democracy was a shared sense of national identity. Unless a significant majority of citizens shares similar social and political norms and aspirations, it is extremely difficult, if not impossible, to create a stable political order. Indeed, once a shared national identity is fractured, civil war or the breakup of the nation-state is invariably the outcome, such as in Czechoslovakia, Pakistan, and Sudan. Anthony Smith argues that a common sense of national identity requires

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14 There is a major conceptual and causal difference between genetic or exogenous and functional or endogenous explanations of the impact of socioeconomic variables. Lipset is quite clear that he is explaining not how democracies come into being, but what sustains democratic governance.

15 For an excellent elaboration of the issues related to comparative historical analysis, see James Mahoney and Dietrich Rueschemeyer, Comparative Historical Analysis in the Social Science (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003).


17 I was in Baghdad in June 1980 when the elections were held. The only two categories of candidates were Ba’th Party members and “independents,” some of whom I was told were, in fact, respected professionals. The day of the elections, Saddam Husayn appeared on evening television visiting houses in poor neighborhoods to make sure that elderly women in particular had voted.

five components: a historic territory or homeland, common myths and historical memories, a common mass public culture, common legal rights and duties for all citizens, and a common economy with territorial mobility for all citizens.  

Another critical dimension that emerges from a diachronic, genetic, and exogenous approach to the study of democratic transitions is the need for a political culture that embodies norms of tolerance, cultural and political pluralism, negotiation rather than violence as a means of settling political disputes, and a view of politics as a cooperative rather than a zero-sum game. In addition to a shared sense of national identity and a political culture based on negotiations, a third component required for a successful democratic transition is effective political institutions, those that provide not just good governance but social services as well. This conceptual triumvirate of national identity, political culture, and political institutions creates the necessary building blocks for a transition to democracy, as well as its ultimate consolidation. Together they form what Robert Dahl has referred to as the *logic of equality*.  

This conceptual triad facilitates the delineation of a key set of variables that allow us to measure the progress of democratization — or lack thereof. Beginning with political institutions, we can measure the extent to which elections, representative bodies, the executive branch, and the judiciary function in ways that are commensurate with democratic governance and the rule of law. If institutions function in an accountable, transparent, and efficient manner, then they engender legitimacy and confidence and, in turn, promote trust in their viability and predictability.  

Effective institutions help support the development of a democratic political culture. If citizens can obtain the services they need from political institutions, and these institutions function according to a set of legal norms, then a sense of fairness and predictability comes to characterize a society’s view of politics. Consequently, there is little incentive for citizens to resort to violence. Instead, a culture of negotiation and compromise is encouraged.  

If we combine effective institutions and a democratic political culture, then one important outcome is to promote a strong sense of national identity and the sense of political community that accompanies that identity. Hence, we see that any theory of democratic transitions must combine historical, structural, and agentic variables. How then do we measure the variables that can be derived from these three core concepts — identity, political culture, and institutions?  

We can begin by posing the following questions: Are elections free and fair? Are the rules governing them clear, and are they followed by those who contest political offices? Is political participation open to citizens who are eligible to vote? Do political leaders who hold office accept losses at the ballot box? Are women marginalized in the political process?

When considering these variables in the Iraqi case, the historical record is mixed. Many Iraqis would argue that the country’s national identity has been and remains highly contested. Others disagree, arguing that Iraq’s main problem is less one of a national identity manqué than a dysfunctional and corrupt political elite that has used its power to promote sectarian identities as part of a “divide and conquer” strategy toward personal and particularistic ends. Which of these narratives proffers a more cogent argument?

Those who argue for a strong sense of Iraqi national identity point to ancient Mesopotamia. Iraq encompasses the world’s oldest civilization, which began at the confluence of the Tigris and Euphrates rivers (the Shatt al-Arab) and created the fabled Garden of Eden, perhaps as early as 20,000 BCE. Whether based in myth or not, Iraqis of all ethnoconfessional groups share great pride in their country’s many contributions to world civilization. One of the most enduring is the world’s first legal code, promulgated by Babylonian King Hammurabi in 1742 BCE, which still comprises part of most modern nation-states’ legal systems today.

The symbolic power of Iraq’s ancient civilizations is apparent to anyone who passes through Liberation Square (Sahat al-Tahrir) in central Baghdad, as well as many other areas of the country. Dominating the square is the impressive Freedom Monument (Nusub al-Hurriya), which was completed in 1961 by the famous Iraqi architect, sculptor, and painter Jawad Salim. The monument depicts 3,000 years of Iraqi history, especially the contributions of the peasantry and less prominent members of society to Iraq’s development.

The Abbasid Legacy

The civilizational contributions of the Abbasid Empire (750 to 1258 CE) are another source of great pride for Iraqis. Among its many accomplishments are the development of algebra (al-jabr), astronomers who discovered and named countless stars, mathematicians who built rudimentary computers, and scholars who preserved many texts of classic Greek authors. During the reign of Caliph al-Ma’mun (813 to 833 CE), the House of Wisdom (Dar al-Hikma), a library-university complex, was constructed. Specialists working in the Dar al-Hikma translated many European manuscripts into Arabic before those manuscripts perished during Europe’s so-called Dark Ages. Later, during the Italian Renaissance, these texts were translated from Arabic to Latin, making them available once again to Europe and the West. The Dar al-Hikma can be seen as a model of ecumenical culture that inspires Iraqis to this day.

24 One of the largest research centers in Baghdad is named Dar al-Hikma.
Nevertheless, the Abbasid Empire’s ignominious collapse at the hands of the Mongol armies under Genghis Khan’s grandson Hulagu in 1258 CE spawned a conspiracy theory that continues to fracture Iraqi national identity to this day. Although there is no supporting historical evidence, an argument developed that the Abbasid collapse, which led to the massive destruction of Iraq’s cities, towns, villages, and agricultural system, was facilitated by the descendants of the Persian Sassanian Empire, which had been defeated by Arab-Islamic forces at al-Qadisiya in southwestern Iraq in 637 CE. In this view, those Persian bureaucrats, who had remained in the new Abbasid Empire and served as its clerical class after the Sassanian defeat, were said never to have lost their hostility to their new Arab overlords.25

Known as the “al-Shu’ubiya” controversy, this argument posits that the Abbasid Empire’s fall was not due to Arab military weakness. Rather, it was the result of the continued efforts of the Persians bureaucrats, who formed a “fifth column” and worked to weaken the empire to such a degree that the Mongols were able to bring about its military defeat. With the term shu’ub, or “peoples,” the Persians were characterized by sectarian elements as appearing to be Arab on the exterior, but really still culturally and politically loyal to their Persian roots and hostile to the empire’s Arab rulers. The dispute had — and continues to have — a link to the cleavage between Sunni and Shi‘i Arabs in Iraq. This became especially true after the Safavid Empire forced Persians to convert to Shi‘ism in the early sixteenth century. In other words, over time, Shi‘ism in Iraq became identified, among some Sunni Arabs, with loyalty to Persia (Iran).

In the modern period, the al-Shu’ubiya controversy became intertwined with the struggle for political power following the June to October 1920 Revolution against the British. As Sunni Pan-Arabists subsequently tried to appropriate the political imagery of post-independence Iraq and dominate the new nation-state’s political narrative, in part through politicizing the education system, the Shi‘a — the country’s majority — were increasingly marginalized and associated with loyalty to neighboring Persia (known as Iran after 1935), rather than to Iraq.

The pride Iraqis express in their Mesopotamian heritage and the continued resonance of the al-Shu’ubiya controversy demonstrate the need to account, conceptually, for the impact of historical memory. Largely neglected in the study of democratic transitions, historical memory can serve to promote national unity through linking citizens to a set of powerful foundational myths, or fragment a society by fostering historically based sociopolitical cleavages that can promote a culture of victimization, mistrust, and hostility. As we shall see, lack of trust among Iraq’s ethnoconfessional groups has fostered a political culture of conspiracy theories and victimization that has undermined the democratization process.

25 Roy Mottahedeh, “The Shu‘ubiyyah Controversy and the Social History of Early Islamic Iran,” International Journal of Middle Eastern Studies 7 (1976): 161–182. The absurdity of this historical claim is that the Persians did not convert to Shi‘ism until forced to do so by the Safavid Dynasty in the early decades of the sixteenth century. Further, the many centuries that had passed from the Arab-Islamic conquest of Iraq in 637 CE until the thirteenth century, when the Abbasid Empire finally collapsed, had attenuated the social, cultural, and political affinities of those of Persian heritage who had remained in Iraq after the conquest to Persia.
Modern Currents of National Identity

Nevertheless, a sense of Iraqi national identity began to develop in the late nineteenth century, stimulated by European encroachment on the Ottoman Empire’s remaining provinces, including Iraq. This sense of a modern national identity, which began to be shaped by Iraq’s integration into the world market beginning in the mid-nineteenth century, accelerated following the discovery of oil in the 1920s. The integration process forced Iraqis to confront the inexorable increase in foreign, especially British, control over the Iraqi economy and its increasing dependence on Great Britain as a trading partner. In mid-1800s, British steamers began to ply the Tigris River in southern Iraq in search of agricultural goods such as dates, jute, and barley. By 1900, Britain was Iraq’s major foreign trading partner. This rising economic influence provided commercial benefits, but also worried many Iraqis.

Iraq’s sense of a separate national identity was further shaped and strengthened by the so-called Young Turk Revolt of 1908. Organized by the Committee on Union and Progress, it disrupted the traditional Ottoman millet model in which ethnoconfessional groups were largely allowed self-rule in exchange for political deference and the payment of state-mandated taxes to the central Ottoman authority. The Committee on Union and Progress’ efforts to “Turkify” the Ottoman Empire, in the hope of creating the sociocultural coherence from which they believed modern European states derived their strength, forced Iraqis to confront a new form of identity politics. In political terms, Iraqis, obviously unwilling to subordinate their indigenous culture to a Turkish one, increasingly came to see themselves as Arabs or Kurds, rather than Ottoman subjects. The British invasion in 1914 and the subsequent defection of many Iraqi officers from the Ottoman army to join Sharif Husayn’s Arab Revolt (1916 to 1918) further contributed to an Iraqi sense of national identity by sharpening the political cleavage between Arabs and the Ottoman Turks.

At the same time, a major uprising, which began in June 1920 and lasted until the British suppressed it in October of that year, provided a strong base for a shared national identity. To counter the British colonial policy of “divide and conquer,” Shi’a and Sunnis celebrated each group’s respective rituals and festivals and prayed in each other’s mosques. Muslims — Shi’a and Sunni — encouraged Baghdad’s large Jewish and Christian populations to join the revolt because they were also full Iraqi citizens.26

During the twentieth century, Iraqis organized a powerful nationalist movement to challenge British control over their government and economy. Iraqis resented the British creation of the Hashimite monarchy through a rigged referendum in August 1921. This nationalist movement served to create a strong sense of Iraqi identity that, in its majority wing, dismissed the significance of ethnicity and confessionalism as socially and culturally divisive, and as part of colonialist efforts to divide and conquer the nation-state.

26 Davis, Memories of State, 47.
Following the 1958 Revolution, Iraq’s identity politics entered a period of serious contestation and the question of Iraq’s contested national identity surfaced once again. Pan-Arabists fought to have Iraq join the newly established United Arab Republic, which had been created by Egypt and Syria in early 1958. Local — or what I have called Iraqist — nationalists sought to build a new republican political system that recognized Iraq’s multi-ethnic and multi-confessional character. They were hostile to Pan-Arabism, which they identified with sectarian elements among Iraq’s Sunni Arab minority. Although Pan-Arabism temporarily won the battle with the consolidation of the second Ba‘thist regime of Saddam Husayn and the Takriti Ba‘th after 1968, the ideology ultimately was thoroughly delegitimized by two disastrous and unnecessary wars, the Iran-Iraq War of 1980 to 1988 and the 1991 Gulf War.

In contemporary Iraq, we can identify three dominant strands of national identity. One is the idea of Iraq as a multicultural, multi-confessional, and multi-linguistic society in which citizens pride themselves on their tolerance, as manifested by their ability to live together as Iraqis. This model includes not only Arabs but also Kurds, Turkmens, and a variety of minority confessions such as Christians and Yazidis. It represents a continuation of the tradition of the Iraqi national movement’s majority trend — until it was suppressed by the first Ba‘thist regime that came to power in February 1963 and was overthrown by the military in November of the same year. This model has been severely tested since the U.S. invasion of 2003, particularly as sectarian violence consumed much of the country between 2003 and 2008.

A second ideological strand is a truncated form of traditional Pan-Arabism. Although this articulation of Arabism no longer advocates the fiction of a unified Arab state and the return to an Arab “Golden Age” during the era of the Arab-Islamic empires (632 to 1258 CE), it continues to postulate the superiority of Sunni Islam as the most “authentic” (asil) manifestation of Arab culture and society. This form of identity politics is especially problematic for Shi‘i Arabs (and Kurds, Christians, and other minorities), in Iraq and elsewhere, who are considered less than Arab, that is, “non-asil.”

Arabism has raised its ugly head in the recent atrocities committed by the so-called Islamic State against the Shi‘a and non-Muslims in Syria and northern Iraq. What has been particularly disturbing in Iraq is the large numbers of Sunni Arabs, hostile to the actions of the Shi‘i-dominated government in Baghdad under former Prime Minister Nuri al-Maliki, who have supported the Islamic State in its massive violations of human rights.

Sunni Arab sectarianism is hostile to Shi‘ism because it views Iraq’s Shi‘a as loyal to Iran rather than Iraq. In effect, this form of identity not only incorporates values designed to provide cohesion to Iraq’s Sunni Arab community, but does so through creating a hostile Other, the

Shiʿa, who are purportedly not authentically Iraqi but loyal to a foreign state, namely Iran (Persia). Having “stolen” Iraq after Saddam Husayn’s regime was toppled in 2003, the Shiʿa “delivered” the country to Iran’s Islamic Republic. Clearly, this form of sectarianism incorporates overtones of the Shuʿubiya controversy, and is most prominent among tribal groupings, radical Islamists, and ex-Baʿthists in the so-called Sunni Arab Triangle and in and around the northwest city of Mosul, traditionally a hotbed of Sunni Pan-Arabism. However, when asked about the overwhelming Shiʿi composition of Iraq’s army in the Iran-Iraq War and the tenacity with which the army fought Iranian troops, especially on Iraqi soil, Sunni sectarians can provide no answer to the fact that, were it not for Iraq’s Shiʿa, Iraq would have lost the war with Iran.

A third form of national identity represents an implicit (and sometimes not so implicit) form of Shiʿi sectarianism. This identity’s strength and “stability” varies directly in relationship to the discrimination that many Shiʿa experienced under Saddam Husayn’s regime, which gave preferences to Sunni Arabs from tribal backgrounds in positions in the military, security services, state bureaucracy, foreign service, public sector firms, and the higher education establishment. It has also proliferated among those Iraqi Shiʿa who spent considerable time in exile in Iran and Syria (including former Prime Minister Nuri al-Maliki), especially after the suppression of Shiʿi Islamist parties in the 1970s and after the start of the Iran-Iraq War in 1980. Those who adhere to this form of sectarian identity vow never to let control of the state revert to minority Sunni Arab control. It is mildly Islamist and hence conservative on issues of gender and the Westernization of Iraqi culture (and therefore hostile to Iraqi youth who embrace “emo” or other forms of Western culture), and unreceptive to norms of cultural tolerance and pluralism.

A sub-variant of Shiʿi sectarianism can be found in Shiʿi populism, especially among poor and marginalized Shiʿa who support Muqtada al-Sadr and the Sadrist movement (al-Taṣayyar al-Sadri) and Shiʿite militias such as the League of the Righteous People (Asaʿib Ahl al-Haqq) and the Iraqi Hizballah Movement in Iraq (Hizb Allah fi-l-ʾIraq). While the armed wing of the Sadrist movement has engaged in the past in many violent acts against Sunni Muslims, officially the Sadrists are Iraqi nationalists who see Islam as uniting the Shiʿa and Sunna in Iraq. The criticism the Sadrists direct against other Shiʿa groups, such as the Daʿwa (Islamic Call) Party and the Supreme Iraqi Islamic Council (SIIC), is that they represent particularistic rather than Iraqi national interests. In November 2014, members of the Sunni Albu Nimr tribe in al-Anbar Province asked Shiʿi militias to come and protect them from Islamic State forces; the militias responded by sending forces.

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28 On a flight from Arbil to Istanbul in November 2008, a Sunni Arab Iraqi woman who was sitting next to me complained that the “Persians” had stolen “our country.” Unfortunately, this is the view held by many Sunni Arabs, although by just how many is unclear.
There are also sizeable sectors of Iraqi society that do not fit comfortably into the identity models just presented. The Shi‘i clergy who comprise the *al-Hawza al-ilmiya* (literally, “the scientific place of learning”), which consists of more than 100 seminaries located in and around the Shi‘i shrine city of al-Najaf, reject the direct mixing of religion and politics. Consequently, they have acquired the appellation “quietist.” This means, in effect, that clerics do not have the right to participate in politics. Ayatollah al-Sistani issued *fatwas* (religious decrees) in 2004 forbidding clerics from participating in the writing, under American tutelage, of the new Iraqi constitution, or standing for office in Iraq’s Council of Deputies (Parliament).\(^{30}\)

Nevertheless, the term “quietist” is somewhat of a misnomer, since Ayatollah al-Sistani has played a very active, if behind the scenes, role in politics since 2003. He was active in forming the first alliance of Shi‘a political parties in the January and December 2005 elections, and in urging women to vote. He has been constant in criticizing the government for its corruption and failure to provide social services. When Nuri al-Maliki tried to postpone the 2010 parliamentary elections,\(^{30}\) Ayatollah al-Sistani issued a fatwa forbidding the participation of clerics in the writing of the new constitution. Many clerics ignored the second stricture and did indeed become members of the Iraqi Parliament.
elections because he saw that his electoral support was not strong, al-Sistani objected. When he tried to use a “closed list system” so he could win seats given to women according to the 25-percent quota required by the Iraqi Constitution by having subservient women run — relatives of male politicians who supported him — again al-Sistani forced the prime minister to back down. Because the Hawza has worked consistently to prevent Shi‘i-Sunni violence, it has played a key role in combating sectarian identities.31

In this context, “quietism” is better understood as a form of lobbying whereby al-Sistani and the Hawza monitor the political system and make pronouncements through fatwas or the Friday sermon (al-khutba).

Tribes further complicate the model of identity politics in Iraq. Many tribal members adopt a local or regional focus but do not subscribe to Arabism or to Shi‘i sectarian models, because all large Iraqi tribes invariably comprise both Shi‘i and Sunni clans. Indeed, tribal elders frequently argue that the tribe (al-‘ashira) represents the only truly national institution in Iraq because virtually all (Arab) tribes include both clans.32

Underscoring the importance of Rustow’s focus on national identity, identity politics has been a key component of the behavior of all post-1958 Iraqi regimes. An indicator of the power of the past — of historical memory — can be found in the behavior of the now-defunct Ba‘thist regime. That Saddam Husayn, in his effort to develop a hegemonic Pan-Arab political narrative, felt the need to establish a “Project for the Rewriting of History” (Mashru‘ Fadat Kitabat al-Tarikh) points to threat that he felt from a tradition of tolerance, democratic impulses, political pluralism, and civil society building that characterized the majority wing of the Iraqi nationalist movement prior to its suppression in 1963. This project, of which Saddam was the president, was designed to expunge the history of the majority wing of the Iraqi nationalist movement from national consciousness, and demonstrated the Iraqi leader’s fear of its residual political and sociocultural impact on Iraqi politics. Why did this historical memory evoke such concern, even within the circles of the powerful Ba‘thist regime?

As documented in my Memories of State: Politics, History, and Collective Identity in Modern Iraq, the Iraqi nationalist movement was characterized by cross-ethnic cooperation, extensive associational behavior, a large and vigorous print media, and artistic movements that promoted


32 An Iraqi colleague from Karbala’ told me that his tribe became worried by Saddam Husayn’s efforts to undermine the power of large tribes after the March 1991 Intifada. To defend itself against Saddam’s policies, his tribe sent a delegation to its Sunni wing in al-Anbar Province. Even though the two tribes had never interacted before, and one was Shi‘i and the other Sunni, they immediately made a pact to work together to oppose any efforts of Saddam to weaken either wing of the tribe.
tolerance and respect of social difference. It promoted democratic impulses, a tolerant political culture, and extensive civil society building.

Those who joined the Iraqi nationalist movement in the struggle against the Iraq’s Hashimite monarchy, its attendant political elite, and their British overlords pursued political freedoms and social justice. Significantly, the movement included not only Muslims — Shi’a and Sunni Arabs — but also Kurds, Jews, Christians, and the panoply of Iraq’s myriad ethnoconfessional groups. The nationalist movement both benefited from and encouraged the creation of many professional associations, formed by physicians, engineers, lawyers, architects, teachers, filmmakers, and members of other professions. Cultural organizations such as the Union of Iraqi Authors and Writers (Ittihad al-Udaba’ wa-l-Kuttab) proliferated, as did artist ateliers such as the Pioneers (al-Ruwwad) and salons and coffeehouses, where intellectuals met on a regular basis. As the nationalist movement expanded, so did a vigorous press. Hundreds of newspapers and journals were published that carried the nationalist banner. The press not only reported the news, but also provided an important forum where poets, writers, and artists could display their cultural production. Thus, the press became a vehicle that promoted cultural interchange among Iraq’s diverse ethnic groups.

The Iraqi national movement’s majority wing, of which the Iraqi Communist Party was a key component, was suppressed when the first Ba’thist regime came to power in February 1963, following the overthrow General ʿAbd al-Karim Qasim. Democracy activists were imprisoned, tortured, or forced to leave the country, and many others were killed. Following the army’s ouster of the first Ba’thist regime in November 1963 due to its brutality, a series of unstable governments ruled Iraq until the second Ba’thist coup in July 1968. Once oil prices began their dramatic rise in the early 1970s, Iraqis became even more accustomed to state largesse, as Saddam Husayn’s regime lavished a wide variety of state services on the Iraqi populace. As noted earlier, after 2003, the term “employment” assumed the connotation of government employment. Thus, one of the arguments presented here is that a democratic transition in Iraq must be intimately linked to the provision of state social services.

Although Saddam Husayn’s policies ultimately undermined support for Pan-Arabism, they did, ironically, contribute to Iraqis’ sense of national identity. When Iraq invaded Iran in September 1980, many analysts warned that Iraq would be defeated because the bulk of its infantry, which was Shi’a (just like the bulk of the Iranian army), would have little incentive to fight their Persian co-confessionalists. While there were some desertions by Iraqi troops and efforts were made by

33 Davis, Memories of State, 82–108.
34 Jo Tatchall’s The Poet of Baghdad: A True Story of Love and Defiance (New York: Broadway Books, 2008) provides strong testimony for the cooperative and tolerant nature of Iraqi society from an ethnoconfessional perspective, as does the film Baghdad High, made by four middle-class Iraqi youth — a Sunni, a Shi’i, a Kurd, and a Christian.
Iraqi security services on the frontlines to prevent such desertions, there is general agreement that the Iraqi army fought tenaciously against Iranian forces, especially after they crossed into Iraq in 1984 and threatened to capture the Fao Peninsula, which would have severed Iraq’s access to the Persian Gulf.\footnote{An excellent analysis of the war’s impact on Iraqi society is Dina Rizk Khoury’s \textit{Iraq in Wartime: Soldiering, Martyrdom and Remembrance} (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2013).} Certainly the war did nothing to enamor Saddam Husayn to the Iraqi populace, most of whom thought the war was a terrible blunder. Nevertheless, it did create a stronger sense of Iraqi national identity, even drawing together Kurdish and Arab officers who served with one another in the conscript army.\footnote{I have conducted several interviews with Arab and Kurdish officers in Iraq and the United States from 2006 to the present. They uniformly indicated that middle-ranking officers experienced no sectarian problems in their daily interactions.}

The United Nations sanctions regime of the 1990s placed tremendous economic and social stress on Iraqi society. There is universal agreement that the regime represented the most repressive sanctions ever imposed on any nation-state in modern times. The national economy came to a halt, the national education system collapsed, and criminality became widespread. Iraqi women, who had made great strides in terms of literacy and employment under Saddam Husayn, were relegated to the private sphere. What impact did the sanctions have on Iraqis’ sense of national identity?

The Ba’thist regime itself adopted policies that undermined the traditional secular nationalism that had characterized Iraq after its formal independence in August 1921. Having suppressed a major uprising (\textit{Intifada}) after the Gulf War in March 1991, Saddam Husayn’s regime was severely weakened by the loss of hundreds of Ba’thist officials who were killed during the violence. The need to rule the countryside as well as prop up his legitimacy led Saddam to focus on what has been called the “retribalization” of Iraq and emphasize a new form of patriarchy that stripped Iraqi women of many of the rights they had acquired under Ba’thist rule in the 1970s and 1980s.\footnote{Faleh A. Jabar, “Sheikhs and Ideologues: Deconstruction of Tribes under Patrimonial Totalitarianism in Iraq, 1968–1998,” in \textit{Tribes and Power: Nationalism and Ethnicity in the Middle East}, edited by Faleh A. Jabar and Hosham Dawod (London: Saqi Books, 2003), 69–109; Hosham Dawod, “The ‘State-ization’ of the Tribalization of the State,” in \textit{Tribes and Power}, 110–135; and Yasmin Al-Jawaheri, \textit{Women of Iraq: The Gender Impact of International Sanctions} (London: I.B. Tauris, 2009).}

The confluence of a “return to tradition,” the collapse of the economy and the national education system, the exclusion of women from the public sphere, the decimation of much of the middle class, and the rise and spread of crime syndicates took a tremendous toll on Iraqi society during the 1990s. Not only did it create tremendous material deprivation and physical suffering, it also created widespread “cognitive dissonance” — a national mood caused by extensive cultural and ideological confusion. Iraqis were torn between national loyalties, on the one hand, and the need to find solace in sub-national loyalties, namely confessional, tribal, and ethnic bonds, on the other.
This ideological confusion was clear in the news media of the 1990s. A survey of the Iraqi press clearly demonstrates the ambiguity of national and cultural identities. The pages of regime newspapers are filled with contradictory images and messages regarding Iraqi identity politics. On one page, one sees images of young boys in skullcaps memorizing the Qur’an. On the next, one finds Saddam Husayn speaking about the “Great Victory” in the “Mother of All Battles” (the Gulf War) and the central role of Iraq in protecting Arabism. Yet these newspapers invariably carry images of the latest Western fashions, especially women’s clothing, in the final pages of each issue.\textsuperscript{40} Such media coverage — monopolized by the state and allowing no alternative source of news — sent multiple and confusing messages about national identity, particularly the message that this identity was not well defined. What was Iraq’s national identity and how has it evolved since 2003? Remembering Rustow’s dictum about the sole prerequisite of a democratic transition — a shared national identity — identity politics becomes a crucial variable in understanding this process.\textsuperscript{41}
Conceptual Framework

Having discussed the historical background to efforts at implementing a democratic transition in post-2003 Iraq, what is the appropriate conceptual framework to employ when studying the possibility of such a transition? Aside from the question of what form of democracy finds greatest support in Iraq, we face a more fundamental question: Where do we begin? What are the requisites of a democratic transition, and does Iraq meet these criteria?

We begin by posing a conceptual and empirical metric for measuring democratization and its impediments. This model delineates the core concepts that are required by any theory of democratic transitions. Having specified these core concepts, we can then determine the key variables that can be derived from them to both quantitatively and qualitatively assess the progress of democratization, whether we are facing a “stalled transition” or a regression to authoritarian rule. These discrete variables can be used to measure the direction of political change. This model rejects a linear perspective and instead views democratization as a contested process in which various interests compete to promote it or attempt to prevent it from being successful.

Rather than offering a general theory, the effort to explain Iraq’s efforts to implement a democratic transition needs to be sensitive to a number of theoretical-conceptual considerations. First, are the concepts proffered below sufficient to encompass the necessary empirical terrain that must be examined to explain the critical aspects of Iraq’s efforts at democratization? Second, which concepts are related to “local democracy,” as opposed to those that are part of a general theory? For example, the manner in which ethnic and confessional variables affect Iraqi politics would not be as salient in a model that seeks to explain the efforts at a democratic transition by nation-states such as Tunisia and Bangladesh precisely because, in the latter cases, the society is overwhelmingly ethnically and confessionally homogeneous. In Iraq, how ethnic and confessional cleavages are negotiated during the effort to bring about a democratic transition must take center stage from a conceptual and empirical-causal perspective. However, a general theory might offer a more abstract notion of cleavages, of which those situated on ethnic and confessional bases represent only one form or subset of contestation. Again, too general a theory may not capture the specifics of the Iraqi case.

Thus, we need to distinguish between concepts and variables that differ among cases. What is important to conceptualize and measure in Iraq and Iraqi politics may not necessarily possess the same salience in other nation-states undergoing a democratic transition. Thus a general theory of democratic transitions and an approach that focuses on local democracy overlap, possessing what Wittgenstein calls “family resemblances.”

participation, the rule of law, and so on — but they also must be viewed through the conceptual prism of local variation, such as local understandings of democracy. Combining the general and the specific is the key to building a theory of democratic transitions in Iraq.

**Attitudes Toward Democracy**

A key concept in any theory of democratic transitions, even if all members of the political system share a national identity, is the populace’s attitudes toward democracy. If citizens do not support democracy, then no amount of effective political leadership or institutional design will be successful in implementing a transition to democracy. Support, or lack thereof, can be measured by a number of indicators, including public opinion surveys, voter turnout during national and local elections, the number and quality of political candidates who participate in elections, and the degree to which citizens understand the basic components of democracy, such as free and fair elections, unrestricted political participation, and the rule of law.

The strong support that Iraqis have developed for democracy is remarkable in light of the instability, violence, and dysfunctional character of political institutions in post-2003 Iraq. The U.S. invasion that overthrew Saddam Husayn placed tremendous stresses on a society already devastated by more than twenty years of war and an oppressive United Nations sanctions regime. Further, there has been considerable contestation over what political structure should be adopted in post-2003 Iraq. Conversely, there has been considerable ideological ambiguity, due to the collapse of Pan-Arabism’s legitimacy after the Gulf War of 1991 and the many contradictory ideological trends emphasized by the Ba‘thist regime during the 1990s sanctions regime prior to the ousting of Saddam.

**Political Parties**

In the wake of the U.S. invasion, a weak Western-oriented liberalism, preferred by the Bush administration and supported by a small group of Iraqi politicians and intellectuals, was quickly superseded by a diffuse Islamism embodied in the major political-ideological movements and parties that burst onto the political scene after 2003. Among these Islamist movements and parties were the Supreme Council for the Islamic Revolution in Iraq (SCIRI), controlled by the prominent clerical al-Hakim family and its militia, the Badr Corps; the Mahdi Army (*Jaysh al-Mahdi*), led by Muqtada al-Sadr, the son of the revered Ayatollah, Muhammad Muhammad Sadiq al-Sadr; the Islamic Call Party (*al-Da‘wa al-Islamiya*), the oldest Islamist party formed in the late 1950s; and the Basra-based Virtue (*al-Fadila*) Party, led by Ayatollah Muhammad al-Yaqubi.

None of these parties enjoys enough popular support to be able to capture a majority of votes and win an election on its own. Instead, Iraqi political parties have formed parliamentary coalitions such as the State of Law Coalition (*I‘tilaf Dawlat al-Qanun*), the Iraqi National Coalition (*al-
I’tilaf al-Watani al-‘Iraqi), the al-Iraqiya Coalition, and the Sadrists’ al-Ahrar bloc. Even though these parties — more accurately described as coalitions of small groups of elites — have not been able to maintain ideological and organizational cohesion (often fragmenting after elections are held), they have nevertheless formed a system of checks and balances that has constrained political leaders. Despite the most vigorous effort to obtain a third term as Iraqi prime minister, Nuri al-Maliki could not overcome the combined opposition of the main political coalitions.44

**Institutional Design**

Despite arguments that Iraqis lack a shared sense of national identity, it is noteworthy that no political group in 2003 argued for the breakup of Iraq, including the Kurds. Instead, Iraqis largely coalesced around the idea of establishing a federal state in which regional groups such as the Kurds could, if they followed certain constitutionally defined procedures, enjoy considerable local autonomy. Thus the Kurdish Regional Government was officially born as part of the new Iraqi state (despite having had *de facto* autonomy since 1991, when the United States imposed the “no-fly zone” on Iraq above the 36th parallel that prevented Saddam Husayn’s forces from attacking the Kurds from the air).

Following the seizure of Mosul, Iraq’s second-largest city, on June 10, 2014, and the abandonment of large areas of northern Iraq by the Iraqi army, Kurdish Peshmerga forces entered the oil-rich city of Kirkuk. Prime Minister Nuri al-Maliki and Arab ministers in his government were furious. Twitter feeds and other social media outlets were filled with Kurds, many residing outside Iraq, calling for independence. Nevertheless, the initial enthusiasm for declaring independence, especially once the Kurds controlled the oil resources of Kirkuk, quickly subsided when ISIS forces attacked the Kurdish Regional Government and approached the capital city of Arbil. The vaunted Peshmerga, which had not engaged in combat since the 1990s, was no match for ISIS and the modern heavy weaponry they had seized from the Iraqi army in Mosul. Clearly, the Kurds realized what the implications of independence would be, were they to declare an independent state: namely, the need to fight terrorism on their own.

One creative manner, then, in which Iraqis approached the problem of reconciling national identity with the problem of political authority in post-Saddam Iraq was to agree to create a federal state. As the occupying power, the United States strongly pushed Iraqi decision-makers to adopt a federal system for the new polity. Even if this had not been the case, Arab politicians knew that without acquiescing to a federal structure, the Kurds would have refused to remain within a unified Iraq.

The issue of federalism addressed two critical issues: how to assure that Iraq remained a unified state, and how the new state could respect cultural and political pluralism. Clearly, a number of post-2003 Arab Iraqi leaders have only nominally supported the idea of federalism. Prime

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44 Of course, the threat presented by the Islamic State after its seizure of Mosul and large parts of northern Iraq, and U.S. pressure to oust al-Maliki, played an important role in his leaving the post of prime minister.
Minister Nuri al-Maliki, for example, used much of his first term (2006 to 2010), and even more of his second term (2010 to 2014) to try and erode local autonomy, whether that of the Kurds or of Iraq’s Arab provinces. He actively opposed efforts by Iraq’s three southernmost Shi’i majority provinces — Basra, Misan, and Wasit — to form an autonomous region, as well as efforts by Sunni Arabs in al-Anbar, Salah al-Din, and Ninawa provinces to create their own autonomous region, as allowed by the 2005 Iraqi constitution. He also refused to implement a Federal Legislative Council, part of Iraq’s new constitution, that is intended to provide watchdog powers over the Council of Deputies and thus strengthen a decentralized system of governance.

National Identity

The question of federalism implicitly raises the issue of Iraq’s national identity. For the many nation-states that have eschewed federalism — such as France, the Scandinavian countries, and Poland — there is no need to adopt a federal political structure, since national identity is not a salient issue given a relatively socially homogeneous population and a lack of strong regional identities. Of course, Arab Iraq did not have the military power in 2003 to force the Kurds to remain part of Iraq or prevent them from declaring independence. From the Kurds’ perspective, independence was a future desideratum but not an attractive option in the immediate term. Had they decided on that route, their new, landlocked state would have been surrounded by hostile neighbors. Nevertheless Saddam’s ouster finally put the question of national identity — one that had been politically swept under the carpet since the modern state’s founding in 1921 — firmly on the negotiating table and into national political discourse. While the issue of federalism has caused serious political and economic problems since 2003, it represents an essential building block if Iraq is to build a democratic state.45 In another words, the Kurds’ ability to enhance their power has, ironically, contributed to establishing the foundations for a truly federal nation-state.46

Assuming that a populace shares a collective national identity — one that is still contested and in formation in Iraq — they will also need to establish institutions if the political system is going to operate according to democratic norms and meet citizens’ needs.47 If we define institutions as the political “rules of the game,” then these include not only procedural criteria — periodic and fair elections, transparent and accountable governance, and respect for the rule of law — but also concern for human and minority rights and their application in everyday life.

One of the legacies of the Ba’athist regime is that all formal political institutions and all civil society organizations were destroyed after 1968. Thus, one of the key variables examined in this

45 This issue will remain a source of continued conflict until Arab and Kurdish elites develop a joint condominium around the distribution of hydrocarbon wealth.
46 It also has been an impetus for Basra, Misan, and Wasit to form a Shi’i autonomous region and Sunnis Arabs in al-Anbar, Ninawa, and Salah al-Din to likewise form a Sunni autonomous region.
essay is the extent to which political institutions in post-Ba’thist Iraq have gained any traction. Put differently, do they function according the “rules of the game,” and do they deliver on their intended functions? Once again we see that the record since 2005, when Iraq’s first Council of Deputies was convened, is mixed.

Social Justice: Employment and Public Services

A bitter complaint that one hears from Iraqis throughout the country concerns the disconnect between Iraq’s great hydrocarbon wealth, on the one hand, and the lack of government services and efforts to improve the economy, on the other. Iraqis wonder why the country has an official poverty rate of 20 percent (though many economists believe it is closer to 30 percent). In light of the long history of state provision of social services after the 1958 Revolution and the focus of the Iraqi nationalist movement on social justice, this development is particularly galling to most Iraqis.

The lack of social services is a function of at least two variables. First, the political system is organized according to a quota system, in which coalitions that are formed to compete in elections agree beforehand which political groups will receive which ministries should their coalition be successful. Once a party or political group takes control of a ministry, the funds allocated to that ministry are devoted to employing members of the group who supported it during the elections. Thus, the ministry’s focus is not on delivering the services it is legally intended to provide, but rather on extending elite patronage networks.

Second, lack of government services is partially a result of the collapse of the national education system in the 1990s. Many young Iraqis, male and female, did not attend school and thus lack education. To obtain government employment, however, one must have completed secondary school or have a college degree. A cottage industry exists that will provide, for a price, any type of degree that someone requires. As a result, many employees in government ministries are semi-literate at best, in addition to lacking the skills to perform the tasks associated with their positions. Even if Iraq’s political leadership attempted to improve the delivery of government services such as housing, education, health care, and municipal services, it would lack competent personnel to provide these services. In other words, the state bureaucracy not only needs to be cleansed of corruption, but its employees need to receive extensive training if state capacity for the provision of social services is to improve.

Political Institutions: The Council of Deputies

On the one hand, many observers, Iraqi and non-Iraqi alike, have scornfully observed that the Council of Deputies (Majlis al-Nuwwab), or national Parliament, is dysfunctional and contributes little in the way of innovative legislation. Often, the council cannot garner a quorum, although its deputies receive an attractive package of salary, housing, and a permanent pension.
even if they only serve one term. The lavish benefits enjoyed by these parliamentary delegates, compared to the lack of basic government services denied to the populace at large, has led to protracted demonstrations in all parts of the country, including members of all of Iraq’s ethnic and confessional groups. These protests — impossible under Saddam Husayn’s rule — are themselves an indicator of the profound change that has occurred since 2003 and another sign of the need to take democracy seriously in Iraq.

While the arguments about the shortcomings of Iraq’s institutions have merit, they fail to document the many contributions that the new Parliament has made since its founding in January 2005. This negative focus neglects the efforts the Parliament has made to rein in government corruption and to constrain efforts by the executive branch, especially under Nuri al-Maliki’s prime minister-ship, to impose a new authoritarian system on Iraq.

In 2009, a parliamentary committee convened hearings to investigate state corruption. The hearings were the first ever to be broadcast live on Iraqi television. The hearings resulted in a polite but comprehensive grilling of Minister of Trade Abd al-Falih al-Sudani, a member of Nuri al-Maliki’s al-Dawa Party, that led to his resignation. This was also the first time an interrogation of a sitting minister had been broadcast on live television in Iraq. Subsequently, the ministers of electricity, health, and transport were summoned to Parliament as well. Although there were no long-term political ramifications as result of these parliamentary actions, nevertheless these hearings, that obviously would never have been possible under the Ba’thist regime, sent a message to the populace that political authority could be challenged.

The Parliament also has challenged the efforts of former Prime Minister Nuri al-Maliki to consolidate power and ride roughshod over the new Iraqi constitution and the checks and balances built into the new Iraqi political system. One effort entailed the introduction of a vote of no confidence in al-Maliki’s leadership in 2012, an effort that involved Shi’i, Sunni, and Kurdish political parties. Unfortunately, Iraqi President Jalal Talabani refused to certify the vote as required by the Iraqi constitution.

Although members of Iraq’s Parliament do receive lavish salaries and benefits, they have nevertheless engaged in highlighting corruption in the executive branch, especially in government ministries. With their country occupying the unenviable position of ranking 171st of 174 on Transparency International’s 2014 list of the world’s most corrupt countries, all Iraqis are aware that corruption and nepotism are among Iraq’s most pressing challenges. While in office, Nuri al-Maliki eliminated the independence of a number of Iraqi institutions. He placed the Independent High Electoral Commission and the Central Bank under his control and sought to

49 On the hearings, see my post, “During Saddam’s time, we could only dream of something like this!” The New Middle East, May 21, 2009, http://new-middle-east.blogspot.com/2009/05/during-saddams-time-we-could-only-dream.html.
50 Clearly, politics was involved in the parliamentary committee hearings. The ministers in question were from al-Maliki’s Islamic Call Party, while the Virtue (al-Fadila) Party, which was in opposition to al-Maliki at the time, had strong representation on the committee.
circumscribe the power of the judiciary. He appointed loyalists to high-ranking positions, not only in his inner circle of advisers but in the security services and the military as well. Of course, the policy of politicizing the military and the security services alienated the Sunni Arab population and was responsible for the collapse of the Iraqi army in Mosul, even though Iraqi soldiers outnumbered ISIS fighters more than 30 to 1. Clearly, corruption and nepotism have negative economic consequences as well as severely destructive political consequences.

**Corruption**

When discussing political institutions and institutional design, it is insufficient to limit ourselves to an examination of the rules that govern their functioning and how their actual performance measures against these rules. We need to go beyond the formal rules to understand the informal mechanisms that promote corruption. Corruption absorbs huge amounts of government revenue and undermines the ability of state institutions to deliver critical services such as social welfare payments, education, health care, municipal sanitation, housing, and local security.52

One of the key impediments to democratization in Iraq is the pervasive corruption that afflicts its governmental institutions. To understand the source of corruption, we need to remember Saddam’s degradation of all government institutions, especially after the 1991 Gulf War, and the impact of the United Nations sanctions regime that was imposed on Iraq after the war. With rigid controls on what could be imported, and international supervision of its oil production to compensate Kuwait for its losses during Iraq’s occupation, the Iraqi economy went into a free-fall after the war.

The collapse of Iraq’s national economy during the 1990s was demonstrated most starkly by the reduced buying power of Iraq’s government salariat, which comprised a large segment of the country’s employed populace. Government employees who had enjoyed salaries averaging $500 to $600 per month before the 1991 Gulf War saw inflation reduce the value of their income to $3 per month by mid-1993.53 In this context, the Iraqi middle classes had to resort to selling their personal belongings, sending their children into to the streets to beg or engage in menial labor, and drawing down on whatever savings they possessed.

The sanctions had a particularly negative impact on women. The progress that many had made during the 1970s and 1980s was lost during the 1990s. In an effort to consolidate his power after the March 1991 Intifada that almost brought down his regime, Saddam Husayn sought to manipulate religious and tribal identities as the regime moved away from a strict focus on secular Ba’thist Pan-Arabism. Except in the primary education sector, one consequence was to remove women from the public sphere and limit government employment increasingly to men.

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The impact of the 1990s sanctions regime has yet to be the subject of a comprehensive study. Nevertheless, its overall effect on Iraq is quite clear. First, the buying power of the middle classes was dramatically reduced. The severe economic constraints many Iraqi faced undermined the secular nationalist orientation of large sections of the populace that had informed Iraq’s political culture throughout most of the twentieth century. As economic conditions worsened, many Iraqis turned to their sects or ethnic groups and to religion as sources of solace in extremely difficult times.

Whether in Iraq or elsewhere, corruption cannot be viewed as a discrete phenomenon. Put differently, corruption is both a symptom and a cause of serious social and political decay — both exogenous and endogenous. The corruption that skyrocketed during 1990s undermined the nation’s social fabric by forcing many Iraqis to engage in criminal activity. This was due to the absence of any ability of those outside the Ba'athist elite to earn a living through legitimate means.

The two most prominent means of illicit activity were oil smuggling and the sale of artifacts, although these activities were largely confined to the Ba'athist elite and criminal syndicates. The salaried middle classes, most of whom were government employees, frequently had no recourse but to insist on bribes for the services they provided.

Such corruption had become deeply rooted in Iraq’s social fabric by the time the United States invaded in 2003. Little or nothing had been done by the Bush administration to study the impact of the United Nations sanctions on economic, social, and cultural life in Iraq. Thus there was no understanding of social conditions on the eve of the invasion. Because the neo-conservative officials in the Bush administration were suspicious of so-called “Arabists” in the U.S. Department of State and other policymaking circles, feeling they would be too “sympathetic” to Iraq, they consciously avoided appointing U.S. occupation officials who were knowledgeable of the Arab world. This ill-advised decision constrained the ability of the Coalition Provisional Authority (CPA) to develop any effective post-invasion policies. Indeed, CPA Administrator L. Paul Bremer had had no experience in the Arab world prior to being appointed to his position.

The looting that the U.S. army failed to stop after seizing Baghdad sent a message to Iraqis that not only did the United States not have a plan for occupying Iraq, but also that it was incapable of controlling the country. Once the United States disbanded the national police and eliminated many army officers because they had ties to the Ba’th Party, U.S. ability to exercise control over Iraq declined still further. Crime syndicates saw this lack of authority as a clarion call to increase their activities.

Perhaps the biggest stimulus to the dramatic increase in corruption was the massive amount of U.S. funds spent on reconstruction projects. As a number of studies have documented, huge sums were allocated by the Congress, only to disappear in a morass of bureaucratic red tape. In his effort to trace what happened to funds allocated for Iraq reconstruction, Christian Miller has
estimated that between $16 billion and $18 billion remain unaccounted for. Several ministers fled Iraq once it was discovered that they had swindled the government through misuse of funds, such as in the purchase of weaponry for the rebuilding of the Iraq army.

The negative synergy between U.S. reconstruction contracts and networks of corruption held over from Saddam Husayn’s regime produced a “perfect storm.” The lack of meaningful oversight of large-scale projects implemented by U.S. corporations, and Iraqi awareness of the money to be made in these projects, produced a dramatic increase in corruption. With no banking system or functioning computer network, many funds transfers needed to be made by hand, enhancing the ability of government employees to siphon off additional funds.

As a demonstration of the need to incorporate historical linkages in explaining democratic impulses and impediments to a democratic transition, the United Nations sanctions regime of the 1990s produced a generation of Iraqi youth in which many had little or no education. After the U.S. invasion of 2003, a political system developed based upon the idea of patronage. In this system, coalitions formed to run in elections agreed upon the distribution of “shares” (al-muhassasat) in accordance with the strength of the political party within the larger coalition. As noted earlier, a particularly important consideration was the ministries each party would receive in the event of a political victory. Unfortunately, many of the party members or clients did not have the education or credentials to fill the positions they were given.

**Gender Relations**

One of the major shortcomings of democratic transitions theory is the lack of attention given to gender relations. This is a major lacuna in the study of democratic transitions, especially when we consider that women constitute at least 50 percent of any nation-state’s population — in some instances, a much greater percentage. If women are not active participants in the transition process and in the new democratic state following a successful transition, how then is it possible to argue that a democratic transition has occurred in any meaningful sense? One question that arises is why gender has been so marginalized in democratic transitions theory.

Another critical hypothesis is that gender relations are an excellent indicator of the quality and duration of democracy. If women are excluded from the public sphere, lack their own civic organizations, fail to have their rights protected and enshrined in public law, and face serious barriers to entering the workforce, at whatever level, then any democracy that is established will rest on shaky foundations at best. As Adorno et al. argued many years ago, there is a relationship between the family and polity — the private and public spheres. If male prerogatives remain unchallenged within the family, socialization of children will send a message that boys are

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55 In Iraq, the estimates are that women constitute well over 60 percent of the population given two major Gulf wars, the March 1991 Intifada, and the sectarian violence that plagued the country between 2004 and 2008.
privileged over girls. This message is gradually transformed into a message that men should have power and control over women.

In other words, constraints on women within the family — in terms of physical mobility, choice of marital partner, ability to become educated, and ability to enter the workforce — are simultaneously indicators of the degree to which equality and tolerance are norms valued by the male members of society. If one of the three core indicators of democracy is a political culture of tolerance and respect for difference, then excluding women from the public and political spheres seriously prevents the establishment of norms that support any meaningful system of democratization.

A parallel can be drawn with the Athenian polis, in which democracy prevailed but was limited to male property owners, thereby disenfranchising the majority of the population. By modern standards, a democracy — if it is to mean “rule by the people” — must allow all citizens access to political participation, basic freedoms of assembly and expression, and equal treatment before the law.

A third reason why the relationship between gender and democracy is significant is the degree to which it sheds light on possibilities for development. If large numbers of women are excluded from the public sphere, their creativity, energy, and skills, both intellectual and physical, become unavailable to society as it seeks economic growth. Gender equality thus translates into economic progress that many studies have shown is critical to the transition to democracy and to sustaining it over time.

In Iraq, women began to actively engage in the public sphere during the anti-colonial nationalist movement that developed against British and Hashimite rule in the 1920s. Already in the 1920s, upper-class Iraqi women had established the Women’s Awakening (Nahda al-Nisa’) organization. As the nationalist movement gained strength, women from all social strata supported strikes and participated in demonstrations to prevent policy that was arresting and killing protestors. Following World War II, women also began to enter the higher education system and the professions. Some became physicians and others important contributors to literature and the arts. Following the 1958 Revolution, women began to play a greater role in the education system and were accepted in large numbers at the newly expanded Baghdad University.

Under the military regime of ʿAbd al-Karim Qasim, women’s role in the public sphere was enhanced by a number of developments. In 1959, Qasim appointed the first female cabinet minister in Iraq, and the Arab world, when Dr. Naziha al-Dulaymi became minister of municipalities. Further, Qasim’s regime, under pressure from women’s organizations among

57 Estimates are that political participation was limited to 10 percent of the Athenian population of 13,000 inhabitants.
others, implemented one of the most progressive personal status laws in 1959 which prevented women under the age of 15 from being forced to marry, gave Iraqi women over age 15 equal inheritance rights with males, and abolished complete male control over divorce. While this law was adamantly opposed by the Shi'i al-marja'iya, and religious clerics generally, it sent an explicit message to women that they now had an important role to play in society, one that would be supported by the state.

Throughout the 1960s women continued to make progress in the realms of education and employment. However, it was only after the Ba'ath Party seized power in July 1968 that a comprehensive state policy toward women was developed. Women served at least two objectives of Saddam Husayn’s Ba'hist regime. First, Saddam sought to undermine the family as institution that could oppose Ba'ath Party policies. This was accomplished through reducing the power of the husband by allowing women to enter the workforce in large numbers, thereby gaining access to an independent source of income. Second, Saddam and the Ba'ath wanted to industrialize Iraq as part of the effort to make Iraq the most powerful state in the Arab world.

Under the Ba’th, women did make great strides at the level of the professions. By the 1980s, they constituted the majority of physicians in Baghdad. The General Federation of Iraqi Women, led by Dr. Manal Yunis al-Alusi, had made great strides in mobilizing women, albeit completely under Ba'ath Party control. Women in rural areas, even those who were very aged, were forced to join illiteracy centers where, through the use of Ba’hist propaganda, they were taught to read and write.

Despite the strides made by women in the material realm, indications are that many were still unhappy with their domestic conditions. In a study published during the 1980s, many women complained about unfulfilling marriages and living under a patriarchal structure. Following Iraq’s invasion of Iran in September 1980, the tenor of Ba’hist ideology began to change from its traditional secular Pan-Arabism to a more sectarian narrative. Accompanying this was a greater emphasis on tribalism as Saddam sought to mobilize support, especially once the war turned against Iraq. The role of women became more “domesticized” and family values and the socialization of children became more pronounced. This was an indicator of what was to come during the next decade.

The 1990s saw a rapid decline in the position of women. While the state-run media was still filled with images of Western women in chic dress, the trend in Iraq was for women to increasingly wear the hijab. There was a direct correlation between the economic decline caused by the harsh United Nations sanctions regime after the end of the January 1991 Gulf War and the social and economic marginalization of Iraqi women.

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Following the toppling of Saddam Husayn’s regime in 2003, there were expectations among educated middle-class women that the status of women in Iraq would improve. To its credit, the Bush administration placed great emphasis on women’s rights. While Iraqi officials writing the new constitution worked under pressure from the Bush administration to complete a draft of the constitution in time for the November 2004 election cycle, the United States insisted on election quotas, namely, that at least 25 percent of parliamentary seats would be reserved for women.

U.S. policymakers were naïve not to realize that the patriarchal policies followed by the Ba‘thist regime during the 1990s had left a legacy of disrespect for women who lost many of their civil rights during under the United Nations sanctions regime and were largely excluded from the public sphere. In the elections that have been held since 2005, many parties have met the gender quotas specified by Iraq’s constitution, but have nominated women who are completely compliant to party dictates. Significantly, however, Ayatollah Ali al-Sistani insisted in 2010 that Iraqi elections be conducted via an open-list system, forcing Prime Minister Nuri al-Maliki to abandon the proposed use of a closed-list system. This allowed voters to know who the women candidates were for whom they were voting. As a result of al-Sistani’s actions, a number of independent women who are not under the thumb of male political leaders were elected to Parliament.

One of the first indicators that women should not expect in improvement in their quality of life came in December 2003, when the U.S.-appointed Iraqi Governing Council tried to repeal Iraq’s progressive Personal Status Law, which had been passed in 1959 during the regime of General ā‘Abd al-Karim Qasim. It was only through large-scale demonstrations organized by secular and leftist elements, including the Iraqi Communist Party and the emerging Iraqi blogosphere, that CPA Administrator L. Paul Bremer was forced to have the Iraqi Governing Council rescind the proposed new law. As many Iraqi women have commented to me, “Iraqi politicians cannot agree on anything, but one thing they can all agree on is repressing women.”

In the Kurdish region during the 1990s, a different dynamic developed. Once the Kurds broke away from control by Saddam Husayn’s regime, women in the newly formed Kurdish region believed the expressions of male leaders of the two main political parties, the Kurdish Democratic Party and the Patriotic Union of Kurdistan, that the Kurdish Regional Government (formed in 1992) was based on democratic principles.

During the extensive research that I conducted in the Kurdish Regional Government in late 2007, many women with whom I spoke indicated that the period of the 1990s was one of new hopes for improving the status of Kurdish women, including escaping marriages that were highly oppressive. As the divorce rate began to rise, there was a reaction among many conservative Kurdish families. Drawing on norms of “honor and shame” emphasized by the tribal culture that still dominates much of Kurdish (and Arab) society in Iraq, male family members reacted negatively to Kurdish women’s efforts to challenge traditional patriarchal norms and values. This reaction often involved so-called “honor killings,” in which women who were considered to have
impugned a family’s honor were killed, often brutally, by being taken to a mountainous region
and burned alive or shot.61

Unfortunately, gender relations have not been adequately theorized in democratic transitions
theory. On logic alone, this represents a serious shortcoming, since women comprise at least 50
percent of all societies. In Iraq, women constitute more than 60 percent of the populace, due to
the violence that has encompassed the nation-state since 1980, including the devastating Iran-
Iraq War, the 1991 Gulf War, the March 1991 Intifada, the sectarian violence of 2003 to 2008,
and the current violence following the ISIS attack on Mosul and northwestern Iraq.

Political Culture
Another prerequisite for a democratic transition is the need for a political culture based on norms
of tolerance, pluralism, and negotiation. One of the pernicious legacies of Ba‘thic
authoritarianism is a culture of fear, suspicion, victimization, and lack of trust among Iraq’s main
ethnic and confessional groups.62 Given the lack of an institutional nexus within which to
conduct the kind of bargaining and negotiation that would provide the “political lubrication” to
enable Iraq’s polity to function effectively, it is difficult for political actors to be assured of
predictability. How can agreements be negotiated if there is no consensus on the “rules of the
game”? Even with a written constitution, how do they know their adversaries will abide by its
rules, especially when the modern Middle East has a history of hastily construed constitutions,
many of which have been relegated to the dustbin of history? Unfortunately, another
authoritarian legacy that must be theorized is a culture of mistrust.

Paralleling the culture of mistrust is a culture of victimization. One of the most important
dimensions of authoritarian legacies is the idea that loyal and patriotic groups within the body
politic have been the target of a serious attack — one that stretches over time — by groups that
seek to harm them and prevent them from achieving their goals and enjoying stable and
productive lives. This is a political trope of all authoritarian regimes. If groups within a society
mistrust each other, then their joining together for purposes of collective action is obviously very
difficult.

Historical Memory
Not all legacies create impediments to democratization. While notions of victimization are
intimately linked to the concept of memory, efforts at combating authoritarian rule offer a
palliative to a negatively constructed past. In other words, resorting to memories of national
unity, inter-communal cooperation, and civil society building can generate a memory to offset
the efforts at “divide and conquer” that authoritarian regimes use to atomize society by setting
different ethnic, confessional, and regional groups, as well as social classes, against one another.

61 This research was supported by Carnegie Corporation of New York while I was a Carnegie Scholar for 2007–2008, for which I
am most grateful.
62 One of the most important works on Saddam Husayn’s regime remains Samir al-Khalil (Kanaan Makiya), The Republic of
If we limit our study of memory by viewing it through the prism of authoritarian legacies, then we will lose sight of the potential benefit of a historical memory of civic culture. Under the Hashimite monarchy, Iraq could in no way be considered a full-fledged democracy. Nevertheless, electoral districts in large urban areas such as Baghdad and Basra did exhibit fair and free elections. Extensive associational behavior was the norm of the day as physicians, lawyers, engineers, pharmacists, and educators formed professional and social organizations. A civic culture was fostered by a vigorous press. Even in the realm of art, painters, sculptors, and architects promoted forms of cultural expression that challenged traditional forms of authority. This historical memory is inscribed in the many coffeehouses, artist ateliers, professional associations, novels, poetry (formal, popular, and tribal), short stories and folktales, and other forms of popular culture (al-turath al-sha’bi).  

Exogenous Factors

Many political systems are able to democratize as a result of authoritarian elites being vanquished in war. In modern times, the most prominent cases that come to mind are Germany, Japan, and Italy. The West’s success in defeating the Soviet Union in the Cold War was central to development of democratic polities among its former satellites in Eastern Europe. Although at this writing Libya is encountering severe political instability, if it is able to continue its trajectory toward democratization, then it too will represent another example of a democracy that arose from the ashes of war.

Of course, if Iraq had not been invaded by the United States in 2003, it is doubtful that Saddam Husayn’s regime would have been overthrown. At the time of the invasion, Saddam had already circumvented many of the economic constraints of the United Nations sanctions regime imposed after the 1991 Gulf War. More importantly, he was signing new contracts with a wide range of international oil companies from France, Russia, China, and South Korea to begin exploration in Iraq.

Democratic transitions theory has not devoted much attention to the relationship between war and democratization. Perhaps this stems from the idiosyncratic manner in which wars play themselves out and result in the collapse of authoritarian rule. Nevertheless, I will argue that many of the problems Iraq faces at present in trying to implement a democratic transition are not to be found in its domestic politics and society, but in the policies the United States followed after toppling Saddam Husayn’s Ba’thist regime. Although Iraq benefited from the invasion in the ousting of Saddam and the Ba’th, the invasion likewise created multiple impediments to the country’s ability to democratize once dictatorial rule had ended.

It is well-known that the United States invaded Iraq without a developed plan of how it would occupy the country after ousting the Ba’thist regime. Apart from transgressing the Geneva Convention, which requires such planning, the Bush administration likewise failed to put in

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place the proper personnel with the technical skills and cultural awareness that would have made their efforts in the reconstruction of Iraq, following the military phase of the war, a success. The stories of young, inexperienced staffers sent to Iraq to assume responsibility for critical tasks are legion and have been documented in a large number of studies. The validity of these studies was subsequently underscored in the extensive reports by the Office of the Special Investigator General for Iraq Reconstruction.

In retrospect, the arguments made by Bush administration officials, such as Under Secretary of Defense Paul Wolfowitz, that the invasion and “temporary” occupation of Iraq would not cost American taxpayers significant amounts of money — because Iraq’s oil revenues would cover the bulk, if not all, of the reconstruction costs — were ludicrous. Reports before the invasion had already indicated that Iraq’s oil industry was in serious disrepair and that the country lacked even sufficient refining capacity to provide for its own energy needs. Indeed, Iraqi engineers had made a valiant effort to keep Iraq’s oil flowing during the 1990s, but by 2000 output was beginning to decline, and their efforts could no longer assure sustained production at 2.5 million barrels per day.

The Bush administration discovered an Iraq devastated by two major wars, a national uprising in 1991 that had been brutally suppressed, and the most repressive sanctions regime ever imposed on a modern nation-state. Rather than address the pressing problems of the moment, namely, widespread unemployment and urgent health care needs, the Bush administration chose to focus on large-scale infrastructure projects that, in retrospect, served the interests of large multinational corporations such as Halliburton and KBR rather than those of the Iraqi people.

The impact of Bush administration policy is difficult to describe other than that it verged on the criminal in term of its gross negligence. The U.S. Army’s Third Infantry Division wrote a damning report after it seized Baghdad, criticizing the absence of a plan for its military operations. U.S. forces were directed to secure two ministries, the Defense Ministry in Saddam Husayn’s Republican Palace and the Ministry of Oil. The failure to secure government buildings led to the complete destruction of seventeen of Iraq’s twenty-one ministries. The buildings were stripped of everything, down to the rebar in the walls. The widespread looting that destroyed Baghdad’s ministries also had a destructive impact on other cities. In Basra, “more than 80% of the city’s government’s office equipment, supplies, and vehicles were looted after Saddam’s fall.”

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65 See the myriad reports of the Special Inspector General for Iraq Reconstruction at www.sigir.mil.

66 Miller, Blood Money, 27.

67 Miller, Blood Money, 28.

68 Miller, Blood Money, 49.
The general looting that occurred in Baghdad, Basra, and other Iraqi cities stoked Iraqi suspicions that the United States’ intentions in Iraq were not in their interests. The failure of U.S. troops to secure important sites such as the Iraq Museum, which contained thousands of priceless artifacts, angered many Iraqis.69 Almost from the start, the Bush administration’s claims that it had toppled Saddam’s regime to bring democracy to Iraq rang hollow. Quickly, Iraqis old enough to remember the post-Gulf War Intifada developed the same suspicions of the United States they had had in 1991.

In February 1991, after Iraqi forces had been expelled from Kuwait, President George H.W. Bush called upon the Iraqi people in a famous speech to “rise up and overthrow Saddam the dictator.”70 When Iraqis did rise up, the United States failed to support the uprising. The most infamous decision, in a long line of bad policy choices, was General Norman Schwarzkopf’s giving permission to the Iraqi military to allow its helicopter gunships to enter the conflict. This modification of the no-fly zone that the United States had imposed on Iraq quickly turned the tide against the insurgents. Not only were American troops on Iraqi soil who watched, in many instances, as Iraqi army units and helicopter gunships suppressed the rebellion, but there were actually reports of U.S. forces destroying ammunition arsenals so they would not fall into the hands of the insurgents. Many Iraqis I have interviewed were shocked by what they felt was an American betrayal of their cause. In this context, it is not surprising that Iraqis were cautious in their interaction with and expectation of U.S. forces when they entered Iraq in March 2003.

An additional “nail in the coffin” in developing Iraqi trust following the toppling of Saddam’s regime was the failure of the new occupation administration, the CPA, to listen to the Iraqis and respect their views on what needed to done now that Saddam and the Ba’th had been overthrown. The head of the Office for Reconstruction and Humanitarian Assistance, the first office of U.S. civilian operations in Iraq, was retired General Jay Garner, who had developed a reputation for helping the Kurds when they were attacked by Iraqi army units during the 1991 uprising.71 Garner did attempt to meet with a large swath of Iraqi professionals and notables in Baghdad, but was quickly replaced by the much more arrogant and autocratic L. Paul Bremer, a former U.S. Department of Defense official who had also conducted missions for the State Department.72


70 On February 15, 1991, Bush stated in a Houston speech: “There is another way for the bloodshed to stop: and that is, for the Iraqi military and the Iraqi people to take matters into their own hands and force Saddam Hussein, the dictator, to step aside and then comply with the United Nations' resolutions and rejoin the family of peace-loving nations.”


72 A colleague at Baghdad University’s Department of Political Science, Riyad Aziz Hadi, attended a large meeting with Jay Garner on April 15, 2003. Dr. Hadi had a generally positive view of Garner’s attempts to reach out to Iraqi professionals, notables, and tribal leaders, although he did ask why, when walking 2 miles from his home to the meeting, there were no Iraqi police to be found in the streets.
There were many problems constraining an effective U.S. policy in post-invasion Iraq. The arrogance of the neo-conservatives in the Bush administration was the most serious problem. Those referred to as “Arabists,” namely, State Department officials who had served for lengthy periods in the Middle East, were not trusted. Foreign policymakers in the Bush administration felt that those with deep knowledge of the Arab world would be too “sympathetic” to Iraq and reluctant to enact the type of radical policies envisioned by neo-conservative policymakers. As a result, only a small percentage of U.S. personnel in Iraq after 2003 could speak Arabic and were conversant with Arab culture, let alone Iraqi culture and society.

Bremer’s first and most counterproductive decision was to proceed with an ill-thought-out policy of de-Ba’thification. Anyone with even the most superficial knowledge of Saddam Husayn’s regime knew that Ba’th Party membership was a requisite for obtaining government employment in Iraq — and government employment accounted for a large sector of the workforce.

However, perhaps even a more egregious decision made by the Bush administration was the decommissioning of the Iraqi conscript army in May 2003. The majority of officers and soldiers in the conscript army were hostile to Saddam and the Ba’th for many reasons. First, they had been left without supplies in Kuwait in January 1991 and endured attacks by United Nations coalition forces, including carpet-bombing by the U.S. Air Force. Second, army recruits were often not paid during the 1990s, and given substandard weapons. Further, the officers and enlisted men in the conscript army resented their subordination to elite military units such as the Republican Guards and the Special Republican Guards, and Saddam’s praetorian guard, the Fadiyu’ Saddam (literally, “those who would sacrifice for Saddam”).

The conscript army comprised an ethnically and confessionally integrated officer corps, unlike the Republican Guard units, which were commanded by Sunni Arab officers. In interviewing officers in the conscript army from all sects and regions, I found that all indicated that they maintained cordial relations with one another. Had the Bush administration not ordered the dismantling of the army, it would have been able to field a large Iraqi force that knew the country’s terrain and had access to intelligence that the United States lacked.

One result of eliminating the conscript army was to provide unanticipated support for the gathering insurgency. Saddam and the Ba’th knew that the Iraqi army would be no match for U.S. forces, especially without any air force or anti-aircraft defense. Thus, weapons caches and funds had been hidden in areas thought to be loyal to Saddam. These weapons and funds would be distributed to insurgents after U.S. forces had deposed the government. Once insurgents began inflicting casualties on U.S. forces, Ba’thist leaders assumed that the United States would be

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73 Coalition Provisional Authority Order Number 1 dissolved the Ba’th Party and excluded large numbers of party members — many of whom were not committed to the party — from public life. Thomas E. Ricks, *Fiasco: The American Military Adventure in Iraq* (New York: Penguin Press HC), 160.

74 Ahmad Hashim raises some doubts about this perspective. He notes that some officers in the conscript army had turned toward Islam during the United Nations sanctions regime of the 1990s. Nevertheless, this segment of the army seems to have been a distinct minority and limited to some Sunni Arab officers from rural tribal regions. *Insurgency and Counter-Insurgency in Iraq* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2005), 110.
Pressured by the American electorate to withdraw from Iraq, echoing what had transpired in Somalia in 1996.

When officers and enlisted men found themselves no longer part of the armed forces, many joined the insurgency. This decision was not motivated by hostility to the United States, although there was considerable anger among members of the army for having lost their positions, but rather by a practical need to feed their families. According to an American officer I interviewed, the United States had lists of the names, addresses, and other contact information of all the members of the conscript army once it seized the Ministry of Defense. It would have been possible to reorganize the army, even though it would have required creating new bases in which to house the former members of the conscript army, an excuse the CPA used after the decision to disband it came under serious criticism.75

Another problematic decision enacted by the CPA was the formation of the Iraqi Governing Council in July 2003. Designed to lend legitimacy to the American occupation of Iraq, the Council was organized along ethnoconfessional lines. It was the first time since the founding of the Iraqi state in 1921 that a government had been specifically organized according to such criteria.76 The formation of the Iraqi Governing Council sent a message to Iraq’s post-Ba’thist political class that sectarianism was the new game in town. If politics were now structured by ethnic and confessional quotas, then everyone needed to play by the rules applied by the U.S. occupation administration.

In August 2003, the CPA decided to end subsidies to Iraq’s agricultural sector, which was already suffering from decades of neglect. The only farmers who had received any meaningful support under Saddam Husayn’s regime had been those who developed niche farming near Baghdad, where they produced agricultural products that were highly desired by the upper echelons of the Ba’th Party. The rationale for this decision was the CPA mantra that the state should not be an active player in economic affairs. Not only was the rationale for this decision hypocritical in light of the extensive subsides that the U.S. government has provided for decades to American farmers, it also strengthened the insurgency by forcing many young farmers to leave rural areas and migrate to urban areas. Faced with a lack of employment and a lack of community with which they could identify and join, these youth were often attracted to criminal syndicates, militias, or insurgent groups. By joining such groups, they received a salary and a sense of importance and belonging in an unfamiliar urban world.

In addition to enacting decisions that failed to address the unemployment situation, U.S. policy attempted to impose a constitution on Iraq that created a decentralized state with a weak central government. While all those interested in a transition to democracy agreed with the idea of a new

75 Interview with a former U.S. Marine Corps officer who was close to CPA Administrator Bremer.
76 Although cabinets under the monarchy traditionally assigned the Ministry of Education to a Shi’a and the Ministry of the Interior to a Kurd, and Saddam Husayn largely excluded Shi’a from his cabinets, there was never an explicit ethnoconfessional quota prior to the formation of the Iraqi Governing Council.
Iraq constructed along federalist lines, the extent to which Iraq was transformed from a strongly centralized state to one that became extremely decentralized went far beyond accepted understandings of federalism.

The United States’ push for a decentralized state was justified publicly as part of the effort to give each of Iraq’s main ethnoconfessional groups its own political influence in post-Ba’thist Iraq. The reality was probably quite different. In August 2006, I was invited, along with three colleagues, to meet with President George Bush and his cabinet to make suggestions about how to reverse the sectarian violence that was engulfing the country. When I was asked my opinions by President Bush, one of my recommendations was that officers from the disbanded Iraqi conscript army be reinstated in their former positions in the Iraqi military.

Immediately, Vice President Dick Cheney snapped, “Abd al-Aziz al-Hakim wouldn’t approve of that!” The immediacy and tone of Cheney’s remark suggested to me the following hypothesis, which explained, in part, the dismantling of the conscript army. Before his death in 2009, al-Hakim — head of the Supreme Council for the Islamic Revolution in Iraq (SCIRI) — was a regular visitor to Washington and the Pentagon, despite the fact that he held no official position in the Iraqi government. SCIRI had decided before the war that it would cooperate with the U.S. occupation as part of its long-term goal of establishing an Islamic state in Iraq. SCIRI was one of the few political organizations to possess a powerful militia, the Badr Corps, which had been trained by the Iranian army.

It seems that there was a tacit, if not explicit, agreement that the Bush administration would disband the Iraqi conscript army, create a decentralized state, and allow the Badr Corps to take control of security in Iraq’s southern Shi‘i majority provinces. Once SCIRI gained control of the south of Iraq, the United States would be given access to Iraqi oil, 60 percent of which is located in the country’s southernmost provinces. Because oil in the south is of exceptional quality — low-sulfur “sweet crude” — and very inexpensive to extract, the Bush administration’s support for SCIRI was understandable.

When the insurgency showed no sign of being defeated and it was no longer possible to avoid admitting the disastrous consequences of the occupation, the American public began to tire of the cost of the Iraq war in human lives and money. In the fall of 2006, the Bush administration finally decided to change course. Donald Rumsfeld was replaced, along with many of the formerly influential neo-conservative advisors. The key change was the diminution of the influence of the main architect of the Iraq war, Vice President Cheney. With the decline of the neo-conservatives, a main impediment to effective decision-making was removed. Officials with

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77 Rashid al-Khayyun, 100 Amm min al-Islam al-Siyasi fi-l-c Iraq, v. 1 al-Sh‘a’ [100 Years of Political Islam in Iraq, v.1, the Shi‘a] (Dubai: al-Mesbar Studios and Research Center, 2011), 297–328.

78 Subsequently, SCIRI changed its name to the Supreme Iraqi Islamic Council, making it more palatable to secular Iraqis and the United States.
greater knowledge of Iraq and the Middle East, whether in the State Department or the U.S. military, now could begin to advance different agendas, rather than face continued infighting.

The introduction of the “Surge” in 2006 brought about a major change in U.S. policy. Conceived by then-Ambassador Ryan Crocker, a diplomat with extensive experience in posts in the Arab world, and General David Petraeus, an expert in counterterrorism policy, the Surge was highly successful in turning the tide of the insurgency. The Surge added 30,000 troops to U.S. forces in Iraq and embedded these forces in neighborhoods threatened by al-Qa‘ida and other militant groups, thereby offering local populations more effective protection.

Equally important was the introduction of the concept of the Provincial Reconstruction Team (PRT). The PRT sent highly educated professionals to Iraq, where they assisted Iraqis in all parts of the country to address specific challenges, ranging from land reclamation to teaching municipal officials how to tender a bid for a government contract. What was particularly significant about the PRT was the impact it had on U.S.-Iraqi relations. For the first time, Iraqis felt that Americans were letting them set the national reconstruction agenda. Feeling that they enjoyed American respect helped Iraqis feel a greater level of trust in the United States and its role in Iraq.

The Surge and the introduction of the PRT model of development were accompanied by successful elections in January and December of 2005 and the spring and summer of 2009. Electoral support for sectarian political parties declined as the security situation improved throughout the country. Another of David Petraeus’ innovations was the “Anbar Awakening” or “Sons of Iraq” movement. When al-Qa‘ida began overstepping its bounds in al-Anbar, the large Iraqi province west of Baghdad, by infringing on tribal economic prerogatives and killing recalcitrant tribesmen who refused to support the terrorist organization’s policies, the United States stepped in and organized a tribal militia, whose members were paid a salary of $300 per month. The success of the Awakening movement was evident in the rapid eradication of al-Qa‘ida’s influence in the so-called Sunni Arab Triangle.

Despite this progress, the Bush administration continued to make bad decisions in the political realm. Having supported a series of Iraqi leaders who had not enjoyed strong popular support, the United States found itself faced with yet another ineffectual prime minister in the person of Dr. Ibrahim al-Ja‘fari. A member of the Islamic Call Party (Hizb al-Da‘wa al-Islamiya), al-Ja‘fari ruled from May 2005 until May 2006, when the United States engineered his replacement with Nuri al-Maliki, a little-known politician with no administrative experience who had spent much of his life in exile in Iran and Syria. Nuri al-Maliki, who had fled Iraq after several members of his family were killed by Saddam’s regime, was highly sectarian and conspiratorial in outlook.

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79 Between and 2006 and their termination in 2010/2011, I had the pleasure of training members of Iraq PRTs at the State Department’s George Schultz National Foreign Affairs Training Center (Foreign Service Institute). During this period, I learned of the many successes of the PRT program in Iraq.
While al-Maliki was able to subdue the Sadrist Mahdi Army militia in the spring of 2008 — initially without U.S. military support — thereby expanding his national support, his increasingly authoritarian behavior eroded the progress Iraq had made toward democracy since 2006. Increasingly, al-Maliki’s actions disturbed U.S. policymakers, who saw his behavior as counterproductive to Iraqi and American interests. Despite his advisers’ recommendations that the United States withdraw its support for al-Maliki, President Bush refused to pressure the prime minister to change his behavior.

Matters did not improve once Barack Obama assumed the U.S. presidency in 2009. Having run on a platform of ending the war in Iraq and withdrawing all remaining U.S. troops, President Obama largely ignored political, social, and economic developments during the al-Maliki administration, considering the situation “Bush’s war.” Meanwhile, al-Maliki enacted policies that marginalized Sunni Arab politicians, appointed loyalists and cronies to positions in the military and security services while dismissing competent officers, and strengthened corruption by using state oil revenues to buy off politicians. Meanwhile, al-Maliki antagonized political parties in the Shi‘i community, such as the Sadrists, the Supreme Iraqi Islamic Council (formerly SCIRI), and the Virtue (al-Fadila) Party.

In the March 2010 parliamentary elections, al-Maliki tried to postpone the voting when he realized he might not win a majority. He also proposed using a closed-list system that would circumvent the constitutional stipulation that one of every four seats in Parliament must be filled by a woman. Here, al-Maliki sought to appeal to male voters: in a closed-list system, parties could nominate female candidates who would be docile supporters of their parties. Fortunately, Ayatollah Ali al-Sistani intervened to prevent these decisions from being implemented, arguing that postponing the elections would undermine the new Iraqi constitution and that using a closed-list system was undemocratic, because voters would not know the individual candidates for whom they were casting their ballots. When al-Maliki was asked why he failed to pursue policies of national reconciliation (al-musaliha al-wataniya), he repeatedly avoided the questions and replied that what Iraq really needed was the “rule of law.”

The sectarian and authoritarian behavior that characterized al-Maliki’s first term as prime minister should have been a red flag for the Obama administration. Instead, when the elections were held, al-Maliki’s State of Law Coalition won eighty-nine seats, while the al-‘Iraqiya Coalition led by a secular Shi‘i, Ayad Allawi, won ninety-one. al-Maliki was furious, calling the elections “unfair” and rigged by his enemies. However, a recount certified the results and a court challenge failed to change the outcome. Nevertheless, the Obama administration feared that if it supported Allawi, who was hostile to Iranian influence in the al-Maliki regime, Iran would increase its meddling in Iraqi affairs, possibly leading to more U.S. casualties. In a bizarre turn of events, Barack Obama formed a tacit alliance with the Islamic Republic to assure that al-Maliki remained in office. Using the argument that he had made an alliance with the Kurdish list that won fifty-four seats in the election and thus possessed a greater number of seats than Allawi’s al-‘Iraqiya Coalition, al-Maliki argued that he should have the right to form the next government.
To pacify al-'Iraqiya, the Obama administration proposed that Allawi become head of the new National Council for Security Affairs and that this council have a central role in appointing the ministers of defense and interior. al-Maliki agreed to the U.S. proposal but immediately reneged once he won a second term as prime minister. During the next four years, al-Maliki followed even more destructive policies, inventing trumped-up charges against all major Sunni politicians whom he viewed as threats, such as Vice President Tariq al-Hashimi and the moderate Sunni minister of finance, Rafić al-‘Issawi, both of whom were forced to flee Baghdad.

The growing political crisis came to a head in June 2014, following the March parliamentary elections. All political parties, including large segments of his own al-Da’wa Party, refused to support al-Maliki for a third term. Having won 33 percent of the vote, more than any other party, al-Maliki refused to step down, arguing that he was entitled to another term. It was only when ISIS burst on the scene, seizing Iraq’s second-largest city, Mosul, and much of al-Anbar, Salah al-Din, and Ninawa provinces, that al-Maliki began to face a serious challenge to his remaining in the post of prime minister. The crisis, and the pressure it generated from the United States and the international community, forced al-Maliki to finally confront the inevitable, even though he called Iraqi security forces and tanks into the streets of Baghdad in an effort to intimidate his political opponents. Obama’s forceful position that no U.S. military aid would be forthcoming until Iraq formed a more inclusive government that reached out to the Kurds, and especially the Sunni Arab population, was the proverbial straw that broke the political camel’s back.

**Conclusion**

In this essay, I have argued for the need to give greater credence to the idea that Iraq has the potential to make a transition to democratic governance. Taking democracy seriously means that we must develop a broader perspective on the transition process, one that integrates a wide variety of historical and contemporary variables. On one hand, the model proffered here transgresses the injunction that truly scientific (and rigorous) theory must be parsimonious in nature. This essay challenges that conceptual and methodological perspective by demonstrating that a theoretical approach that limits itself to a core set of variables (for example, the social [pre]requisites of democracy) by definition excludes many other critical variables; for example, those of a diachronic nature such as historical memory or those of a synchronic nature, such as political culture.

The approach employed in this essay further argues that, without grounding the analysis of Iraqi politics in a broad conceptual framework that encompasses notions of identity, social justice, and political institutions, our theoretical model cannot grasp the elements that we need to examine if we are to capture the possibilities for democratic change in Iraq.
In place of a misplaced emphasis on parsimony, I have outlined a core set of concepts that can, in turn, be measured by a subset of variables using qualitative and quantitative data. These include attitudes toward democracy, institutional design, national identity, political parties, corruption, political culture (particularly norms of trust, pluralism, and conflict resolution through negotiation), gender relations, and exogenous variables (either positive or negative “neighborhood effects” or the impact of the international community, especially, in Iraq’s case, that of the United States).

The variables derived from each of these contexts can be measured to produce a set of indices of democratic transitions. For example, national identity can be measured using survey research data, gender relations can be measured by female participation in the workforce and the impact of higher education on male and female employment, and institutional design can be evaluated by the extent to which institutions respect the rules of federalism in their daily functioning. Once these indices are constructed, they can be compared to similar indices in other countries seeking to implement a democratic transition. Thus Iraq no longer remains an isolated “case study,” but becomes part of a large, cross-national dataset.

Beyond issues of conceptualization and measurement, I argue that Iraq offers certain “counterfactual” hypotheses that challenge the stereotypical understanding of two models: one being the rentier state thesis, and the other the ethnic conflict model. A number of theorists argue that rentierism is antithetical to positive political change; Iraq offers an important variation on this argument. In Iraq, it is oil wealth that has actually kept the nation unified, creating a more complex intra- and inter-elite dynamic. On the one hand, oil wealth has created conflict between the Kurdish political elite in the Kurdish Regional Government and the Arab political elite in Baghdad, but it has also fostered cleavages within the Kurdish and especially the Arab political elite. Thus, oil wealth has created conflict within Iraq’s political classes so that we see both inter- and intra-elite conflict over its disposition. Likewise, oil wealth has created strong cleavages between the central government in Baghdad and the country’s Arab provinces. This led, for example, to lawsuits brought by al-Anbar — a Sunni-majority province — and al-Basra — a Shi’i majority province — against the central government for not consulting them on oil contracts in their respective regions, as required by the Iraqi constitution.

Iraq challenges the rentier state thesis from another perspective. The unexpected collapse of world oil prices that began in January 2015 and continues at the time of this writing, will have serious economic consequences for Iraq. There may, however, be a silver lining. If Iraq loses significant revenues due to continued low oil prices, the government will find it difficult to deliver social services, a problem that has already angered many Iraqis. On the other hand, this crisis may allow reform-minded elements within the Iraqi government, the foremost of whom is

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Prime Minister Haydar al-Abadi, to make inroads in fighting corruption. The argument is that, facing reduced state revenues, corruption must be curtailed so that more social services can be provided. Otherwise, there could be a substantial growth in public opposition to the government. To protect their own sinecures, members of the political elite may decide that reducing corruption is in their own interest to protect their hold on political office.

Iraq is often viewed through the conceptual prism of ethnoconfessional groups. Its political instability is caused, it is argued, by the inability of the three main ethnic and confessional groups — the Kurds, Sunni Arabs, and Shi’i Arabs — to cooperate in governing the country. In this essay, I argue that it is precisely the division of the country among these three politically dominant groups which helps to promote democratic transition. First, with power divided among the main ethnoconfessional groups, no one group can dominate the state. Second, the incentive for all segments of the political elite to ultimately come to a successful agreement, so as not to disrupt oil production and sales, makes oil wealth a key variable in countering the supposed centrifugal forces of Iraq’s three main ethnoconfessional communities.

Iraq enjoys a distinction that has been experienced by only a few Arab states. In all four of its parliamentary elections, the transfer of political power has taken place though non-violent means. While it is true that three of the four instances occurred during the U.S. occupation, the 2014 elections led to Prime Minister Nuri al-Maliki ceding power to Dr. Haydar al-Abadi. One of the key indicators of a democratic transition is the transfer of power through constitutional means. Although it is still unclear whether al-Maliki had the mandate to form a government in light of his receiving roughly 33 percent of the national vote, more than any other candidate, it was clear that he had little support for remaining in office for a third term. The appointment of al-Abadi as prime minister bodes well for future Iraqi parliamentary elections. Already, he has reached out to the Sunni Arab and Kurdish communities, dismissed corrupt and incompetent military officers in the Iraq army, and reduced his salary and that of his ministers. He has also pushed for reforms in the arrest and treatment of political prisoners.

Another key indicator of democracy is that the outcome of an election is not known in advance. In the two most important elections, 2010 and 2014, no one knew who would become prime minister. In Iraq, there is a fractious political elite that reflects the country’s diverse ethnic and ideological makeup. Because it is doubtful that a strongman like Saddam Husayn will emerge anytime in the near future, there is a high probability that power will rotate among a number of leaders of the transitory political coalition that now characterizes the Iraqi political landscape.

82 We can cite other examples where such a transfer has taken place, such as Egypt, Morocco, and Jordan. However, when Muslim Brotherhood candidate Muhammad Mursi was elected president in the Egyptian elections of June 2012, it was always understood that the military was the power behind the throne. In Morocco and Jordan, prime ministers have always served at the pleasure of King Muhammad VI and King Abdallah. Indeed, the Moroccan prime minister, Justice and Development Party leader Abdelilah Benkirane, “recently described himself as an employee rather than the leader of what he termed the king’s government”: http://www.dailymotion.com/2014/11/19/gulf-football-diplomacy-highlights-regional-divisions/.

83 Tunisia is the only other Arab state that can claim that quality in its national elections.
Finally, taking democracy seriously in Iraq entails avoiding viewing Iraq’s efforts at a democratic transition as an analytic “spectator sport.” As I have shown, the U.S. occupation from 2003 to 2011 seriously hampered Iraq’s effort to achieve political stability and democratize. If the international community would offer more assistance to the Iraqi government and to Iraqi civil society organizations, such support would energize large segments of Iraqi society, especially youth, the educated middle classes and women, to press harder for their demands. Without such help, the failure of democratization could become a self-fulfilling prophecy in which countries outside the Middle East view the lack of progress as substantiating their stereotypes about Iraq’s “inherent” inability to engage in positive political development.

Is Iraq a democracy? The answer is no. The more important question is whether it has the capability to make a transition to democracy. As the effort to transition to democratic governance continues, the inability of any one segment of its political elite to dominate power in the manner of the former Ba’th Party will provide an opening for the development of new political tendencies, particularly those that emerge from Iraq’s large youth demographic. This is particularly true if Iraqi youth can acquire the necessary education and employment that will prevent them from being drawn to illegal or terrorist activities. Here, Iraq’s extensive hydrocarbon wealth can support democratization by expanding education and economic opportunity. It is in this area that the international community can have a significant impact. Supporting democratic impulses in Iraq will continue to constitute a critical variable in whether the country ultimately succeeds in becoming a democracy.

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84 Some would argue that Iraq is actually an example of a state that is better understood through the concept of “competitive authoritarianism.” Although Iraq does demonstrate qualities that would allow it to be characterized as such, a competitive authoritarian state is one where a small, powerful elite exercises tight control over the polity. This is not true of Iraq. See Steven Levitsky and Lucan A. Way, *Competitive Authoritarianism: Hybrid Regimes after the Cold War* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010).
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