

# To what Extent can Contemporary Internal Governance Problems in Iraq be Blamed on Outside Powers?



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**Citation:** Mathurin, Shaquille (2023) To what Extent can Contemporary Internal Governance Problems in Iraq be Blamed on Outside Powers? The Mathurin Hybrid Society, War & Conflict, 1-8:  
<https://www.mathurinhybridinitiative.org/war-conflict>

## **1: Introduction**

The modern Iraqi state is a nation that has been plagued by violent internal governance issues. Since the formation of modern Iraq, outside powers have heavily influenced the politics and institutional frameworks of Iraq through coercive means. This raises the question, to what extent can contemporary internal governance problems in Iraq be blamed on outside powers? Combining historical and contemporary political analysis, this essay argues that outside powers are to blame for current internal governance issues in Iraq. My view is based upon failed attempts by western policymakers, to sufficiently state-build the Arab nation, despite numerous military occupations to enforce their political will. Starting from the British Mandate of Iraq to the unjustified 2003 U.S invasion, western policymakers have consistently destabilised Iraqi politics, paving the way for authoritarianism and extremism. Additionally, the state of Iran has also played a significant role in fuelling ethnic and sectarian divisions within Iraq, to build its sphere of influence in the Middle East.

## **2: Analytical Framework**

Due to the nature of this topic and several important historical factors, this essay will consist of a pluralist analytical framework. Firstly, Halliday (2005: 23) highlights that historical analysis allows for insightful comparative opportunities to explore. This opportunity will be utilised in section 5 of this essay, where I review the similarities between the British Mandate and the U.S occupation of Iraq. Also, historical analysis allows me to consider different theoretical approaches to this topic. Thus, this article will also explore realist and constructivist theory. Realist theory focusses on the role of security and power in international relations (Halliday, 2005: 25). This is particularly useful to section 6 of this essay, which examines how Iran's quest for regional influence and power has impacted internal governance issues in Iraq. Constructivism is the view that state behaviour is determined by cultures and shared identities (Halliday, 2005: 32). Understanding ethnic and sectarian factors are of vital importance, as

ethnic/sectarian violence is a prominent internal governance issue in Iraq. Identity is a factor that the British Empire and the United States failed to consider in their attempts of state-building and is a factor Iran exploited. Finally, this essay will also address international, state and individual elements to this research topic. As Fawcett (2013) notes, this method is often used “reductionist problem solving device”. However, in this essay, I will deploy this method to draw attention to how the international order and individual analysis of Saddam Hussein has impacted the Iraqi state.

### **3: The Role of the British Empire**

Following the collapse of the Ottoman Empire after WW1, the League of Nations passed a mandate in 1920, giving the British Empire the right to build and govern an Iraqi state. British attempts to combine the provinces of Basra, Baghdad and Mosul into a single state faced three significant issues. The first issue was the changing international system in the aftermath of WW1. The growing influence of the United States, who held an anti-imperial stance, and the financial struggles of the British Empire subsequently pushed forward the idea that developing states should become self-ruling rather than colonies (Dodge, 2006). The second issue was the rise of Arab nationalism and revolts against British control. Revolts included rebel forces, often led by former Ottoman military officers, attacking crucial infrastructure and British garrisons (Vinogradov, 1972: 136). The fighting spread across multiple fronts, killing thousands of people, forcing the British to change their policy in Iraq by installing a structurally weak constitutional monarchy (Vinogradov, 1972: 123). With the growth of Arab nationalism and continued fighting, it became that Iraq was going to become an independent state sooner rather than later. This meant that it was the goal of the British to build the Iraqi state at low costs (Dodge, 2006), influencing the hasty decision to establish the Hashemite Dynasty through King Faisal. As Thomas Eich (2009: 112) illustrates, the appointment of Faisal as King of Iraq was done despite his lack of an indigenous power base and without the considerations for religious factors in Iraq. This relates to the third major issue for Britain, who had disregarded ethnic and religious elements of the region. The British and French signed a secret treaty in 1916, named the Sykes-Picot Agreement, establishing the spheres of influence the British and French would have in the Middle East if the Ottoman Empire collapsed. The treaty contradicted previous agreements the U.K had with Arabian leaders and had no consideration for historical ethnic antecedents.

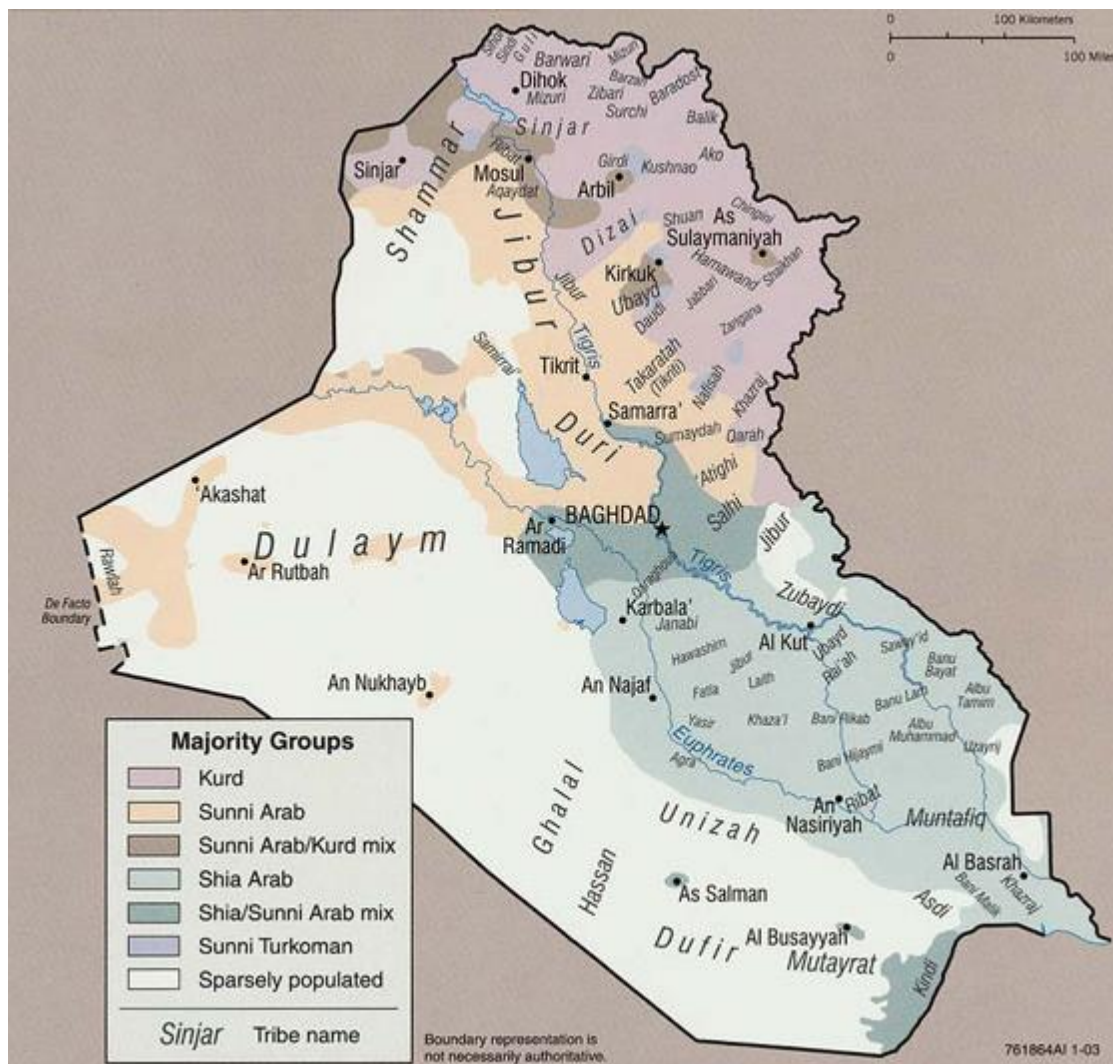


Figure 1

Source: Detailed Ethnic and Religious Map of Iraq. [www.ciaonet.org](http://www.ciaonet.org)

Figure 1 highlights the scale of ethnic divisions within the borders of Iraq, drawn by the British and French. Figure 1 shows a considerable amount of land ethnically dominated by the Kurds to the North compared the Arabs further south. According to Michael Gunter (2013: 36), Kurdish nationalism began to develop after WW1 in Iraq, due to the British granting minimal Kurdish autonomy. The Sykes-Picot Agreement entrenched internal divisions we see today in Iraq, as the Kurdish people continue to struggle for an independent state in the Middle East. Similarly, figure 1 shows a huge geographical divide between Shia and Sunni Muslims within Iraq, with sectarian violence continuing to be an internal governance issue for Iraq today. I do not believe it is impossible for Shia and Sunni Muslims to peacefully coexist in a single nation. However, the weak governmental institutions created by the British Empire, made Iraq more susceptible to a series of attempted military coups. For example, the 1941 Iraqi coup d'état, the 1958 assassination of the Iraqi royal family and finally the 1968 Second Ba'athist coup, which was co-led by Saddam Hussein. As a Sunni Muslim, Saddam Hussein's rise to power exacerbated sectarian hatred between Sunni and Shia Muslims, which will be discussed in the next section of the

essay. There is a wide consensus that the Sykes-Picot Agreement was the beginning of many modern governance issues in the Middle East (Gaub, 2016) and as we have reviewed, Iraq is no exception to this. Therefore, I argue that the role of the British Empire in creating a structurally weak monarchy and disregarding ethnic factors in the signing of the Sykes-Picot Agreement laid the foundations for the internal government issues we see today in Iraq.

#### **4: Saddam Hussein**

For this section of the essay, rather than focussing on Saddam Hussein's external wars, my primary focus is individual and state level analysis of Saddam's reign. As discussed, the creation of the modern Iraqi state by the British was opposed by those living there and failed to provide a strong institutional framework that could establish a general basis for the rule of law. Thus, by nature, Iraqi politics has remained inherently unstable, leading to a magnitude of political disputes (Kelidar, 1992: 779). Tripp (2007: 216) supports the argument that Saddam Hussein's rise to power is a consequence of the "long-apparent ambivalence of the Iraqi state".

Saddam was mentored by his uncle, Kairallah, a man who had spent 5 years in prison after rebelling against the British. Kairallah was devoted to Arab nationalism, with a hatred for foreigners and taught Saddam Hussein the ideology of the Ba'ath party. The ideology of the Ba'ath party was focussed on the concept of the struggle and oppression of the Arab people from the Ottoman's, western mandates and the monarchies set up by the west (Post, 1991: 280). Initially the Ba'ath party comprised of mostly Shia Muslims, however over time, clans and tribal networks from the "provincial Sunni Arab north-west" dominated the party by 1968 (Tripp, 2007: 186). Therefore in 1968, the year Saddam Hussein co-lead a successful coup, the new regime was disproportionately represented by Sunni Muslims (Tripp, 2007: 186).

After becoming president in 1979, Saddam created national institutions, such as a new National Assembly to propel the myth of a unified state. (Tripp, 2007: 217-218). These institutions enabled Saddam to establish patron-client networks, used to seek out those who opposed him. Starting with the Kurds, who Saddam viewed as "insidious enemies supported by foreign powers" (Post, 1991: 282), Saddam used his patron-client networks, to exploit internal divisions among the Kurds to draw them into his personal domain (Tripp, 2007: 218-221). This helped Saddam wage a vicious war against the Kurds, resulting in a magnitude of atrocities. During the Iran-Iraq war, Iraqi Kurdish rebel groups were targeted by Saddam's military "Anfal Campaign". According to the European Agency for Asylum (EUAA), 182,000 Kurds were killed or deported by Iraqi forces during the Anfal campaign. The EUAA also states that Iraqi forces used chemical weapons in the Kurdish village of Halabja, killing 5,000 and wounding 10,000 Kurds. Additionally, organised opposition from Shia citizens in Iraq were also a considerable

challenge for Saddam (Tripp, 2007: 221). Iraq comprises of a majority Shia population meaning to some degree, dissidents from the Shia population was more problematic to Saddam than the Kurds. Supported by Iran, Shia opposition groups revolted against the Saddam regime multiple times, for example, the two Sadr Uprisings. However, one of the most prominent altercations between Saddam's regime and Shia Muslims was the 1982 Dujail Massacre. In response to an assassination attempt on Saddam Hussein by the Shia Islamic Dawa Party, 148 Shiite men and boys were massacred in Dujail.

The core argument of this essay is that the attempts of state building Iraq from outside powers is a primary cause of contemporary internal governance issues in Iraq. Tripp (2007: 187) claims that the communal mistrust, extreme violence and exclusivity of Saddam Hussein's presidency was a manifestation of the historical trends of the Iraqi state. Building on this claim, I argue that failed western attempts of state building, starting with the Sykes-Picot Agreement, is what entrenched this narrative of Iraqi politics. From a constructivist view, the total disregard of ethnic antecedents in the creation of modern Middle Eastern states, made the atrocities committed by Saddam Hussein possible. Identity related governance issues worsened by the Saddam regime persist today and will likely continue to be a difficult obstacle for the current and future Iraqi governments.

## **5: Consequences of 2003**

In March 2003, a U.S-led coalition launched an invasion of Iraq, under the false claim that Saddam Hussein had weapons of mass destruction. This section of the essay will focus on state and partially regional level consequences of the U.S invasion and occupation of Iraq. After the capture of Saddam Hussein, US policymakers failed to engage in sufficient planning of Iraq's reconstruction (Carapico & Toensing, 2006). This is reinforced by Abboud (2009), who argues that the neoliberal economic model imposed by the U.S failed to tailor the needs of reconstructing Iraq, most notably the stealth privatisation of Iraqi oil fields. The U.S "production sharing agreements", in which the state would legally own the oil fields, but private multinational companies who invested in the infrastructure of the oil fields would oversee the extraction and distribution process and would share the profits. This meant billions of dollars was diverted from the Iraqi government and profits were dependent on the actions of foreign oil companies rather than the state (Abboud, 2009: 437)

Politically, Flibbert (2013: 81-82) identifies three reasons for why the U.S occupation crippled Iraq's ability to function as a state. The first reason is that the invasion destroyed the administrative capacity of Iraq, forcing authorities to rebuild political structures, whilst simultaneously dealing with other consequences of the war. This meant that state-building from the ground up, lacked the attention to detail needed to install successful basic administrative capabilities. The second reason outlined by Flibbert, is that the post-war dismantlement of Iraqi security forces by the U.S, destroyed Iraq's ability to control

violence. This is evident in the dramatic rise of sectarian and ethnic violence since the 2003 invasion. Ashraf al-Khalidi (2006) claims that sectarian divisions between Shia and Sunni Muslims, that had grown after an extensive period of Ba'athist favouritism towards Sunnis, reached breaking point, due to U.S mismanagement of its occupation. According to Flibbert, this has also led to Iraq becoming dependent on foreign military power for defence, resulting to the 2014 return of the U.S military in Iraq to combat ISIS and an increasing presence of Iran's IRGC-QF, which will be later discussed. The third reason why the U.S invasion is to blame for governance issues in Iraq illustrated by Flibbert is that the institutions set up by the Americans lacked legitimacy among many Iraqi civilians. This is also a contributor to the increase in sectarian conflict within Iraq.

Comparative analysis of the U.S occupation and the British rule of Iraq offers some striking similarities. Both the British colonial rule and the U.S occupation of Iraq, took place during a period of dramatic global paradigm shifts, increasing the difficulty of effectively state-building. The British control of Iraq took place during a period of growing anti-imperialism post-WW1 and economic turmoil after the 1929 Wall Street Crash. The U.S occupation of Iraq took place during the shifting global politics of the post-9/11 era, the return of a multipolar international system and the financial struggles of the 2007-2008 Financial Crisis. Also, both the British imposed monarchy and American installed democracy of Iraq lacked legitimacy and failed to consider the ethnic and sectarian consequences of their political creations. What remains to be seen is whether the U.S occupation of Iraq will follow a similar path of British Mandatory Iraq to a solidified dictatorship. Toby Dodge (2012: 161-163) claims that the contemporary cause of Iraqi state weakness is endemic corruption within state institutions, leading Iraq towards dictatorship and civil war. However, I argue that corruption within Iraqi politics is due to failed western state-building and economic mismanagement. The British Empire made Iraqi politics inherently unstable, making it possible for individuals to engage in corruption and exploit state weaknesses, made worse by the U.S invasion.

## **6: Iran and the Arab Spring**

Iran and Iraq have a long history of interfering in each other's internal governance issues. Historically, constructivist explanations of identity within Iraq and Iran have been fundamental to their geopolitical relations. Despite this, I believe analysing the contemporary relationship between Iran and Iraq is best approached with a neo-realist perspective. The Arab Spring has arguably been the most important development in Middle Eastern politics since the 2003 invasion of Iraq. In 2011, mass uprisings in the Middle East and North Africa challenged authoritarianism in the region, instigating several regime changes and ongoing civil wars. The power vacuums caused by the Arab Spring provided regional powers an opportunity to expand their influence. With the 2003 U.S invasion shifting the balance of power in the Middle East, Iran has seized the opportunities provided by the Arab Spring to increase their



regional authority. Also, the Arab Spring has also deepened Iran’s rivalries with Saudi Arabia and Israel, with Iraq being a key player in these proxy conflicts. The Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC-QF) have been fundamental to Iranian strategy in Iraq. According to Seth Jones (2019: 8), Tehran has used the IRGC-QF to actively bolster Shia militias in Iraq, helping Iran to strengthen its grip on Iraqi political affairs. Iranian officials have also had direct involvement in Iraqi political affairs, aided by the sectarian governmental system in Iraq (Cherry, 2019). As Abrahamian (2008: 195) highlights, Shia Muslims in Iraq have long viewed Iran as their protector. However, recent Iranian interference has been met by several deadly protests in Iraq, opposed to sectarian politics and foreign influence (Cherry, 2019). Nonetheless, growing Iranian influence poses a threat to Saudi regional interests, who have been accused of sponsoring Sunni terrorist groups in Iraq. If true, sectarian violence between Shia and Sunnis, and the threat of ISIS can widely be associated with Iran and Saudi Arabia’s proxy war.

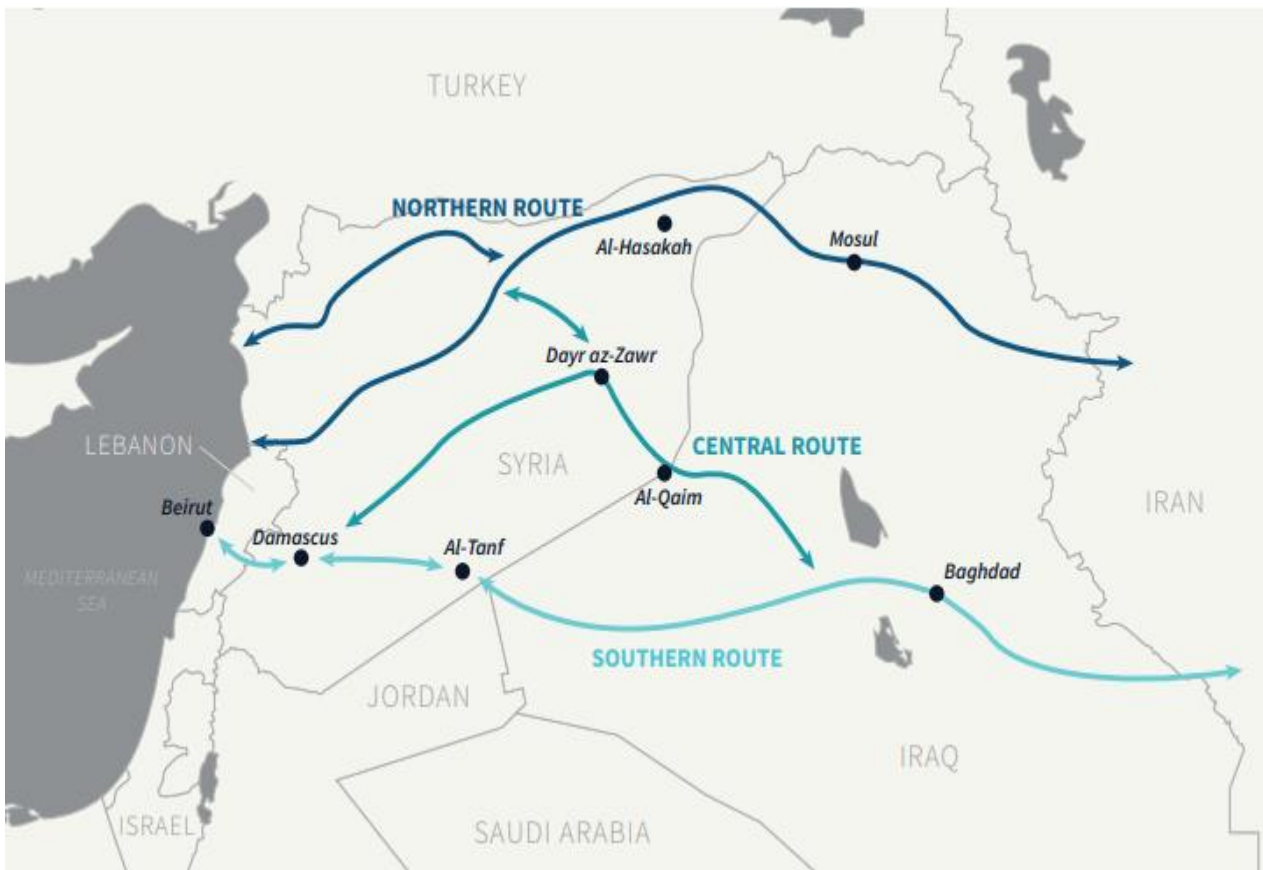


Figure 2  
Source: Jones, 2019

Furthermore, figure 2 shows “land bridges” Iran is trying to establish in the Middle East between itself and proxy non-state organisations such as Hezbollah according to Jones (2019). Figure 2 highlights the strategic importance of Iraq in Iran’s proxy conflict against Israel, with major cities like Baghdad and Mosul used as key points for supply chains to Lebanon. To combat this, in 2019, Israel conducted

airstrikes in Iraq, on Iranian proxy groups, also killing civilians. The U.S have also conducted airstrikes in Iraq to combat the IRGC-QF, executing its Iranian general, Qasem Soleimani in Baghdad, a man accused of causing the death of many American soldiers. Nevertheless, along with the British Empire and the U.S, Iran's activity has been a significant cause of contemporary internal governance problems within Iraq. Iran has further entrenched sectarian violence in Iraq as a means of fulfilling their quest for regional power. Iran's proxy wars with Saudi Arabia, Israel and the U.S has seen Iraq used as a theatre of war. These conflicts are not the fault of Iraq, yet it's Iraqi civilians who pay the price.

## 6: Conclusion

Using multiple analytical tools, this essay has studied the influences of outside powers in Iraqi politics, since the end of WW1. This essay has argued that outside powers are predominantly to blame for Iraq's internal governance issues. The British failure in Mandatory Iraq laid the foundations for future sectarian/ethnic violence, with Saddam Hussein being a product of the political weaknesses of Britain's imposed monarchy in Iraq. Moreover, I have argued that U.S policy of regime change for their 2003 invasion has also developed key weaknesses in Iraqi politics and economy. Gaddis (1992: 6) states that "visions of any future have to proceed from the awareness of some kind of past", a lesson that U.S policymakers failed to learn from the British, in their failed attempts of state-building Iraq. Finally, fuelling old sectarian divisions and Iran's quest for regional power and authority in the region has further exacerbated internal governance issues within Iraq. As a result, I reaffirm my view that outside powers are predominately to blame for Iraq's internal governance problems.



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