

# A State in Collapse: Iraq's Security and Governance Failures

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## ABOUT THE AUTHORS

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Brief Analysis

## Unregulated weapons, corruption, and mismanagement are pushing Iraq's political system towards potential collapse.

Iraq is in a state of crisis: the unprecedented spread of uncontrolled weapons has reached frightening levels in Iraq, and unemployment has affected large segments of the workforce. The irritation of unemployed youth is at worrying levels as well, accompanied by disguised unemployment in all state institutions and lower, if not nonexistent, productivity in many bloated state agencies burdened with completely unnecessary institutions. Financial and administrative corruption is rampant in most key state agencies. Under the administration of a fragile and mismanaged political system, all this has become a tangible reality. The spread of the COVID-19 pandemic and its repercussions on all areas of life and the economy has made matters worse, devastating a country that has barely caught its breath from a series of splintering crises, day after day, since 2003.

These crises and challenges would constitute factors for the imminent collapse of any system in the world, not just in Iraq. On top of all the previously mentioned issues, the country's ruling political leadership seems indifferent to the dangers of the system's expected collapse. They turn their attention to divvying up the remaining plunder rather than fulfilling their national and moral responsibilities to deal with Iraq's many crises and stop the harbingers of collapse.

### Proliferation of Weapons

Without a doubt, uncontrolled weapons play a major role in reducing state resources. Because armed non-state groups control border crossings, widespread weapons have meant the theft of state resources. And when oil prices fall, as happened in 2020, armed groups begin to fight among one another for control of the geographic areas that secure resources for them, such as border crossings, oil wells, and factories. In other words, the circulation of weapons among different segments of society, under any name, poses a grave danger to political and economic

stability. Iraq will not be able to recover unless these arms can be controlled.

**State Weapons:** These weapons are held by military and state institutions that, on the surface, are under the command of the Commander-in-Chief of the armed forces. In reality, most of these institutions are ravaged by corruption and operate according to party loyalties. Few work in the interest of the state.

**Factional Weapons:** Weapons possessed by factions in Iraq can be divided into two types. The first type consists of weapons in the hands of the armed factions that are within the framework of the Popular Mobilization Commission (PMC) but follow the orders of faction military and party leadership tied to sectarian Shia interests. They do not hesitate to challenge the state at any moment if stands in the way of their interests.

The second type consists of weapons held by factions outside the PMC. These groups are ideological and loyal to the Islamic Republic of Iran. They do not obey PMC orders and work outside state authority, even using weapons against the state at times. However, they benefit from all the salaries and financial and armament support the state provides to PMC factions, including the right to move freely, around the clock.

**Peshmerga Weapons:** The Peshmerga forces are formally linked to the Kurdistan region's president. In reality, however, they are divided in two parts: the first led by the Kurdistan Democratic Party (KDP) and the second led by the Patriotic Union of Kurdistan (PUK). Their loyalty is not to the Iraqi state when its interests conflict with Kurdish interests, as occurred in Kirkuk and its outskirts in 2017.

**Tribal Weapons:** most Iraqi tribes in central, southern, and even northern Iraq—if not all of them—are armed. The type and level of arms varies from one tribe to another, and inter-tribe clashes and armed confrontations take place from time to time, especially in Basra, Nasiriyah, and Amarah. Light, medium, and even heavy weapons are used in these clashes. The loyalty of these armed fighters is certainly to the tribe, making their use against the state possible, depending on the higher interest of the tribe.

**Terrorist Weapons:** Terrorist factions and cells possess other, not insignificant, amount of weapons, ammunition, and materiel. These are used to disrupt and weaken security while threatening state authority in most areas of central, western, and northern Iraq. They are no less dangerous than the other weapons, especially when a series of coordinated attacks are launched against both military and civilian targets.

**Loose Weapons:** These are collected by individuals and bought and sold openly, in specialized markets. They include an enormous amount of licensed and unlicensed light weapons, and significant quantities of ammunition and materiel. They are spread among civilian citizens and used currently either for personal defense or on social occasions threatening civil peace. Their use is sometimes against the state and its institutions, depending on the loyalty of the person bearing arms.

The spread of an enormous amount of weapons outside state control weakens the state and leaves it unable to rule and control the country. As one senior diplomat described it to me, “the Iraqi state is the fifth largest armed force in Iraq.”

## **Pervasive Corruption**

Corruption in Iraq, once a phenomenon, is now a culture. It is a culture led by the ruling parties, in their greed, to systematically loot most of the country's resources, either directly or indirectly. Corruption is the greatest danger to the country, having paralyzed the already stalled movement of construction, growth, and development. It corrodes the crumbling economy and squanders fiscal and administrative abundance. Successive governments have been unable to curb the spread of corruption within governmental and non-governmental institutions, despite the multiple official bodies concerned with combatting it, including the Commission of Integrity, the Financial

Supervision Bureau, and the judiciary. Most ruling parties have worked to establish economic offices to appoint the minister and those who follow him, directing them in the service of party interests by sending them purchase, service, and building contracts. All of the parties have become involved in this phenomenon, in one way or another.

Corruption is not limited to the executive authority, but also extends to the legislature. The Council of Representatives is working to codify some forms of corruption, or to turn a blind eye, failing to exercise its role in oversight. A good example of this is the failure of the Council of Representatives to investigate any minister from the beginning of the current term to this day, despite a number of requests for inquiries into multiple ministers filed with the presidency of the Council. Some representatives resort to waving the card of investigation of one minister or another for self-seeking gains. The leverage of representatives over the government departments increased following the adoption of Council of Representatives **Law No. 13 (<https://moj.gov.iq/upload/pdf/4499.pdf>)** of 2018, Article 16 of which stipulates that government departments cooperate with a representatives “to enable him to fulfill his role.” Article 15 requires all ministries to respond to any correspondence from representatives. Refraining to do so is a breach of duty punishable under Article 329 of the Iraqi Penal Code.

According to the 2021 **report**

**(<https://www.alaraby.co.uk/economy/%D8%A7%D9%84%D8%B9%D8%B1%D8%A7%D9%82-82-%D9%88%D8%B2%D9%8A%D8%B1%D8%A7%D9%8B-%D9%88%D9%85%D8%B3%D8%A4%D9%88%D9%84%D8%A7%D9%8B-%D9%85%D8%B7%D9%84%D9%88%D8%A8%D9%88%D9%86-%D9%84%D9%84%D8%AA%D8%AD%D9%82%D9%8A%D9%82-%D8%A8%D9%82%D8%B6%D8%A7%D9%8A%D8%A7-%D9%81%D8%B3%D8%A7%D8%AF-%D9%85%D8%A7%D9%84%D9%8A>)** of the Commission of Integrity, 52 ministers or those of their rank have been issued summonses. Some 491 summonses have also been issued against 329 high-ranking officials of special degrees. The Commission’s 2018 report also said that more than 3,000 defendants had been referred to the judiciary, including 11 ministers and 157 individuals with special degrees. Despite these large numbers of cases and referrals to the judiciary, no minister has been imprisoned in recent years. The main reason for this is interference by political parties on behalf of convicted ministers.

### **Weak Political System and Quotas**

The source of these failures in governance lies the weakness and fragility of the political system, springing from sectarian and ethnic quotas adopted after 2003. The ruling parties were able to take control of the political scene in 2005 and have remained in power to this day, with some variation in influence over the years. For example, the Islamic Supreme Council was at the forefront in the 2006 elections. After that, the State of Law Coalition ruled the scene until 2014. Meanwhile, the Sadrist bloc and Fatah Alliance became dominant after the 2018 elections. In the Kurdistan region, the two main ruling parties have led since 1992. As for the Sunni arena, it has been a scene of dramatic political changes, from boycotting the first elections to divided representation and then the entrance of the Islamic State (ISIS) into the Sunni provinces and the emergence of new leadership. No single party has continuously controlled the scene, and the Sunni situation has not settled into a picture resembling that of the other two groups, the Shia and the Kurds.

All Iraqi parties are relatively new to the principles and rules of governance, with the exception of the Kurdish KDP and PUK parties, whose experience dates back to 1992. The parties’ experience in running the country and the political process is based on partisan jurisprudence and improvised decisions. These parties do not rely on studies and deliberate plans, or those drawn from similar experience. They vie for rule on the basis of sectarian and nationalistic quotas. Previous governments were formed on a consensual basis to satisfy the main forces that had

monopolized power. All these parties are responsible for the state the country has come to. All bear responsibility for the devastation that has befallen Iraq over the past two decades or so. Despite federal budgets reaching more than \$1.4 trillion since 2005, equivalent spending has not been seen on the ground.

The parties continue to compete in each election, but on the basis of an agreement to share the spoils and distribute top positions according to party quotas, regardless of electoral performance, win or lose. This is done under the slogan of a consensus government. Political opposition is rarely found even now, and these parties work together under the principle of serving and exchanging interests.

The parties have contributed to the collapse of state institutions through the arbitrary appointment of incompetent people to high positions. This attracts an opportunistic class from party ranks. As a result, we see that state appointment does not depend on administrative and professional experience and specialization so much as service and obedience to the party. This has prevented the appointment of competent people and the investment in their abilities, as well as the reconstruction and development of the country.

### **Poor Management**

This weak political structure has led to political mismanagement in all its articulations. The main cause of this failure is Iraqi officials' lack of experience in state administration. For decades, the opposition parties in exile were devoted to opposing the former regime and did not gain experience running a state. Opposition political activists were not part of state institutions. Additionally, most opposition members, especially in western countries, did not work to gain experience and skills or develop their scientific, technical, and administrative abilities. Rather, they lived on assistance provided by the governments of those countries, only mixing with fellow Iraqis. The proof of this is that most did not learn the language of their host country.

After the demise of the dictatorial regime at the hands of the international coalition, opposition leaders were installed in power and handed the reins of state administration despite their lack of governing experience, without abandoning the opposition inclination. The features of this inclination are still rooted in many among the leadership of these parties, reflected in their fear of quickly losing power. This fear drives them to compete as quickly as possible for the resources of the country that are available to them.

Despite the new rulers' lack of experience, they have failed even in seeking the help of accumulated expertise within state institutions. On the contrary, they hollowed these institutions of expertise under the slogan of de-Baathification, or non-affiliation with their parties. The Director-General, the deputy minister, the advisor, and the expert on ministerial management and governmental establishments have all been replaced by members of the ruling parties on a sectarian quota basis without concern for competence or experience. The result was clearing governmental institutions of administrative experience, so all have collapsed.

The proof of this phenomenon lies in what has become of the education, health, basic service, energy, industry, and agriculture sectors in Iraq. It is not surprising to see that all the government buildings, main roads connecting cities, bridges in the capital Baghdad and the provinces, hospitals, public universities and others were all built in the past era and those before it. Since 2003, successive governments have been unable to build something competing with these examples, to the extent that Baghdad and the cities of central and southern Iraq have become miserable to behold.

### **Other Factors**

While the major economic and political challenges facing Iraq have been highlighted, there are innumerable factors

that each contribute a part to Iraq's potential collapse. It suffices to take a quick glance at the collapse of basic public services such as electricity, water, sewage, roads, health, and education. An inspection of any city in Iraq, with the exception of the Kurdistan region, clearly shows the extent of the decline, devastation, and failure in these sectors. This reflects the absence of social justice and showcases the deterioration in the level of education in schools and universities, as well as the underdevelopment of the health sector, the failure to solve the problems of the displaced and return them to their homes, and the delay in reconstructing areas liberated from ISIS. All these aspects represent factors of the failure corroding the state, and each contributes to accelerating the process of collapse. As such, the final article in this series explores the potential scenarios of such a collapse and the serious reforms needed in Iraq to avert such a disaster. ❖

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