Where is the 'state' in Iraq and Lebanon?

Power relations and social control

Renad Mansour and Lina Khatib

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Summary

— Disillusionment with an unaccountable and incoherent political system and elite political class has pushed many Iraqis and Lebanese into feeling that their countries are effectively stateless. Western policymakers also often share this interpretation of the governance picture, at times labelling Iraq and Lebanon as failed or failing states.

— Yet in a practical sense, the state in some form is *very much* present in both countries, even though it may not appear so to those who define the state as a concept emerging from European history. In both countries, state power is not vested principally in formal institutions, but resides to a considerable degree in horizontal power relationships among elements of the elite, in vertical power relationships between the elite and citizens, and in interactions between these two axes.

— This paper interrogates the nature and effects of these power relationships. It takes as its starting point the proposition that power in Iraq and Lebanon is not fixed. Although formal structures do play a role, power is principally exercised socially: through competition and cooperation between diverse actors such as political parties, armed groups and societal leaders. Such practices are also responses to the instability that has beset each country's political system.

— Iraqi and Lebanese leaders rely on an array of tools to maintain power in this way. These tools fall into three broad categories – **ideology, economics** and the **use of violence** – and interact with the institutions of government and with society. The leader or group that maintains effective relationships both 'horizontally' and 'vertically' can be said to enjoy power in the state.

— For the past several years, the Iraqi and Lebanese states have faced a seemingly imminent and existential threat. They have often been characterized as on the brink of collapse. Protests and bottom-up challenges to the ruling elite have led to movements calling for revolution. Infighting between parties and leaders – epitomized by repeated delays in the choosing of prime ministers or cabinets – has revealed intense fragmentation. However, state collapse has not materialized in either country because state power has not been confined to government institutions. Instead, social systems of power have proven durable thus far. Fragility in power systems, rather than the absence of the so-called 'neo-Weberian' institutionalized state, is the key to understanding whether Iraq and Lebanon are indeed on the verge of collapse or are simply muddling through successive crises.

— For Western policymakers, understanding the nature of social power in Iraq and Lebanon is critical to addressing persistent questions about state fragility and to formulating realistic responses. Policy thinking should focus not only on the fragility or so-called hybridity of institutions or actors *per se*, but also on the systems of social power in place. Acknowledging these systems provides a more realistic framework in which to implement policy.

01
Introduction

Any analysis that is consumed with the supposed 'failure' of the state in Iraq and Lebanon overlooks the importance and resilience of social systems of power in both countries.

'*Ma fi dawla*' (there is no state). Anyone who has entered into political conversation with people from Baghdad or Beirut will undoubtedly have heard this expression. For years, the populations of both Iraq and Lebanon have suffered under successive governments that have been unable to provide basic necessities, such as regular supplies of electricity and water. These governments have consequently lost their authority to speak legitimately on behalf of their citizens. Disillusionment with the political system and the elite political class has pushed many Iraqis and Lebanese into feeling that their countries are effectively stateless.

Western policymakers dealing with the Middle East also engage with the concept of the state. Economic, political and security policies focusing on the region have often been formulated under the banner of state-building or reviving failed states. Yet such policies often conceptualize the state as something that consists merely of formal government institutions. As a consequence, policymakers often perceive the state to be absent.

Instead of arguing that the state does not exist or has failed, this paper uses the cases of Iraq and Lebanon to illustrate the workings of **power systems that make up the state and society.** In terms of horizontal power relationships among elements of the elite,[1] vertical power relationships between the elite and citizens, and interactions between these two axes, the state in some form is *very much* present in both countries – even though it may not appear so to those who define the 'state' as a concept emerging from European history. As such, the paper highlights the centrality of society in the state in Iraq and Lebanon,[2] and proposes a reconsideration of any policy definition of state power that separates the state from society.

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1 In this paper the term 'elite' refers both to the overall political class and – where necessary for convenience or readability – to elements or factions within it. An example is the Maronite elite in Lebanon.
2 For a discussion of the literature on state–society relations, see Mitchell, T. (1999), 'Society, Economy, and the State Effect', in Steinmetz, G. (ed.) (1999), *State/Culture: State-Formation after the Cultural Turn,* Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press.

The analytical basis for this approach was developed over the past two years during a Chatham House project in which the authors have engaged with academics – sociologists, anthropologists and political scientists – across the Middle East with an eye to understanding their perceptions of the state, its form and its role. In particular, the paper challenges the 'neo-Weberian' institutional model of the state and any related attempt to explain the grey area between state and non-state entities through the concept of 'hybridity'. That model does not capture the complex essence of power and public authority in countries such as Iraq and Lebanon. Critically, a narrow focus on formal institutions of state power also leads to false predictions of state failure or collapse. As a consequence, there is a need in the policy arena to study and rethink the nature and role of the state.[3]

This paper holds the state to be **the political system within which actors compete for power.** Power is not fixed and does not only exist in official institutions. It takes the form of a constant process of competition and cooperation between diverse societal actors such as political parties, armed groups, social leaders and civil society. The dynamics of this system are similar in both Iraq and Lebanon: a variety of actors all cooperate within the 'state' (broadly defined) and compete for control of its institutions and its resources.

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[3] With Peter Salisbury, we argued that the state is multilayered, and that the formal layer only represents part of the state. In this series, we focus on the social aspects of state power. Mansour, R. and Salisbury, P. (2019), *Between Order and Chaos: A New Approach to Stalled State Transformations in Iraq and Yemen*, Research Paper, London: Royal Institute of International Affairs, https://www.chathamhouse.org/2019/09/between-order-and-chaos.

02 Rethinking the state

The 'neo-Weberian' worldview, equating the state with formal institutions, is inadequate to describe the complex reality of power interactions that effectively make up the state in Iraq and Lebanon.

Has the state indeed disappeared, as many Iraqis and Lebanese would claim? Before seeking to answer this question, one should ask, what is a state? The most frequently used definition is Max Weber's explanation: 'A compulsory political organization with continuous operations will be called a state in so far as its administrative staff successfully uphold the claim to the monopoly of the legitimate use of force in the enforcement of its order.'[4]

Although the definition was written 100 years ago, many Western academics, policy-based researchers and government officials continue to rely on it in their understanding of the state. These 'neo-Weberians' argue that the state is a central and formal authority that controls coercion and dominates populations. Theda Skocpol, who co-edited and wrote the introduction to the seminal book *Bringing the State Back In*, argues that the state is a 'set of administrative, policing and military organizations headed, and more or less well co-ordinated by, an executive authority'.[5]

According to the neo-Weberian worldview, the state is found in the formal institutions that govern society. Power, therefore, is embodied in institutions such as a parliament, government offices, the military (including a ministry of defence),

4 Weber, M. (1919), 'Politics as a Vocation', in Owen, D. and Strong, T. B. (eds) (2004), *The Vocation Lectures*, Indianapolis: Hackett Publishing Company.
5 Skocpol, T. (1985), 'Bringing the State Back In: Strategies of Analysis in Current Research', in Evans, P. B., Rueschemeyer, D. and Skocpol, T. (eds) (1985), *Bringing the State Back In*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

the police and other government agencies. When these institutions are unable to perform their duties, the argument is that the state is 'weak', 'fragile', 'failed' or indeed absent.[6]

Equally, in neo-Weberian terms the rest of society is deemed the 'non-state'. Any entity – such as an armed group or civil society organization – that sits outside the formal institutions of governance falls into this category. The International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC), which operates in many so-called fragile state contexts, defines a non-state armed actor as 'any armed group, distinct from and not operating under the control of, the state or states in which it carries out military operations, and which has political, religious, and/or military objectives'.[7] Other observers have defined a non-state actor as 'largely or entirely autonomous from central government funding and control: emanating from civil society, or from the market economy, or from political impulses beyond state control and direction'.[8] The problem with such definitions is that they take for granted the neo-Weberian worldview. Many actors who hold political influence over a social base and who perform the duties of the state are still considered non-state under this rigid conceptualization.

However, in Middle Eastern countries such as Iraq and Lebanon, the activities of the state often spread from so-called 'formal' to 'informal' institutions. The line between state and non-state is blurred or grey, as armed groups, civil society organizations, and social leaders and their organizations all in effect act as the state, or perform activities usually associated with governments, such as collecting taxes, providing services, or granting freedom of movement across boundaries.[9] Dispersed institutions and social networks take on the mundane processes of governance.

To better explain this reality and the grey area, some researchers have employed the term 'hybrid'. Hybrid political orders arise, according to Boege et al., when:

> … diverse and competing authority structures, sets of rules, logics of order, and claims to power co-exist, overlap, interact, and intertwine, combining elements of introduced Western models of governance and elements stemming from local indigenous traditions of governance and politics. […] In this environment, the 'state' has no privileged monopolistic position as the only agency providing security, welfare, and representation; it has to share authority, legitimacy, and capacity with other institutions.[10]

6 Jones, L. (2015), *Societies Under Siege: Exploring How International Economic Sanctions (Do Not) Work*, Oxford: Oxford University Press.

7 Bellal, A., Giacca, G. and Casey-Maslen, S. (2011), 'International law and armed non-state actors in Afghanistan', *International Review of the Red Cross*, Volume 93, Number 881, March 2011, https://www.icrc.org/en/doc/assets/files/review/2011/irrc-881-maslen.pdf.

8 Josselin, D. and Wallace, W. (2001), 'Non-state Actors in World Politics: A Framework', in Josselin, D. and Wallace, W. (eds) (2001), *Non-state Actors in World Politics*, New York: Palgrave Macmillan, pp. 1–20.

9 See Jessop, B. (2016), *The State: Past, Present, Future*, Cambridge: Polity Press; and Bieler, A., Higgott, R. and Underhill, G. (eds) (2004), *Non-State Actors and Authority in the Global System*, Routledge/Warwick Studies in Globalisation, London: Routledge.

10 Boege, V., Brown, A., Clements, K. and Nolan, A. (2008), *On Hybrid Political Orders and Emerging States: State Formation in the Context of 'Fragility'*, Berlin: Berghof Research Center for Constructive Conflict Management, https://berghof-foundation.org/library/on-hybrid-political-orders-and-emerging-states-state-formation-in-the-context-of-fragility.

Others have defined hybrid armed actors as those which are not completely in the formal government structure and which compete and cooperate with the government.[11]

The use of 'hybridity' as a concept in explaining how power transcends government institutions (such as ministries or government agencies) and also inhabits non-government-recognized organizations reveals the blurred boundaries between the neo-Weberian state and non-state actors. However, it still stops short of challenging the fundamental premise. It does not question whether the neo-Weberian state/non-state model is itself appropriate. Such interpretations typically seek an explanation as to why, in some contexts, such as in Iraq and Lebanon, the model has not *yet* worked. In this way, scholars of hybrid political orders, while analysing the nuance of power and governance in complex settings, still engage with the neo-Weberian worldview where society and state remain independent, autonomous spaces.

Several ministers have confided to the authors of this paper that political parties and other actors – either operating directly or through proxies – interfere with policymaking and make decisions on behalf of particular ministries on issues ranging from contracting to personnel.

In the incoherent political contexts of Iraq and Lebanon, however, the two spaces become blurred. State power does not always reside in government institutions but is also derived from society. Often, government institutions rubber-stamp decisions after they have been made behind closed doors by other societal actors. Several ministers have confided to the authors of this paper that political parties and other actors – either operating directly or through proxies – interfere with policymaking and make decisions on behalf of particular ministries on issues ranging from contracting to personnel.[12] In these cases, social forces outside government institutions seem to be more influential in the state than the institutions themselves, undermining the neo-Weberian premise.

While the concept of hybridity describes how the neo-Weberian line between state and non-state is blurred, it still accepts that society and state should be separate in an ideal or so-called 'strong state' scenario. In contrast, this paper shifts attention to the reality of the power system that makes up the *de facto* state in both Iraq and Lebanon. This system has proven resilient through economic crises, civil wars, mass uprisings and changes in government.

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11 Cambanis, T., Esfandiary, D., Ghaddar, S., Hanna, M. W., Lund, A. and Mansour, R. (2019), *Hybrid Actors: Armed Groups and State Fragmentation in the Middle East*, New York: The Century Foundation, https://tcf.org/content/report/hybrid-actors.
12 This point is made in a forthcoming Chatham House paper by Toby Dodge and Renad Mansour. See Dodge, T. and Mansour, R. (2021), *Political Barriers to Economic Reform in Iraq* [working title], Research Paper, London: Royal Institute of International Affairs.

03
Power relations and the state

Power in Iraq and Lebanon is exercised through 'horizontal' intra-elite relationships and 'vertical' relationships between the elite and citizens. Key actors in this system use ideology, economics and violence to assert control.

Iraqi and Lebanese leaders rely on an array of tools to maintain power in their respective political systems, both of which have been beset by instability. Hazem Kandil refers to 'three "sources" of social power: coercive, economic, and ideological'.[13] These tools – in short, **ideology, economics** and **the use of violence** – interact with the institutions of government and with society. In this paper, we argue that they are deployed horizontally, with elements of the elite competing and frequently cooperating with each other; and vertically, in the sense that political leaders use such tools to strengthen ties to a social base.

In this system of power, the leader or group that maintains both horizontal and vertical ties can be said to enjoy power in the state, whichever side of the neo-Weberian categorization that actor sits on. The horizontal and vertical axes of power are not isolated, but interact with each other. **Fragility and incoherence in power systems, rather than the purported absence of the formal state, are key to understanding whether Iraq and Lebanon are indeed on the brink of collapse or are simply muddling through crises.**

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13 Kandil, H. (2014), *Soldiers, Spies, and Statesmen: Egypt's Road to Revolt*, London and New York: Verso Trade, p. 2.

Horizontal power and elite competition

Intra-elite competition in Iraq's post-2003 political system

The US-led invasion of Iraq in 2003 is said to have destroyed the unitary state
in that country. Yet while the transition from the regime of Saddam Hussein to
the Coalition Provisional Authority (CPA), then to the Governing Council (GC),
and finally to the new Iraqi government in 2005 brought in new personalities,
laws and institutions, the state never completely disappeared. Instead, a group
of formerly exiled political parties began cooperating and competing within the
transformed state by using the tools of social power – as mentioned, ideology,
economics and violence – in multiple fields.

Iraq's political parties were largely based around identity, bringing ideological
power to the forefront. The Kurdish nationalist parties – the Kurdistan Democratic
Party (KDP) and the Patriotic Union of Kurdistan (PUK) – claimed to speak on
behalf of the Kurdish population. Shia Islamist parties and groups – namely
the Supreme Council for the Islamic Revolution in Iraq (which later became the
Islamic Supreme Council of Iraq, or ISCI), the Dawa Party, the Fadhilla Party and
the Sadrist movement – claimed to speak on behalf of the Shia community. Given
minimal accommodation from Sunni representatives, this resulted in Kurdish
nationalists and Shia Islamists becoming the main negotiators of the country's
horizontal consociational power-sharing agreement, or elite pact.

The power system became known as *muhasasa ta'ifiya*, a type of ethnic or
sectarian quota-sharing based on the allocation of identity-based positions
of power.[14] The three top positions in the government – president, prime
minister and speaker of parliament – were allocated to the Kurdish, Shia and
Sunni ethno-sectarian blocs respectively. This formula was applied downwards
through the entire bureaucracy, with each party justifying its claim to positions
based on ideological arguments that it represented a particular ethnic or
sectarian community.

While this system was initially identity-based, it subsequently shifted towards
party political power-sharing. This process became known as *muhasasa hizbiya*.[15]
The change was a product of the immediate power contestation that emerged
from within and between the major political blocs under *muhasasa ta'ifiya*.[16]
As each party sought political power, wealth and legitimacy, this further split
the conceptually neat yet practically flawed Shia–Kurdish–Sunni logic of
post-2003 Iraq.

The political parties competed for influence over the budgets of major ministries.
Beginning with the first premiership of Nouri al-Maliki, the Dawa Party began to
flood the senior positions of the bureaucracy – at the level of deputy ministers,

14 Dodge, T. (2019), 'Muhasasa Ta'ifiya and its Others: Domination and Contestation in Iraq's political field',
POMEPS Studies 35: pp. 38–46.
15 Haddad, F. (2019), *The Waning Relevance of the Sunni–Shia Divide*, New York: The Century Foundation,
https://tcf.org/content/report/waning-relevance-sunni-shia-divide/?agreed=1.
16 Dodge, T. (2013), 'State and society in Iraq ten years after regime change: the rise of a new authoritarianism',
International Affairs, 89(2): pp. 241–57.

directors-general, and general managers of state-owned companies – with political appointees. Today, these positions are known as the 'special grades' (*al-darajat al-khassa*), and account for some 5,000 employees.[17]

Although Maliki began this process in the course of his consolidation of power over the state, the other political parties got involved. In doing so they maintained some of the patronage systems employed by Saddam Hussein and his predecessors. For instance, in relying on the system of special grades, Maliki was simply invoking past legislation, including Law No. 8 of 1966 on Special Degrees in Official and Semi-Official Departments, which outlined special grades across the civil service.[18] These positions were meant to be used for patronage and to enable proxies to act for leaders outside formal government institutions.

Instead of becoming 'wealthy then political', Iraq's post-2003 leaders became political in order to become wealthy. With this wealth came patronage, endemic corruption and a bloated bureaucracy.[19] The process also created a new and restricted elite pact, based on a sharing of the country's oil wealth, that excluded most of the population.

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Horizontal competition was also based on developing and mobilizing patronage networks to provide economic incentives. Each party sought to employ its followers in government posts and to offer financial rewards to its social base. This patronage would then ensure that the beneficiaries would vote in elections for the party that had given them jobs. As voter turnout diminished in successive elections (it was believed to have fallen below 20 per cent by May 2018), the influence of the patronage-based vote was thus magnified, becoming a key tool in elite contestation for power.

The political parties that came to power from 2003 onwards recognized that state-building would become an exercise in the accumulation of wealth, which they could then use on the intra-elite level to maintain power, legitimacy and military capability. Yet all of the post-2003 parties that were successful in competing for state power also had some form of armed wing. The KDP and PUK had the *peshmerga* forces, which gave them military power over potential

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17 Interviews conduced with officials in Iraq in 2018–19. See also Dodge, T. (2018), '*Muhasasa Ta'ifiya* and its Others: Domination and contestation in Iraq's political field', in Project on Middle East Political Science (2018), *Religion, Violence and the State in Iraq*, pp. 38–46, https://pomeps.org/wp-content/uploads/2019/10/POMEPS_Studies_35.1.pdf.

18 Supreme Judicial Council of Iraq, 'To classify: a public post Issuer: Iraq - Federal Type of legislation: Law Legislation Number: 8 Date of legislation: January 29-1966', http://iraqld.hjc.iq:8080/LoadLawBook.aspx?SC=031220052840061.

19 Sassoon, J. (2014), *Iraq: Tackling Corruption and Sectarianism is More Critical than the Outcome of Elections*, Washington, DC: Woodrow Wilson Center, https://www.wilsoncenter.org/publication/iraq-tackling-corruption-and-sectarianism-more-critical-the-outcome-elections.

opponents such as the Gorran (Change) movement; the latter emerged strongly in 2009 but, as an anti-establishment movement, had no armed group attached to it. The *peshmerga* were legally recognized in the 2005 constitution. Similarly, the Sadrists, ISCI and other Popular Mobilization Forces (PMF) parties were able to maintain their positions in part due to the threat of violence they presented. They relied on armed groups that at times operated outside government oversight. During both of Maliki's prime ministerial terms, his party, Dawa, relied on the protection of government-funded groups such as the Counter Terrorism Service. In short, intra-elite competition involved the frequent use by political parties of their respective agents of violence as a means of maintaining power – even though some of those agents were 'formal' and some were 'informal'.[20]

At times, violence has been used more extensively as leaders have sought political advantage. For instance, in 2008 forces loyal to Maliki fought a civil war against those serving a fellow Shia leader, Muqtada al-Sadr. More recently, clashes have broken out in southern Iraq between Qais al-Khazali's League of the Righteousness (*Asaib Ahl al-Haq*) and Muqtada al-Sadr's Peace Brigades (*Saraya al-Salam*).

In fact, many of the post-2003 systems of public authority existed even before that date. While the state was 'transformed', the new state had many recognizable features. Charles Tripp writes that behind the official state under the Saddam regime lay a shadow state, 'formed by networks of associates, chains of patrons and clients, circles of exclusion […]'.[21] Saddam was able to maintain public authority not only through coercion, which made him notorious as a dictator, but also through ideological and economic forms of social power. He used ideological principles from Iraqi nationalism and tribal culture – and, in the 1990s, even from Islam – to subdue dissent.[22] In terms of economic leverage, Saddam offered land, money and weapons to those in his patronage network.

While the state looked different after 2003 as new parties emerged, the process of competition for state power at the horizontal or intra-elite level was still based on the social tools of ideology, economics and violence.

Elite fragmentation in Iraq: testing horizontal power

The elite pact's durability in Iraq is neither guaranteed nor uniform. Over the past 18 years, new elite factions have emerged, splitting from their original parties, with the result that today, instead of a handful of parties, there are numerous groupings whose leaders all claim a share of the state's coffers.

Intra-elite competition has grown over the years, but not to the extent of changing the status quo. The 2005 election may have featured one Shia bloc, one Kurdish bloc and one Sunni bloc, but each was the subject of internal contestation. For instance, the United Iraqi Alliance (UIA), the original Shia bloc, eventually split.

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20 For more on the connection between violence and state power, see Sirri, O. (2021), *Destructive creations: social-spatial transformations in contemporary Baghdad*, LSE Middle East Centre paper series (45), http://eprints.lse.ac.uk/108866.
21 Tripp, C. (2007), *A History of Iraq* (3rd edn), Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, p. 259.
22 See Baram, A. (2015), *Saddam Husayn and Islam, 1968–2003: Ba'thi Iraq from Secularism to Faith*, Washington DC: Johns Hopkins University Press.

Maliki and the Dawa Party chose to create a new coalition, State of Law, prior to the provincial elections of 2009, rather than continuing to cooperate with ISCI, Fadhilla and the Sadrists. Several factors suggest that in recent years political fragmentation may have become less easily manageable than was the case in 2005. These factors include the inability of existing groupings to coalesce into forming the largest bloc in parliament following the May 2018 elections; the formal fragmentation of massive political parties into smaller groups; the unprecedented failure of the parties to decide on a prime minister-designate (until the subsequent economic and COVID-19 crises forced their hand); and the inability of the elite to address protests other than by violent means. The prevailing system continues, however, because for the elite the cost of losing it is perceived as greater than that of maintaining it.

Competition among the Shia groups has had the most far-reaching consequences for the political system. The parties that made up the UIA bloc, which in 2005 won 128 out of 275 seats in the Transitional National Assembly, have splintered over the intervening years. In the elections of May 2018, a large number of Shia Islamist groupings competed against each other, including Muqtada al-Sadr's Saairun Alliance, Hadi al-Ameri's Fateh Alliance, Haider al-Abadi's Nasr (Victory) Alliance, Nouri al-Maliki's State of Law coalition and Ammar al-Hakim's Hikmeh. Some Shia parties have also been riven by internal disputes. The Dawa Party, for example, split into two wings, led respectively by Maliki and Abadi. In the 2018 government formation process, Maliki's wing joined the Binaa electoral bloc, whereas Abadi's branch joined the Islah coalition.

A similar fragmentation has been seen among the Kurdish parties. In 2018, for instance, splits in the PUK led to the formation of several parties, including Gorran, New Generation (led by Shashwar Abdul Wahab), and the Coalition for Democracy and Justice, led by former PUK official Barham Salih, who was selected as president of Iraq in October 2018. The PUK and its splinter groups are a product of internal dissent and competition for power *within* the Iraqi state at both the central government and Kurdistan Regional Government (KRG) level. A leadership struggle emerged more explicitly following the death of veteran PUK leader Jalal Talabani in 2017. Unable to reach a solution, the PUK politburo decided to move towards a dual-leadership structure, with Talabani's son, Bafel Talabani, and his nephew, Lahur Talabani, assuming shared control. Salih, although officially a member of the PUK, was unable to gain control over the party.

While party political fragmentation has tested the horizontal power relationship in post-2003 Iraq, it has not changed the system. It has simply brought to the surface the horizontal power competition that has characterized the post-2003 Iraqi state. Fragmentation has constantly been present, although it has hitherto remained hidden to a greater extent. At times, elite competition relying on the wielding of ideological, economic and violent power has revealed the extent of fragmentation and tested the political system, but it has never ended it. Instead, it has revealed the true boundaries of state power.

Horizontal power: intra-elite competition in Lebanon

As in Iraq, intra-elite competition in Lebanon has relied on ideological, economic and violent power, but each type has taken a different form in the Lebanese context. From the country's inception as an independent republic in 1943, Lebanon has had an unwritten elite pact – explicitly referred to as the National Pact. This political pact was meant to safeguard power-sharing between Lebanon's different sectarian communities by assigning key positions – political, army, security and civil service posts – according to sectarian affiliation, with top state positions reserved for the Maronite Christian, Sunni and Shia communities.

The system has enabled both competition and cooperation among the ruling elite. The status quo guaranteed access to state resources and power for the leaders of Lebanon's major sects, who in turn became political leaders. Major decisions regarding state policy were to be made on the basis of consensus between sectarian representatives, often outside formal government institutions. However, the process was historically dominated by the Maronite elite, which controlled the state and its resources until the outbreak of the civil war in 1975. This status quo pushed sectarian representatives to compete to increase their share of power and resources relative to others.[23]

By the end of the 2010s, what had begun as a sectarian-based system of power-sharing had been transformed into a system in which Hezbollah had become the dominant political party.

Such a system, based on a constant tug-of-war among elements of the elite, was always destined to evolve as Lebanon went through cycles of wars and instability, during which certain political groups gained and others lost relative power and resources. The Maronites lost a significant degree of their power in the course of the civil war, which ended with the Taif Agreement in 1989; that accord increased privileges for Muslims through measures such as ensuring equal representation of Christians and Muslims in the legislature. Post-war dynamics also changed horizontal relationships, not just between the Muslim and Christian elites but also among Muslims. A new elite emerged: the Iranian-supported Hezbollah, which had first risen to prominence as a liberation and resistance movement challenging Israel's occupation of Lebanon, and then evolved over the years from a militia into an armed political party.

By the end of the 2010s, what had begun as a sectarian-based system of power-sharing had been transformed into a system in which Hezbollah had become the dominant political party. Other sectarian parties came to have complex relationships both with Hezbollah and with each other.

23 Salloukh, B. F., Barakat, R., Al-Habbal, J. S., Khattab, L. W. and Mikaelian, S. (2015), *The Politics of Sectarianism in Postwar Lebanon*, London: Pluto Press.

These relationships oscillated between competitiveness and cooperation. On the pro-Hezbollah front, the Amal party – the only Shia party other than Hezbollah – was militarily defeated by Hezbollah in a fierce battle in Beirut in 1987, and henceforth had no choice but to ally itself with Hezbollah. Hezbollah could have eliminated Amal, but chose not to as the latter proved useful: the illicit economic activities associated with Amal affiliates allowed Hezbollah to benefit economically while presenting itself as above corruption; at the same time, Hezbollah could mobilize part of Amal's constituency while claiming that its own members did not engage in violence.[24] Also, the presence of another Shia party within the political system meant that Hezbollah could assert that it did not monopolize power in the Shia community. In return, Hezbollah facilitated Amal's access to economic resources and political representation in a rentier state model.[25]

There is no uniform position towards Hezbollah among the political parties that consider it to be a rival. By the mid-2010s the Future Movement, led by then prime minister Saad Hariri, was so weak that Hariri's only chance of retaining his position lay in granting Hezbollah concessions. This included turning a blind eye to Hezbollah's intervention in Syria, which went against Lebanon's state policy of dissociation. The Lebanese Forces, on the other hand, though allied with the Future Movement, were consistently vocal in criticizing Hezbollah's intervention in Syria, seeing it as eroding Lebanon's state sovereignty. But neither Hariri nor the Lebanese Forces or any of their allies had the political, financial or social base to present a solid oppositional front towards Hezbollah and its allies. Although Hezbollah came to possess enough military power to overwhelm these opponents if it so wished, it nonetheless did not seek to change the elite pact because the pact's presence gave – and continues to give – Hezbollah the veneer of a party accepting of Lebanon's diversity.

The same motivation applies to all other elements of the ruling elite in Lebanon. Though the country continues to have a nominally sectarian-based system of power-sharing, the evolution of that system has moved beyond simple sectarian interests. Rather than being based on political party platforms, it has become instead a system that merges consociationalism with rising autocracy.

Hezbollah's rise to exert control over this system has relied partly on ideology and economics as forms of social power – the former to rally Shia constituents and the latter to attract constituents and handle other parties – and partly on coercion. After the civil war, Hezbollah was the only militia allowed to retain its weapons. This was in recognition of its role in liberating and protecting Lebanon from Israel. But in 2008, following a dispute with political opponents in government who argued that the Lebanese state should proscribe Hezbollah's separate telecommunications network, Hezbollah turned its weapons against supporters of Saad Hariri in Beirut in what came to be known as the events of 7 May. This caused its critics to backtrack. Hezbollah had also capitalized

24 Lob, E. (2014), 'Is Hezbollah Facing a Crisis of Popular Legitimacy?', Middle East Brief, Crown Center for Middle East Studies, Brandeis University, https://www.researchgate.net/profile/ Eric-Lob/publication/293478575_Is_Hezbollah_Confronting_a_Crisis_of_Popular_Legitimacy/ links/56b8908c08ae5ad3605f3f02/Is-Hezbollah-Confronting-a-Crisis-of-Popular-Legitimacy.pdf.
25 Ibid.

on the 2006 Israeli attack on Lebanon to relaunch itself as the bulwark of national resistance, and to increase its military and financial capacity in the name of post-war recovery and resilience. It used its military prowess to bolster its political status, achieving for the first time – following the events of 7 May 2008 – the power of veto in the Lebanese cabinet.[26]

But despite Hezbollah increasing its power and use of coercion, all elements of Lebanon's ruling elite have sought to maintain the elite pact. This is because the impression of sharing power across sects provides a measure of legitimacy in the perception of Lebanese citizens – a legitimacy based on being part of a national rather than a sectarian order. In theory, the elite pact also guarantees access to resources for all the ruling powers, dispelling worries that a one-party system, were it ever to be implemented, would result in a winner-takes-all scenario. However, the fact that the elite pact does not guarantee particular allocations of resources drives political and economic competition, including for access to state institutional resources.[27]

Horizontal fragmentation: when Lebanon's pact is strained

In Lebanon, the 'March 8' coalition, led by Hezbollah since 2005, has remained unified in the face of several waves of protests calling for reform and a change in the political status quo. This is despite the fact that some Hezbollah constituents even participated in the latest wave of protests – in particular, those of October 2019, which at the outset were convened to protest against corruption but which eventually broadened into calls for wholesale change of the political system.

The anti-Hezbollah 'March 14' coalition led by Saad Hariri, however, has fragmented. One of its constituent parties, the Lebanese Forces, withdrew all its ministers from the cabinet in response to the October 2019 protests. Another, al-Kataeb, had one of its legislators join protests on the street (although the protesters saw this as an attempt at co-optation). Future Movement supporters staged their own demonstrations, calling for the reinstatement of Hariri, the party's leader, as prime minister, following the latter's resignation in late October. Meanwhile, Walid Jumblatt, the leader of the March 14-allied Progressive Socialist Party (PSP), came under intense pressure from Hezbollah not to support the protests. He eventually announced that he would support the creation of a new cabinet, but that PSP members would not participate in it.[28]

Fragmentation within March 14 can be attributed to intimidation (as exemplified in the case of Jumblatt); the lack of a unified political vision (the Lebanese Forces remained staunchly against Hezbollah's possession of weapons, whereas the Future Movement softened its stance on the issue); and competition over

26 Khatib, L., Matar, D. and Alshaer, A. (2014), *The Hizbullah Phenomenon: Politics and Communication*, London: Hurst.

27 Salloukh, B. F. (2019), 'Taif and the Lebanese State: The Political Economy of a Very Sectarian Public Sector', *Nationalism and Ethnic Politics*, 25(1): pp. 43–60.

28 Al-Andari, S. (2019), 'Hezbollah pressures Jumblatt to back off', Sky News Arabia, 21 November 2019, https://www.skynewsarabia.com/middle-east/1299592-%D8%AC%D9%86%D8%A8%D9%84%D8%A7%D8%B7-%D8%A7%D9%84%D8%AA%D9%82%D8%AF%D9%85%D9%8A-%D8%A7%D9%84%D8%A7%D8%B4%D8%AA%D8%B1%D8%A7%D9%83%D9%8A-%D9%8A%D8%B4%D8%A7%D8%B1%D9%83-%D8%A7%D9%84%D8%AD%D9%83%D9%88%D9%85%D8%A9-%D8%A7%D9%84%D9%85%D9%82%D8%A8%D9%84%D8%A9.

dwindling resources as Lebanon experienced an intensifying economic crisis. Certain ministries were considered more lucrative sources of rents and patronage than others because they received foreign aid for public services. This encouraged competition – not just between the parties of the March 8 and March 14 coalitions, but also among March 14 members – over which ministry should be administered by which party, both at ministerial and director-general level.

This competition intensified as the US imposed more stringent sanctions on Iran, driving Hezbollah to become more reliant on seeking to acquire state resources. Hezbollah's attempt to control state resources was motivated in part by its desire to serve its own constituents in Lebanon. The move was also driven by the aim of supporting allies and networks in Syria following Hezbollah's military intervention in that country, which began in 2012. In May 2020, Lebanese media reported that goods such as fuel and wheat, imports of which were subsidized by the Lebanese state, were being smuggled by Hezbollah for sale in Syria.[29]

In contrast to Iraq, Lebanon has not seen a proliferation of new political parties over the past decade and a half. Rather, fragmentation within the March 14 coalition has served to bolster Hezbollah's power, as the latter no longer has a strong challenger. It has maintained its March 8 coalition because the partnership with the Free Patriotic Movement, in particular, grants both parties greater access to state power and to economic resources. Although the elite pact continues to exist, a disproportionate rise in the strength of one actor within it risks upsetting the system. Contestations over power, legitimacy and capabilities have thus led to fragility at the horizontal (intra-elite) level, with alliances negotiated based on issues and economic interests, rather than on sectarianism *per se*.

Vertical power and the social contract

Competition for power is not only about negotiating the horizontal relationships described above, but also about 'vertical' relationships between the elite and the social base. In both Iraq and Lebanon, the political class has employed an array of social tools to build vertical support. Such support is used in turn to build a social base which, while not representing the entire population, provides enough of a patronage network to allow the elite to govern. For example, it enables specific actors to win votes in elections, since declining voter turnout in both countries means that each party's only electoral support comes from its social base.

Electoral successes also translate into strengthened horizontal power, as competing parties and factions use election results to enhance their bargaining position. As such, in both Iraq and Lebanon, the elite has been able to cultivate a social base sufficient to allow it to continue to rule – using the tools of social power – even when the regime seems challenged by mass uprisings, as occurred in both Iraq and Lebanon in 2019.

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29 BBC Monitoring (2020), 'Explainer: Why are Lebanese politicians talking about fuel smuggling into Syria?', 14 May 2020, https://monitoring.bbc.co.uk/product/c201pk3p.

Negotiating the social contract in Iraq

In post-2003 Iraq, the three tools of social power have been vividly at play in the context of vertical relations and public action. To maintain social power through the social contract, leaders have relied in part on ideological appeals: to ethno-sectarianism, support for democracy, opposition to dictatorship, civic spirit and reformism. They have also leveraged economics, redistributing oil wealth into public sector employment and dispersing benefits to build patronage networks. Finally, as mentioned, they have maintained power through coercion: targeting potential threats using violence.

The case study of the 2011 protests in Iraq reveals the effective use of these tools to maintain power over the population. While some analysts cite 2011 as the year in which Sunni Arabs in northwestern Iraq rose up against the regime of Prime Minister Nouri al-Maliki, less attention is paid to the protests which erupted in Baghdad and southern Iraq (notably in the city of Basra) in the same year. Unlike in the predominantly Sunni areas, Maliki's administration quickly subdued the protests in Baghdad and the south by relying on the whole range of instruments of social power.

In terms of ideology Maliki, who hitherto had been moving towards a rule-of-law discourse and even named his electoral alliance State of Law (*dawlat al-qanoon*), responded to the 2011 protests by returning to a sect-centric discourse.[30] This relied on anti-Ba'athist sentiment to reinforce fears of an external threat and to bring together the Shia. Maliki also promised not to run for another term as prime minister and to bolster anti-corruption measures.

Among economic incentives, Maliki pledged, and achieved, a rapid expansion in public sector employment during his second term.[31] At the beginning of his premiership in 2006, public sector employment accounted for 18 per cent of government expenditure. By the end of his second term in 2014, that share had risen to 27 per cent.

The Maliki administration also deployed coercion, albeit in a limited capacity. Tens of protesters were killed during the 2011 demonstrations, and scores were wounded. The authorities used water cannons to disperse protests. The administration also employed a strong intelligence apparatus to intimidate civil society activists, with the more fortunate ones managing to flee to the Kurdish region or to neighbouring countries.

Overall, however, Maliki's ability to utilize all three tools of social power, rather than just coercion, was what allowed his government to quickly and quietly silence the protests of 2011.

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30 Haddad, F. (2016), *Shia-Centric State Building and Sunni Rejection in Post-2003 Iraq*, Washington, DC: Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, https://carnegieendowment.org/2016/01/07/shia-centric-state-building-and-sunni-rejection-in-post-2003-iraq-pub-62408.
31 World Bank Group (2018), *Iraq Economic Monitor: From War to Reconstruction and Economic Recovery*, Washington DC: World Bank Group, http://documents.worldbank.org/curated/en/771451524124058858/pdf/125406-WP-PUBLIC-P163016-Iraq-Economic-Monitor-text-Spring-2018-4-18-18web.pdf.

When protests erupted again in 2015 and 2016, Prime Minister Haider al-Abadi relied on a similar set of tools. He sought to maintain ideological coherence by using the language of reform and democratization, symbolized in his drive to recruit technocratic ministers. In the economic sphere, Abadi pledged to increase state employment, offering a higher number of public sector jobs in order to bring more citizens into the system of patronage. Finally, the Abadi government used a degree of violence to clear out protesters after they invaded Baghdad's so-called 'Green Zone'. This mixture of tools worked, as most protesters went home and awaited change.

The October 2019 uprising in Iraq

After the end of Abadi's term in October 2018, structural changes seemed to threaten the social contract in Iraq, leading to the uprising of October 2019. Over the preceding four years, Iraq had experienced a decline in the value of its gross national income per capita, which fell from $7,040 in 2013 to $4,800 in 2017.[32]

During this period, citizens' disillusionment increased. A common grievance against the functionality of the political system was held to be its inability to provide basic services, and this perception intensified. According to a poll by the US-based National Democratic Institute (NDI) in 2018, an increasing majority claimed that basic services were worsening in Iraq.[33] Water scarcity has long been considered a threat multiplier and driver of conflict. Indeed, the government's failure to address water shortages drove an outbreak of civil unrest in Basra in 2018. Launching a report on these events in July 2019, Human Rights Watch commented:

> Iraqi authorities have failed to ensure for almost 30 years that Basra residents have sufficient safe drinking water, resulting in on-going health concerns [...]. The situation culminated in an acute water crisis that sent at least 118,000 people to hospital in 2018 and led to violent protests.[34]

Another failure of a key state function has been seen in the provision of electricity. Despite increasing its labour force,[35] the Ministry of Electricity has been unable to meet demand, with the result that the gap between demand and supply has widened since 2003. Iraqi citizens expect electricity to be provided free of charge by the state – the legacy of many years of state subsidies dating back to before 2003.[36]

Iraq has long ranked poorly in the UN's Human Development Index, which in 2019 placed the country 120th out of 189 nations.[37] The leadership's failure to

32 World Bank (undated), 'GNI per capita, Atlas method (current US$) – Iraq', World Development Indicators database, https://data.worldbank.org/indicator/NY.GNP.PCAP.CD?locations=IQ (accessed 20 Mar. 2021).
33 National Democratic Institute (2018), 'Parliamentary Elections: A New Turning Point for Iraq', https://www.ndi.org/sites/default/files/NDI%20Poll%20-%20Feb-April%202018%20%28English%29.pdf.
34 Human Rights Watch (2019), 'Iraq: Water Crisis in Basra: Decades of Mismanagement, Pollution, Corruption', 22 July 2019, https://www.hrw.org/news/2019/07/22/iraq-water-crisis-basra.
35 Interview with senior officials, Baghdad, 2018.
36 Allawi, A. A. (2007), *The Occupation of Iraq: Winning the War, Losing the Peace*, New Haven: Yale University Press, p. 375.
37 United Nations Development Programme (2019), *Human Development Report 2019*, http://hdr.undp.org/sites/default/files/hdr2019.pdf.

improve the country's relative standing in terms of health, education, income and gender inequality, among other indicators, has eroded the social contract. At the same time, World Bank indicators have revealed a decline in the quality of governance, particularly in terms of political stability, government effectiveness, control of corruption and observance of the rule of law.[38] The low turnout in the 2018 elections revealed the extent of popular disenfranchisement over these issues. Most Iraqis felt their country was going in the wrong direction. According to research by the NDI, while 45 per cent of Iraqis thought their country was heading in the right direction in 2014, by 2019 that share had fallen to just 21 per cent.

In response to this context, in October 2019 many Iraqis in the centre and the south of the country took to the streets to question the social contract. This time, the elite was less able to rely on the usual range of social tools for maintaining power, having notably lost some ideological legitimacy during the 2010s.

In the first few years after 2003, the elite had often used democracy narratives, together with anti-Saddam or anti-Ba'ath rhetoric, to gain popularity. At the same time, each ethno-sectarian group employed ethnic- and sect-centric narratives to appeal to its own constituents. Some leaders also relied on anti-US sentiment, particularly during the period of insurgency and civil war. However, Iraqis appeared to have become increasingly less convinced that their leaders were representing their interests. Analysing the 2015 protest movement, Faleh Abdul Jabar wrote, 'The protest movement has proved that it has the potential to prevent politicians from manipulating communal identity to cover their political, administrative, service, security and economic failures.'[39]

Many Iraqis simply do not believe that their leaders are committed to reform. As such, they are less convinced than in the past by politicians' promises.

By the mid-2010s, polling data suggested that Iraqis were less convinced by ethnic or sect-based ideology. From March 2014 to April 2018, according to NDI polling, 32 per cent more Iraqis claimed that they would prefer to support a party that represented multiple ethnicities and sects.[40] The inability of the elite to build narratives and discourse capable of convincing citizens that its members are their legitimate representatives has made the status quo more fragile. Many Iraqis simply do not believe that their leaders are committed to reform. As such, they are less convinced than in the past by politicians' promises.

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38 World Bank (undated), 'Worldwide Governance Indicators', http://info.worldbank.org/governance/wgi/Home/Reports (accessed 24 Mar. 2021).

39 Jabar, F. A. (2018), *The Iraqi protest movement: from identity politics to issue politics*, LSE Middle East Centre papers series (25), London: LSE Middle East Centre, http://eprints.lse.ac.uk/88294/1/Faleh_Iraqi%20Protest%20Movement_Published_English.pdf.

40 National Democratic Institute (2018), 'Parliamentary Elections: A New Turning Point for Iraq'.

By October 2019, events further revealed that the elite was less able to rely on the economic tools of power. With the Iraqi economy at the mercy of fluctuations in the international price of oil, Baghdad's leadership risked losing legitimacy by not being able to pay public sector salaries.[41]

More critically, the 'youth bulge' and other demographic changes meant that an increasing proportion of the population was excluded from the post-2003 patronage networks. The elite now had to cater for a new supply of graduates each year who expected employment. According to the World Bank, the burgeoning youth profile contributed to a youth unemployment rate of around 36 per cent as of 2016.[42] The upward trend in youth unemployment also reflected the growing inability of the political elite to meet the employment expectations of young people by offering opportunities in the public sector – a strategy upon which it had hitherto relied heavily. The gender aspect also remains important. According to the International Labour Organization (ILO), only around 20 per cent of Iraqi women were active in the labour force in 2017.[43]

Despite a weakening of its ability, as a result of the October 2019 protests, to maintain the social contract, the elite kept control over its vertical power relationships by relying to a greater extent on the third social tool: coercion. Where protests erupted, the elite deployed force, killing more than 600 protesters and wounding more than 30,000. According to the Iraq High Commission for Human Rights, 2,800 people were detained during the protests.[44] Many detainees reported the use of torture. One civilian detainee told the *Guardian*: 'By the end of the first week, I yearned for death. I wanted them to kill me. I just wanted to die and the torture to stop.'[45] Over the following 12 months, the frequency of protests began to dwindle, and by October 2020 they had come to an end.

The October 2019 uprising revealed the durability of vertical power relations in Iraq. While structural changes caused by factors ranging from demographics to climate change have strained the social contract, depriving the elite of one or two forms of social power, the leadership was nonetheless able to rely on violence to maintain its position. This illustrates the particular leverage that Iraq's ruling elite possesses in the competition for state power, as when it is unable to deploy all three tools of social power evenly, it can still rely on their uneven use (i.e. predominantly turning to violence) to suppress unrest.

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41 World Bank (undated), 'Worldwide Governance Indicators' (accessed 24 Mar. 2021). A precedent for this can be seen in the effects of the protracted fall in oil prices from mid-2014 throughout 2015, which was a factor leading to the protests in the summer of that year. According to Faleh Abdul Jabar: 'The worsening economic situation [was] triggered by the unexpected and dramatic fall in oil prices from over $100 per barrel to $40 and then to $32–30. State coffers were almost empty.' Jabar (2018), *The Iraqi protest movement: from identity politics to issue politics*.
42 World Bank (2018), *Jobs in Iraq: a primer on job creation in the short-term*, 15 June 2018, http://documents.worldbank.org/curated/en/255111529495871846/pdf/Jobs-in-Iraq-a-primer-on-job-creation-in-the-short-term.pdf.
43 International Labour Organization (2019), 'Decent Work Country Programme Iraq: Recovery and Reform', ilo.org/wcmsp5/groups/public/---arabstates/---ro-beirut/documents/genericdocument/wcms_736362.pdf.
44 Abdul-Ahad, G. (2020), '"I just wanted to die": the torture of an Iraqi protester', *Guardian*, 18 February 2020, https://www.theguardian.com/world/2020/feb/18/i-just-wanted-to-die-the-torture-of-an-iraqi-protester.
45 Ibid.

The basis of the social contract in Lebanon

Although elements within Lebanon's ruling elite may compete with one another for power, each deploys similar tools to those seen in Iraq in relations with its constituents. Historically, all political parties in Lebanon have utilized ideology around sect-based rights and privileges to rally supporters. Moreover, all have established clientelist economic relations with their followers – for example, offering them employment in the civil service or cash in return for votes. Different parties have used coercion to varying degrees, both against opponents and to keep followers in line. The nature of power-sharing in Lebanon has enabled the elite to use these tools with impunity, because the system's reliance on consensus among the political class has erased the ability of the electorate to hold its leaders accountable.[46]

Clientelism has been ubiquitous, with one illustrative example being the Future Movement's response to the rising power of Hezbollah. In 2005, Hezbollah entered a political alliance with the Free Patriotic Movement, a Christian party, and both consequently appeared to be gaining wider popular support. This was a cause for concern for Hezbollah's political opponents, led by the Future Movement, especially as Hezbollah orchestrated mass protests and sit-ins, which paralysed much of central Beirut from 2006, in an attempt to bring down the government. Brokered talks between the two sides and their allies led to the formation in 2008 of a national unity government that granted Hezbollah and its allies the power of veto. This left parliament as the sole remaining government institution through which the Future Movement could seek to exercise power. During the parliamentary elections of 2009, the Future Movement, with support from Saudi Arabia, sought to gain seats by offering Lebanese expatriates free flights to Lebanon so that they could vote. This episode illustrates the wider political economy within which sectarianism operates in the country. In the words of Hannes Baumann, 'a small politically connected elite appropriates the bulk of economic surplus and redistributes it through communal clientelism'.[47]

The use of ideology came to the fore in Lebanon following Hezbollah's intervention in Syria in 2012. Since the liberation of Lebanon from Israeli forces in 2000, Hezbollah had moved towards the use of nationalist instead of purely sectarian rhetoric, so that it could present itself as an actor working in the national interest rather than solely in the interest of the Shia sect within Lebanon. However, Hezbollah's intervention in Syria was met with widespread criticism from outside the Shia milieu. At first, Hezbollah's response was to present its intervention as an act of national protection against the spread of Sunni jihadism from Syria. When this narrative failed to appease critics, Hezbollah instead sought to justify intervention in terms of the need to secure Shia sites in Syria, mobilizing the

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46 See, for example, Khalaf, S. (1987), *Lebanon's Predicament*, New York: Columbia University Press; and Hamzeh, A. N. (2001), 'Clientelism, Lebanon: Roots and Trends', *Middle Eastern Studies*, 37(3): pp. 167–78.
47 Baumann, H. (2016), 'Social Protest and the Political Economy of Sectarianism in Lebanon', *Global Discourse* 6(4): p. 634. See also Leenders, R. (2012), *Spoils of Truce: Corruption and State-Building in Postwar Lebanon*, Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press; and Salloukh, B. F. and Verheij, R. A. (2017), 'Transforming Power Sharing: From Corporate to Hybrid Consociation in Postwar Lebanon', *Middle East Law and Governance*, 9(2): pp. 147–73.

Shia community in Lebanon on that basis.[48] The Free Patriotic Movement also frequently used ideology to rally supporters on the basis of protecting Lebanon from 'foreigners' in reference to Syrian refugees in the country, whom the party portrayed as taking jobs away from Lebanese citizens.[49]

Lebanese political parties have also used coercion to varying degrees towards their own followers to counter dissent, as well as towards their opponents. As mentioned earlier, in 2008 Hezbollah deployed its fighters to areas of Beirut known for their loyalty to the Future Movement to contest a cabinet proposal to prevent Hezbollah from using its own telecommunications network in Lebanon; such use would not have been subject to oversight by public institutions. Hezbollah then withdrew its ministers from the cabinet, causing the government to fall, before securing veto power in the next cabinet following the Doha agreement of 2008. On 17 October 2019 – the first day of the protests that sparked the 'October Revolution' – the security staff of Akram Chehayeb, a PSP member of parliament, fired at protesters as his convoy passed through Beirut. In documenting violent incidents against individuals that took place in the context of the revolution between 17 October 2019 and 15 March 2020, Legal Agenda, a local NGO, found that 11 per cent of attacks were conducted by affiliates of the ruling political parties. Legal Agenda listed the parties associated with these violent incidents as Amal, Hezbollah, the PSP, the Free Patriotic Movement, the Future Movement and the Lebanese Forces.[50]

The crisis of public authority in Lebanon

By 2019, Lebanon had entered the most severe financial crisis in its modern history, with gross general government debt rising to an estimated 174 per cent of GDP during that year[51] and the local currency depreciating. Commentators linked the economic deterioration to the lack of accountability for elite behaviour, as consecutive governments had continued to fail to deliver basic services adequately. Citizens began to lose trust in their leaders, state institutions and the formal processes of political participation.

The Arab Barometer survey for 2019 showed that only 20 per cent of Lebanese citizens trusted core public institutions.[52] Turnout in the parliamentary election of May 2018 fell to 49.2 per cent of eligible voters (compared with 54 per cent

48 See Malmvig, H. (2019), 'Allow me this one time to speak as a Shi'i: The sectarian taboo, music videos and the securitization of sectarian identity politics in Hezbollah's legitimation of its military involvement in Syria', *Mediterranean Politics,* 1 October 2019, doi:10.1080/13629395.2019.1666230.
49 Wintour, P. (2019), 'Thousands of Syrian refugees could be sent back, says Lebanese minister', *Guardian*, 15 June 2019, https://www.theguardian.com/world/2019/jun/15/thousands-of-syrian-refugees-could-be-sent-back-says-lebanese-minister.
50 Haidar, N. (2020), 'Violence and torture in the face of the popular uprising: Crimes against protesters with no accountability' (Arabic), Legal Agenda, 16 October 2020, https://legal-agenda.com/%D8%A7%D9%84%D8%B9%D9%86%D9%81-%D9%88%D8%A7%D9%84%D8%AA%D8%B9%D8%B0%D9%8A%D8%A8-%D9%81%D9%8A-%D9%88%D8%AC%D9%87-%D8%A7%D9%84%D8%A7%D9%86%D8%AA%D9%81%D8%A7%D8%B6%D8%A9-%D8%A7%D9%84%D8%B4%D8%B9%D8%A8.
51 International Monetary Fund (2020), World Economic Outlook Database, October 2020, https://www.imf.org/en/Publications/WEO/weo-database/2020/October/weo-report?c=446,&s=GGXWDG_NGDP,&sy=2010&ey=2020&ssm=0&scsm=1&scc=0&ssd=1&ssc=0&sic=0&sort=country&ds=.&br=1 (accessed 20 Mar. 2021).
52 Arab Barometer (2019), *Arab Barometer V: Lebanon Country Report*, https://www.arabbarometer.org/wp-content/uploads/lebanon-report-Public-Opinion-2019.pdf.

in the previous election in 2009).[53] Following anti-corruption protests in Beirut in 2015, a number of activists and new political figures had emerged to contest the 2018 election. If their intention was to change the system from within, however, it was unsuccessful: only one such 'independent' candidate won a parliamentary seat. Meanwhile, the economic situation continued to worsen throughout Lebanon.

From October 2019 a series of demonstrations took place in which protesters across the country demanded the resignation of all those in power and an end to the sect-based system of power-sharing. A defining feature of these protests was that they predominantly involved younger people, who perceived the political system as the cause of economic injustice. As such, their protests were not so much about the state of the economy as about demanding rights. They explicitly called for a change in the social contract.[54]

As in Iraq, the October 2019 protests threatened the prevailing political system and the vested interests behind it. Similarly, the Lebanese elite resorted to the above-mentioned tools of social power – ideology, economics and coercion – to protect the status quo. But while these tools had worked to various degrees in the past, on this occasion they were less effective.

Hitherto, the political system's formalized class, clan and religious hierarchies – which had existed in the country well before it became a republic – had provided the basis on which social power was distributed. This formalization had aligned religious symbolism and political leadership, as leaders of different sects became political party leaders or representatives within the government. Sectarianism was therefore harnessed to create an aura of symbolic credibility for leaders, who engaged with constituents within their respective sects in a quasi-feudal, patrimonial fashion. People seeking jobs, for example, would, as a first course of action, turn to their leaders to provide opportunities for them, often through state channels such as the civil service or the military.

However, the October 2019 protests highlighted the extent to which this status quo is now under pressure. The country's youth bulge has led to the rise of a new generation that has begun to reject patrimonial norms and sectarian ideology. This has weakened the traditional alignment of religious symbolism and political leadership, undermining the elite's ability to use symbolism and ideology to maintain the status quo. While the elite in 2015 largely succeeded in its attempts to neutralize anti-corruption protests by co-opting those who saw themselves as the movement's leaders, the situation in October 2019 proved different. The protesters displayed an acute awareness of the risk of being co-opted, or 'shoehorned' into sectarian boxes. Participants maintained firmly that the protests were to remain leaderless, even though this strategy ultimately limited what the protests could achieve.[55] One year later, in late 2020, Lebanon witnessed a wave of university

53 Reuters (2018), 'Lebanese election turnout was 49.2 percent: minister', 6 May 2018, https://www.reuters.com/article/us-lebanon-election-turnout/lebanese-election-turnout-was-49-2-percent-minister-idUSKBN1I70W6.

54 Al-Khalidi, S. and Knecht, E. (2019), 'Young, angry Lebanese ditch their differences to target 'unjust' system', Reuters, 23 October 2019, https://www.reuters.com/article/us-lebanon-protests-youth/young-angry-lebanese-ditch-their-differences-to-target-unjust-system-idUSKBN1X21KI?il=0.

55 Collard, R. (2019), 'Lebanon's Protests Are Leaderless. That May Be Their Strength', *Foreign Policy*, 25 October 2019, https://foreignpolicy.com/2019/10/25/lebanon-protests-michel-aoun-corruption-mismanagement.

student council elections during which, for the first time on such a scale, candidates labelling themselves as 'secular' won the largest numbers of votes compared to candidates affiliated with political parties.[56]

Decades of corruption and mismanagement have rendered Lebanese state institutions hollow, albeit effective as clientelist tools. This clientelism has long helped the state to retain its nominal form, despite civil war and cycles of conflict and instability. However, the state has largely failed to deliver services to its citizens, due in part to a lack of accountability. By 2019, as Lebanon faced economic crisis, state institutions had effectively become insolvent, as foreign-currency reserves had been depleted and the Lebanese pound had tumbled in value. Funding from external patrons for political parties had also fallen off and could not be relied on to shore up the economy (for example, in November 2017, following what it perceived as Saad Hariri's failure to stand up to Hezbollah, Saudi Arabia stopped seeing the Lebanese prime minister as a dependable ally and severely cut funding for his party).[57] Iran was straining under mounting US sanctions, which reduced cashflows to Hezbollah, though the latter's other sources of revenue persisted.[58] Lebanese expatriates who had previously sustained the economy through remittances significantly reduced the amounts they sent to or invested in Lebanon, because of concerns over the economic crisis.

> **Decades of corruption and mismanagement have rendered Lebanese state institutions hollow, albeit effective as clientelist tools. This clientelism has long helped the state to retain its nominal form, despite civil war and cycles of conflict and instability.**

All this translated into a challenge for elite business interests, which in turn meant that monetary distribution could no longer serve as a viable tool of maintaining elite power. This left the elite with coercion as the only remaining tool at its disposal. The mass protests against the political system that began in October 2019 were met with considerable violence. As in 2015, the army and security forces quelled the protests using rubber bullets, and sometimes even live ammunition. Meanwhile, the ruling political parties used tactics such as sending loyalist thugs to infiltrate the protests, commit arson (in an effort to discredit the protesters) or directly intimidate participants, as documented in the 2020 Legal Agenda report. Notably, however, the fact that violence had been used in the past against protesters in 2015 did not deter people from taking to the streets in 2019. This can partly be attributed to the youth of the majority of protesters. Unlike the

56 Such results were seen in the student council elections at Lebanon's three major universities: the American University of Beirut (AUB), the Lebanese American University (LAU) and Saint Joseph University (USJ).
57 Nakhoul, S., Bassam, L. and Perry, T. (2017), 'Exclusive: How Saudi Arabia turned on Lebanon's Hariri', Reuters, 11 November 2017, https://www.reuters.com/article/us-lebanon-politics-hariri-exclusive/exclusive-how-saudi-arabia-turned-on-lebanons-hariri-idUSKBN1DB0QL.
58 Harding, T. (2020), 'Hezbollah suffers blow to funding from Iran amid pandemic', *The National*, 22 April 2020, https://www.thenationalnews.com/world/mena/hezbollah-suffers-blow-to-funding-from-iran-amid-pandemic-1.1009925.

older generation, they had no memory of the Lebanese civil war, and were more assertive in their demands and less fearful of coercion.[59] Just as in 2015, coercion did not succeed in halting the 2019 protests.

With the three traditional tools of social power having failed to suppress the dissent, the elite resorted to a new tactic: *economic* coercion. As Lebanon's economy continued to deteriorate, members of the elite whose interests were intertwined with those of the country's private banks blocked citizens' access to their bank accounts.[60] Different banks introduced different informal capital controls and operational measures; these tended to change frequently and at short notice. Measures ranged from changes in the operating hours of different branches to restrictions on the amounts of US dollars that customers could withdraw each week. The government effectively turned a blind eye to these actions, which added to the sense of ambiguity and anxiety among citizens. Many people were unable to pay their bills and worried about the security of their deposits.

Even though these measures hurt all Lebanese citizens, including the elite's own supporters, the tactic meant that popular concerns about political rights and the social contract were soon overridden by concerns about individual livelihoods, with the consequence that protests dwindled in size all over the country.[61]

59 Many young people support Lebanon's ruling political parties, on the other hand.
60 Bazzi, M. (2020), 'The Corrupt Political Class That Broke Lebanon', *Foreign Affairs*, 14 August 2020, https://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/lebanon/2020-08-14/corrupt-political-class-broke-lebanon.
61 The COVID-19 pandemic started contributing to this decline from March 2020.

04
Conclusion

Political systems of social power have proved remarkably persistent in Iraq and Lebanon. Policy interventions should focus on making these systems more accountable to society.

For the past several years, the Iraqi and Lebanese states have faced a seemingly imminent existential threat. The onset of protests and bottom-up challenges to the ruling elite has led to movements calling for revolution. Infighting between parties and leaders, exemplified in repeated delays in the choosing of prime ministers or cabinets, has revealed intense fragmentation. These realities have been stimulated by economic, demographic and climate change. They have challenged both the elite pact and the ability of political leaders to maintain public authority, leading many observers to argue that both states are on the brink of collapse. However, thus far such an eventuality has failed to materialize. Civil wars, insurgencies, massive explosions[62] and government collapses have occurred, but the state has remained seemingly perpetually 'on the brink' without ever quite tipping over.

This paper has argued that the Westphalian, neo-Weberian definition of the state – in which power in effect resides in formal institutions – has often been taken for granted by Western policymakers engaging in the Middle East and North Africa. This has led much of the debate to focus on the likelihood of imminent 'state' failure or collapse.

However, the state in a more broadly defined sense has not disappeared in the region, nor has it been replaced with subnational modes of governance such as tribal or local community governance. Instead, the neo-Weberian ideal itself needs to be challenged, so that policymaking can be shaped by more informed assessments of conditions on the ground. In reality, the Iraqi and Lebanese examples show that in some cases a state neither 'collapses' nor disappears, even if particular institutions and actors within it manifestly can.

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62 Including the explosion at the Port of Beirut on 4 August 2020.

Focusing on the state not as an institutional form of government but as a broader and more elastic system of power reveals a different equation, and explains why both countries survive as states. Thus far, their systems of power have proven durable, withstanding elite fragmentation, political incoherence and uprisings.

A more realistic approach to understanding the question of state fragility and collapse in Iraq and Lebanon must consider the effects and prevalence of social power. Studying these states through the lens of power relations – and how leaders operate in both 'horizontal' (intra-elite) and 'vertical' (elite–citizenry) axes of society – reveals that the state is in fact the space in which elements of the elite cooperate and compete with each other, using the tools of ideology, economics and violence. Even when faced with mass protests, the elite commands enough of a social base, and is sufficiently willing to use coercion, to weather the type of uprisings that arose in both countries in October 2019.

The state in countries such as Iraq and Lebanon is often understood in negative terms; indeed, policy recommendations have sometimes even called for the removal of the state. However, Western policymakers should focus not only on the fragility or hybridity of particular institutions or actors *per se*, but also (and more importantly) on the systems of power themselves. These systems, within which elements of the elite negotiate both with one another and with their respective social bases, will reveal the true extent to which these countries are indeed 'on the brink' of collapse. This is not to say that authoritarianism will endure. Yet understanding its persistence requires the observer to acknowledge the power dynamics that are at the heart of the particular form which the 'state' takes in these countries. Policy interventions should focus on ensuring that the interactions which make up both horizontal and vertical power relationships are more accountable to society.

About the authors

Dr Renad Mansour is a senior research fellow and project director of the Iraq Initiative at Chatham House. He is also a senior research fellow at the American University of Iraq, Sulaimani, and a research fellow at the Cambridge Security Initiative based at Cambridge University. Renad was previously a lecturer at the London School of Economics and Political Science (LSE), where he taught the international relations of the Middle East. From 2013, he held positions as lecturer of international studies and supervisor at the Faculty of Politics, also at Cambridge. He is co-author of *Once Upon a Time in Iraq*, published by BBC Books/Penguin (2020) to accompany the critically acclaimed BBC series.

Dr Lina Khatib is the director of the Middle East and North Africa Programme at Chatham House. She was formerly director of the Carnegie Middle East Center in Beirut and co-founding head of the Program on Arab Reform and Democracy at Stanford University's Center on Democracy, Development, and the Rule of Law.

Her research focuses on the international relations of the Middle East, Islamist groups and security, political transitions and foreign policy, with special attention to the Syrian conflict. She is a research associate at SOAS, was a senior research associate at the Arab Reform Initiative and lectured at Royal Holloway, University of London.

She is a frequent commentator on politics and security in the Middle East and North Africa at events around the world and in the media.

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