

# State and society in Iraq ten years after regime change: the rise of a new authoritarianism

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At midday on 20 December 2012, Iraqi security forces raided the house and offices of the country's Minister of Finance, Rafi al-Issawi. They arrested 150 people, including members of the minister's staff and his bodyguard. During the raid, Issawi tried to reach the Prime Minister, Nouri al-Maliki, to see if he had authorized the action, but Maliki refused to take his call. Once the troops had left, Issawi sought sanctuary in the house of the speaker of parliament, Usama al-Nujaifi. It subsequently emerged that the day before the raid, security forces had arrested the head of Issawi's protection force and a member of his family, Colonel Mahmoud al-Issawi, and charged him with terrorist offences.<sup>1</sup>

The raid on Issawi's house evoked strong memories of a similar event in Baghdad's Green Zone a year earlier. On 15 December 2011, troops and tanks, led by Maliki's son Ahmed, surrounded the houses of Issawi, the country's Vice-President Tariq al-Hashemi and its Deputy Prime Minister Saleh al-Mutlaq.<sup>2</sup> All three politicians were placed under temporary house arrest. Hashemi was subsequently allowed to fly into exile via the capital of the Kurdish Regional Government in Erbil. Three of his bodyguards, however, were kept in detention. After four days they appeared on national television, making dramatic confessions denouncing the Vice-President for paying them to carry out a series of assassinations and bomb attacks.<sup>3</sup> It soon became apparent that Hashemi's bodyguards had undergone extensive torture in order to extract their 'confessions'.<sup>4</sup> Their treatment was so brutal that one of them, Amir Sarbut Zaidan al-Batawi, died in custody. Government officials claimed he had suffered kidney failure, but pictures of his corpse showed clear evidence of extended brutality.<sup>5</sup> In 2012, Rafi al-Issawi's supposed guilt was open to even greater doubt.<sup>6</sup>

<sup>1</sup> See Associated Press, 'Iraq confirms arrest of minister's bodyguards', 21 Dec. 2012, <http://www.foxnews.com/world/2012/12/21/iraq-confirms-arrest-minister-bodyguards/>, accessed 25 Feb. 2013.

<sup>2</sup> Marisa Cochrane Sullivan, 'Iraq's post-withdrawal crisis', Institute for the Study of War, Update no. 2, 3 Dec. 2011.

<sup>3</sup> Roy Gutman, 'Iraq orders vice president's arrest after TV "confessions"', *Miami Herald*, 19 Dec. 2011, <http://www.miamiherald.com/2011/12/19/2553867/iraq-orders-vice-presidents-arrest.html>, accessed 25 Feb. 2013.

<sup>4</sup> Ghaith Abdul-Ahad, 'Corruption in Iraq: "Your son is being tortured. He will die if you don't pay"', *Guardian*, 16 Jan. 2012, <http://www.guardian.co.uk/world/2012/jan/16/corruption-iraq-son-tortured-pay>, accessed 25 Feb. 2013.

<sup>5</sup> 'Iraq Vice-President Hashemi's guards "die in custody"', BBC News, 11 April 2012, <http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-middle-east-17675666>, accessed 25 Feb. 2013.

<sup>6</sup> Jack Healy and Michael R. Gordon, 'A moderate official at risk in a fracturing Iraq', *New York Times*, 30 Dec.

The arrests of 2011 created a consensus among those members of Iraq's ruling elite not aligned with the Prime Minister that was further consolidated by the events of a year later. Maliki's behaviour, they argued, posed a direct threat to the country's nascent democratic institutions. Ayad Allawi, the head of the Iraqiya coalition of which both Issawi and Hashemi are senior members, wrote that 'the country is slipping back into the clutches of a dangerous new one-man rule, which inevitably will lead to full dictatorship'.<sup>7</sup> In April 2012 Massoud Barzani, the President of the Kurdish Regional Government, took that message to Washington, telling the US administration: 'Iraq is facing a serious crisis ... it's coming towards one-man rule.'<sup>8</sup> In 2011, following intervention by the United States, the charges against Issawi were not pursued. However, the move against him in 2012 triggered a series of mass demonstrations across the north-west of Iraq, Iraqiya's electoral heartlands: 60,000 people were reported to have blocked the main road in Issawi's home town of Fallujah, with a further 100,000 demonstrating in Ramadi, the capital of Anbar province.<sup>9</sup>

Hashemi's arrest may well have been triggered by the backing he had given to federalist movements across the country who were trying to form autonomous regions to limit the power of Baghdad.<sup>10</sup> It looks as if the raid on Issawi's house was part of Maliki's broader attempts at securing victory in the provincial elections scheduled for April 2013. Issawi, unlike Hashemi, is a skilled and popular politician, and in the week before his arrest he had joined a multiparty coalition led by Nujaifi to contest the forthcoming provincial elections.<sup>11</sup> The presence within this coalition of an admired technocrat with a strong regional base would certainly help maximize their vote.

The moves against Issawi and Hashemi are part of a larger pattern of deployment by the Prime Minister of the judiciary and security forces to break any political opposition to his long-running attempts to centralize power in his own hands and those of his allies. This process has reached the level at which it threatens Iraq's democracy.

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2011, <http://www.nytimes.com/2011/12/31/world/middleeast/rafe-al-essawi-a-moderate-in-an-increasingly-polarized-iraq.html?pagewanted=all>, accessed 25 Feb. 2013.

<sup>7</sup> Ayad Allawi, 'Iraq's slide toward renewed violence', *Washington Times*, 9 April 2012, <http://www.washington-times.com/news/2012/apr/9/iraqs-slide-toward-renewed-violence/>, accessed 25 Feb. 2013.

<sup>8</sup> See Josh Rogin, 'Kurdish leader: no to arming the Syrian opposition', 'The Cable', *Foreign Policy*, 5 April 2012, [http://thecable.foreignpolicy.com/posts/2012/04/05/kurdish\\_leader\\_no\\_to\\_arming\\_the\\_syrian\\_opposition](http://thecable.foreignpolicy.com/posts/2012/04/05/kurdish_leader_no_to_arming_the_syrian_opposition), accessed 25 Feb. 2013.

<sup>9</sup> Kamal Naama and Raheem Salman, 'Iraqi Sunnis stage big anti-government rallies', Reuters, 28 Dec. 2012, <http://www.reuters.com/article/2012/12/28/iraq-protests-idUSL5E8NS7XR20121228>; 'Anti-government protests sweep Iraq', Al Jazeera, 12 Jan. 2012, <http://www.aljazeera.com/news/middleeast/2013/01/201311204814911200.html>, both accessed 25 Feb. 2013.

<sup>10</sup> See Mustafa Habib, 'Niqash interview with Iraqi Vice President: US withdrawal "nothing to worry about"', 13 Dec. 2011, <http://www.niqash.org/articles/?id=2953>; Marina Ottaway and Danial Kaysi, *The state of Iraq* (Washington DC: Carnegie Foundation, 2012), pp. 13–14, [http://carnegieendowment.org/files/state\\_of\\_iraq.pdf](http://carnegieendowment.org/files/state_of_iraq.pdf), both accessed 25 Feb. 2013.

<sup>11</sup> Sam Wyer, 'Weekly Iraq update' no. 50, Institute for the Study of War, 12 Dec. 2012, <http://www.understandingwar.org/backgroundunder/weekly-iraq-update-50>, accessed 25 Feb. 2013.

## **From imposed democracy to competitive authoritarianism**

The accusations of authoritarian ambition levelled at the Prime Minister by a number of figures in Iraq's ruling elite must have come as a bitter disappointment to those who planned the invasion in 2003. There is little doubt that a core aim of the Bush administration's strategy in Iraq was to use its military power not only to remove the Ba'athist regime but also to impose a new democratic system of government on the country. Iraq was meant to play a central role in George W. Bush's 'forward strategy of freedom'—a mission announced on page 1 of the National Security Strategy, published after the attacks of 9/11 and before the invasion of Iraq, which boldly stated: 'We will actively work to bring the hope of democracy, development, free markets, and free trade to every corner of the world.'<sup>12</sup> In the months leading up to the invasion, Bush explicitly justified the war in terms of democratizing Iraq: 'A liberated Iraq can show the power of freedom to transform that vital region, by bringing hope and progress into the lives of millions.'<sup>13</sup> Democratization also shaped the policy discussions within the administration about how to handle the aftermath of Saddam Hussein's removal.<sup>14</sup>

How are we to judge the health and sustainability of an exogenously imposed democracy, a decade after the war that delivered it to Iraq? Robert Dahl's definition has dominated discussions of democracy since the publication of his book *Polyarchy* in 1971.<sup>15</sup> Dahl set four minimum standards to be met before a political system could be judged democratic, namely: free and fair elections; full adult suffrage; the protection of human rights; and the absence of unelected authorities that could constrain the power of the elected representatives of the people.<sup>16</sup> Critics of America's efforts at democracy promotion abroad have claimed that the application of this minimal 'polyarchic model' is a deliberate attempt at creating a 'low-intensity democracy', which demobilizes the target population and creates elite consensus in support of economic inequality and the status quo.<sup>17</sup>

The US-run Coalition Provisional Authority (CPA) that ruled Iraq for over a year after the invasion, from April 2003 until June 2004, laid the foundations for Iraq's present political system. It created a raft of regulations and institutions that were designed to limit the power of the state and set the rules under which a polyarchic democracy could flourish. Paul Bremer, the man in charge of the CPA, issued 100 legally binding orders during his time in Baghdad with the aim

<sup>12</sup> See the introduction to the *National Security Strategy of the United States of America*, Sept. 2002, <http://georgewbush-whitehouse.archives.gov/nsc/nss/2002/>, accessed 25 Feb. 2013.

<sup>13</sup> George W. Bush, 'President discusses the future of Iraq at the American Enterprise Institute', 26 Feb. 2003, <http://georgewbush-whitehouse.archives.gov/news/releases/2003/02/20030226-11.html>, accessed 25 Feb. 2013.

<sup>14</sup> 'We've got an obligation to go stand up a democracy ... We've got to fundamentally change the place. And we've got to give the Iraqi people a chance at those fundamental values we believe in': Vice-President Cheney at a cabinet meeting in 2003, quoted in Bob Woodward, *Plan of attack* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 2004), p. 284.

<sup>15</sup> Robert A. Dahl, *Polyarchy: participation and opposition* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1971).

<sup>16</sup> See Steven Levitsky and Lucan A. Way, *Competitive authoritarianism: hybrid regimes after the Cold War* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010), p. 5.

<sup>17</sup> See William I. Robinson, *Promoting polyarchy: globalization, US intervention and hegemony* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996); Jean-François Drolet, 'A liberalism betrayed? American neoconservatism and the theory of international relations', *Journal of Political Ideologies* 15: 2, June 2010, pp. 89–118.

of dismantling the authoritarian apparatus of the old regime, reforming what was left of the state and guaranteeing its neo-liberal ethos.<sup>18</sup> These orders were meant to secure the independence of the central bank (order 18), freedom of assembly (order 19), the financial probity of government ministries (orders 55, 57, 59, 77), human rights (order 60) and free and fair elections (orders 92, 96, 97).<sup>19</sup>

The democratic process itself was inaugurated seven months after the formal occupation ended with national elections for an interim parliament held on 30 January 2005. A new Iraqi constitution was then drafted and voted on in a country-wide referendum before another set of national elections for a full-term government were held on 15 December 2005. Finally, a third set of national elections were held on 7 March 2010. Three sets of national elections, overseen by an independent electoral authority and internationally judged to be free and fair, appear to stand in stark contrast to the accusations of Massoud Barzani, Saleh al-Mutlaq and Rafi al-Issawi that Nouri al-Maliki is now a direct threat to Iraq's nascent democratic institutions.<sup>20</sup>

Of Dahl's four tests for ascertaining whether a country is democratic, three at least appear to have been met: free and fair elections, full adult suffrage and the absence of unelected authorities constraining elected government. On the other hand, the human rights situation in Iraq remains terrible. In addition, the institutions that Bremer set up have seen their autonomy and role in protecting democracy systematically broken. The central bank, the Independent High Electoral Commission (IHEC) and the judiciary itself have all seen their independence put at risk by the actions of the Prime Minister. This trend has yet to reach the levels of complete authoritarianism, but it certainly bears close comparison to what Levitsky and Way have labelled 'competitive authoritarianism'.

In a fully authoritarian system, opposition forces cannot legally and openly compete for power. Within competitive authoritarianism elections are regularly held, and their result is open to some doubt before the event.<sup>21</sup> However, the competitive authoritarian government increasingly shapes the electoral contest to its advantage. It does this by restricting civil liberties to limit the space for political mobilization and protest. It then uses the resources of the state, particularly finance, coercion and the media, to ensure that it retains a dominant electoral advantage. Although the results of elections are not entirely predictable in advance, the use of state-controlled repression and resources reduces the political space within which the opposition can operate. Iraq today much more closely resembles the competitive authoritarianism described by Levitsky and Way than it does the procedural democracy described by Robert Dahl. The Prime Minister has repeatedly deployed a very pliant judiciary to reinterpret the constitution drafted

<sup>18</sup> See Toby Dodge, 'The ideological roots of failure: the application of kinetic neo-liberalism to Iraq', *International Affairs* 86: 6, Nov. 2010, pp. 1269–86.

<sup>19</sup> <http://www.iraqcoalition.org/regulations/#Orders>, accessed 25 Feb. 2013.

<sup>20</sup> Arwa Damon and Mohammed Tawfeeq, 'Iraq's leader becoming a new "dictator", deputy warns', CNN, 13 Dec. 2011, [http://articles.cnn.com/2011-12-13/middleeast/world\\_meast\\_iraq-maliki\\_1\\_al-maliki-iraqi-prime-minister-Nouri-shiite-and-minority-sunni?\\_s=PM:MIDDLEEAST](http://articles.cnn.com/2011-12-13/middleeast/world_meast_iraq-maliki_1_al-maliki-iraqi-prime-minister-Nouri-shiite-and-minority-sunni?_s=PM:MIDDLEEAST), accessed 25 Feb. 2013; Healy and Gordon, 'A moderate official at risk in a fracturing Iraq'.

<sup>21</sup> Levitsky and Way, *Competitive authoritarianism*, pp. 3–5.

in 2005. This process has seen the power of the independent institutions set up by Paul Bremer systematically curtailed. Maliki has then applied the coercive power of the state to intimidate other politicians and demobilize political protest against him.

## **The rise of competitive authoritarianism in Iraq**

Nouri al-Maliki's path to power began when he was appointed prime minister in April 2006. After 156 days of negotiations following Iraq's second postwar national elections, Maliki was chosen because none of the other competing party bosses saw this grey functionary as a threat to his own power. Upon taking office, Maliki was confronted by the very issue that had enabled his appointment: he lacked the political power with which to govern. He simply had too few coherent governmental institutions through which to rule. During his first two years in office, Baghdad was dominated by rumours that his political rivals were on the verge of obtaining the parliamentary votes needed to remove him.

Maliki's first move to consolidate his grip on power involved building a small and cohesive group of functionaries, the 'Malikiyoun', with strong personal ties to him.<sup>22</sup> The 'Malikiyoun' comprises two separate groups: first, close family members, his son, nephews and son-in-law, who occupy sensitive positions in the prime minister's office;<sup>23</sup> second, functionaries from his own party, Dawa, who aligned themselves with Maliki after he took over the party and consolidated his power as prime minister. Faced with a fractured political elite consumed with infighting and self-enrichment, Maliki skilfully placed the 'Malikiyoun' at the centre of a network of influence and patronage that bypassed the cabinet and linked the prime minister directly to those generals and senior civil servants who were exercising state power below ministerial level. In effect, from 2006 onwards, Maliki slowly built a shadow state that circumvented both the existing governing elite and democratic oversight of the exercise of power. It placed the Office of the Prime Minister at the centre of state power, reducing the ability of the cabinet and parliament to influence the formation and application of policy. As the networks of influence spread out from the prime minister's office into the formal institutions of the state, Maliki increasingly controlled the use of state power through members of his family and those that had allied themselves to him personally from within the ranks of the Dawa party. He appointed his son, Ahmed Maliki, deputy chief of staff, giving him an oversight role across all of Iraq's security services and making him personally responsible for his father's security.<sup>24</sup> It is this shadow state, with the 'Malikiyoun' at its centre, which is imposing competitive authoritarianism on Iraq.

<sup>22</sup> Joel D. Rayburn, 'Rise of the Maliki regime', *Journal of International Security Affairs*, no. 22, Spring–Summer 2012.

<sup>23</sup> Hosham Dawod, 'Nouri al-Maliki: the construction and deconstruction of power in Iraq', *Near East Quarterly*, 30 June 2012, p. 3, <http://www.neareastquarterly.com/index.php/2012/06/30/nouri-al-maliki-the-construction-and-deconstruction-of-power-in-iraq/>, accessed 25 Feb. 2013.

<sup>24</sup> Ned Parker, 'The Iraq we left behind; welcome to the world's next failed state', *Foreign Affairs* 91: 2, 2012, p. 100.

Maliki's use of Iraq's security services to protect himself both personally and politically became apparent at the end of March 2008, when he identified a coordinated plot to unseat him. He thought the conspiracy against him would use an upsurge in militia violence in the southern port city of Basra as a pretext to push a vote of no confidence through the parliament in Baghdad and oust him as prime minister.<sup>25</sup> To outflank this plot, Maliki launched the 'Charge of the Knights'. This operation sent four divisions of the Iraqi army into Basra to seize control of the city back from the militias that were threatening his rule.<sup>26</sup> The eventual re-establishment of government authority in Basra struck a widespread popular chord with an Iraqi population long subject to criminality and sectarian violence. Maliki went on to bolster his new-found popular appeal in May 2008 by imposing state control over the Sadr City area in Baghdad, the huge slum that had until then been run by the Jaish al-Mahdi, the militia which was one of the two main protagonists in the civil war. The 'Charge of the Knights' was a major turning point in Iraqi politics. Maliki used this victory to stamp his authority on both the Iraqi government and the armed forces, and also to reshape his popular political image as an Iraqi nationalist and the saviour of the country. Iraq was well on its way to competitive authoritarianism.

The Prime Minister's new nationalist image was unveiled in the provincial election campaign of January 2009. He named his coalition Dawlat al-Qanoun or 'State of Law', in an attempt to convince the population that it was his policies and actions that had brought increased law and order to Iraq. On the campaign trail Maliki stressed the success of the military operations in Basra and his decision to send troops into Sadr City. He emphasized his role in challenging the Kurdish Regional Government's expansionist policies along its boundary with the rest of Iraq. In a key campaign speech he set himself against the decentralized federal agenda of the Islamic Supreme Council of Iraq and its partners within the coalition government, the Kurdistan Democratic Party and the Patriotic Union of Kurdistan.<sup>27</sup> The Prime Minister then built on this popular support by portraying himself as an Iraqi nationalist and adopting a tough negotiating stance over the Status of Forces Agreement with the United States. This approach garnered support from a population that had been mired in a sectarian civil war and endured a long and destructive American occupation. The skill of Maliki's campaign was reflected in the results of the election, in which the Prime Minister's coalition won the largest slice of the popular vote in nine out of the 14 participating provinces.<sup>28</sup>

<sup>25</sup> See US Brigadier-General H. R. McMaster, quoted in 'Secret Iraq', Part 2, BBC2, 6 Oct. 2010, [http://www.bbc.co.uk/iplayer/episode/boov8t2t/Secret\\_Iraq\\_Awakening/](http://www.bbc.co.uk/iplayer/episode/boov8t2t/Secret_Iraq_Awakening/), accessed 25 Feb. 2013.

<sup>26</sup> Leila Fadel and Nancy A. Youssef, 'Is "success" of U.S. surge in Iraq about to unravel?', *McClatchy Newspapers*, 24 March, 2008, <http://www.mcclatchydc.com/iraq/story/31527.html>; Seattle Times News Service, 'Fighting leaves crucial truce with Iraq militia in shambles', *Seattle Times*, 26 March 2008, [http://seattletimes.nwsourc.com/html/iraq/200430660I\\_iraq26.html](http://seattletimes.nwsourc.com/html/iraq/200430660I_iraq26.html); Peter Graff, 'U.S. special forces units working with Iraqi troops in Basra', Reuters, 30 March 2008, <http://www.reuters.com/article/latestCrisis/idUSL30612974>, all accessed 25 Feb. 2013.

<sup>27</sup> See International Crisis Group, *Iraq's provincial elections: the stakes*, Middle East Report no. 82 (Baghdad, Istanbul, Brussels: ICG, 27 Jan. 2009), fn. 96, [http://www.crisisgroup.org/~media/Files/Middle%20East%20North%20Africa/Iraq%20Syria%20Lebanon/Iraq/82\\_iraqs\\_provincial\\_elections\\_the\\_stakes.pdf](http://www.crisisgroup.org/~media/Files/Middle%20East%20North%20Africa/Iraq%20Syria%20Lebanon/Iraq/82_iraqs_provincial_elections_the_stakes.pdf), accessed 25 Feb. 2013.

<sup>28</sup> International Institute for Strategic Studies, 'Iraq's provincial elections', *Strategic Comment* 15: 2, 2009.

Maliki attempted to reproduce this vote-winning formula in the March 2010 national elections. He hoped to capitalize on his popularity across the south and centre of the country and on his claim to have been responsible for the drop in intercommunal violence since 2007. However, this time, in contrast to the 2005 national elections, the Prime Minister refused to join a united Shi'i coalition, the Iraqi National Alliance, designed to maximize the Shi'i vote, preferring to run on an exclusive State of Law platform. This divided the Shi'i vote. A rising current of nationalism then allowed Maliki's main rival, Iiraqiya, to gain a slim majority, winning 91 parliamentary seats to Maliki's 89.

In the period following the vote, we see Maliki's first sustained public attempt at imposing competitive authoritarianism on Iraq. 'No way we will accept the results,' he bluntly stated, demanding a recount in order to prevent a 'return to violence'.<sup>29</sup> The sinister implications of this statement were highlighted by the fact that Maliki chose to issue it in his role as head of the country's armed forces. In mid-May 2010, after the recount, the IHEC, backed by the United Nations, announced that it had found no evidence of fraud, and the vote and seat allocation remained unchanged.<sup>30</sup>

Maliki's tried and tested formula of encouraging divisions among the ruling elite, exploiting the lack of rules governing politicians' behaviour and building informal networks of power across government allowed him to dismantle the sustained attempts at limiting the growth of competitive authoritarianism in the post-election compromise reached in November 2010. The Erbil Agreement, brokered by Massoud Barzani, created another government of national unity. However, it also sought to place a number of limitations on how Maliki could exercise power in the future. The agreement stipulated that the ministries of defence and the interior should not be run by politicians aligned with the prime minister. However, since the agreement Maliki has rejected all the candidates proposed by Iiraqiya for the two ministries. In June 2011 he appointed his close adviser, Falih al-Fayyad, as acting Minister of National Security. In August he chose the Minister of Culture, Saadoun al-Dulaimi, as acting Minister of Defence while retaining the post of acting Minister of Interior for himself.<sup>31</sup>

By designating weak politicians or people personally tied to himself as acting ministers, Maliki has increased his control over the army, police force and intelligence services. He has successfully circumvented both the Erbil Agreement and the constitutional demand for cabinet posts to be validated by parliament on his way to securing competitive authoritarianism. In addition, as the Erbil Agreement has no constitutional or legal standing, the only possible sanction Maliki faces for

<sup>29</sup> Ned Parker and Caesar Ahmed, 'Maliki seeks recount in Iraq elections', *Los Angeles Times*, 22 March 2010, <http://www.latimes.com/news/nationworld/world/la-fg-iraq-election22-2010mar22,0,5859306.story>, accessed 25 Feb. 2013.

<sup>30</sup> Gabriel Gatehouse, "No fraud found" as Iraq election recount ends', BBC News, 14 May 2010, [http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/middle\\_east/8684071.stm](http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/middle_east/8684071.stm), accessed 25 Feb. 2013.

<sup>31</sup> Special Inspector General for Iraq Reconstruction, *Quarterly Report and Semiannual Report to the United States Congress*, 30 July 2011, [http://www.sigir.mil/files/quarterlyreports/July2011/Report\\_-\\_July\\_2011.pdf](http://www.sigir.mil/files/quarterlyreports/July2011/Report_-_July_2011.pdf), p. 60; Special Inspector General for Iraq Reconstruction, *Quarterly Report and Semiannual Report to the United States Congress*, 30 Oct. 2011, [http://www.sigir.mil/files/quarterlyreports/October2011/Report\\_-\\_October\\_2011.pdf](http://www.sigir.mil/files/quarterlyreports/October2011/Report_-_October_2011.pdf), p. 40, both accessed 25 Feb. 2013.

breaching it is a vote of no confidence in parliament. A senior parliamentarian, when asked about this option, bleakly commented: 'If we move towards a vote of no confidence do you think he [Maliki] would allow members to reach the chamber and if they did do you really think he would take any notice?'<sup>32</sup>

Further concerns about Maliki's plans have been raised by his public statements about how state power will be exercised in the future. In December 2011, a week after US troops left Iraq, he gave a news conference in which he effectively repudiated the Erbil Agreement and threatened to move away from coalition government to majoritarian rule based around the Shi'i Islamist political parties.<sup>33</sup> The centrepiece of the agreement, the National Council for Strategic Policy, was meant to establish an oversight body to vet all major policy decisions. It was never established.

In addition, Maliki has deployed an increasingly pliable judiciary to weaken existing institutional oversights. In January 2011, Chief Justice Medhat al-Mahmoud ruled that a series of previously independent and powerful agencies set up during the American occupation—the Committee of Integrity, the IHEC, the Central Bank of Iraq and the High Commission for Human Rights—were now subject to direct cabinet oversight. Given that the cabinet is fractious and lacks the coherence to act as a unified policy-making body, the ruling clearly increased the influence and reach of the Prime Minister's office.<sup>34</sup>

In the aftermath of the judge's ruling, Nujaifi, the parliamentary speaker, sent a letter to the cabinet seeking to defend the central bank's independence. So far from this having the desired effect, the widely respected head of the bank, Sinan al-Shabibi, and his deputy, Mudher Saleh, were indicted on corruption charges. Shabibi was then forced into exile and quickly replaced by Abdelbassit Turki, who had previously been appointed by Maliki as head of the anti-corruption organization, the Board of Supreme Audit.<sup>35</sup>

Parliament has also seen its powers undermined by judicial rulings favouring Maliki. In 2010, the Higher Judicial Council ruled that new legislation could be proposed only by the cabinet, not by parliament, thus giving the prime minister, as the dominant voice in cabinet, the ability to control the work of the legislature.<sup>36</sup> This meant that by the time parliament passed a law limiting the prime minister to two terms in office in January 2013, the Higher Judicial Council had already ruled it did not have the constitutional power to make it legally binding on Maliki.<sup>37</sup>

<sup>32</sup> Confidential interview with the author, London, Nov. 2011.

<sup>33</sup> See Roy Gutman, 'Iraq's Maliki rebuffs Biden, signals move to Shiite rule', *McClatchy Newspapers*, 21 Dec. 2011, <http://www.mcclatchydc.com/2011/12/21/133802/iraqs-maliki-rebuffs-biden-signals.html>, accessed 25 Feb. 2013.

<sup>34</sup> Special Inspector General for Iraq Reconstruction, *Quarterly Report and Semiannual Report to the United States Congress*, 30 April 2011, [http://www.sigir.mil/files/quarterlyreports/April2011/Report\\_-\\_April\\_2011.pdf](http://www.sigir.mil/files/quarterlyreports/April2011/Report_-_April_2011.pdf), accessed 25 Feb. 2013.

<sup>35</sup> See Ali Latif, 'Iraq's central bank governor is removed under cloud', *Azzam*, 16 Oct. 2012, republished in *al-Monitor*, <http://www.al-monitor.com/pulse/business/2012/10/warrant-issued-for-iraqs-central-bank-governor.html>, accessed 25 Feb. 2013.

<sup>36</sup> Special Inspector General for Iraq Reconstruction, *Quarterly Report and Semiannual Report*, 30 April 2011, p. 73.

<sup>37</sup> <http://www.france24.com/en/20130126-iraq-parliament-passes-law-barring-maliki-third-term>, accessed 25 Feb. 2013.



More worrying still, in April 2012 Faraj al-Haidari, then head of the IHEC, was arrested on charges of corruption. The IHEC, which oversees national and provincial elections as well as any referendums, was praised by the United Nations for running a free and fair election in 2010. Maliki, on the other hand, blamed the organization when he failed to obtain a majority. The arrest and prosecution of its head and another senior official on minor corruption charges was clearly an attempt to intimidate the commission and puts the transparency and fairness of future elections in doubt.<sup>38</sup>

## **The role of coercion**

Since his appointment in 2006 Maliki has if anything worked even harder to gain control over the Iraqi military than he has to gain ascendancy over the country's political institutions. In doing so he has successfully subverted the formal chain of command, tying senior army commanders and paramilitary units to himself personally and thereby arrogating to himself power over the coercion needed to achieve competitive authoritarianism.

Maliki's assumption of the office of prime minister in 2006 coincided with the increasing coherence, power and reach of the Iraqi security forces. The new Iraqi military had been built with such haste that the institutionalization of political oversight remained fragile. With his political vulnerability in mind, Maliki exploited and used the Office of the Prime Minister to cement his grip on the army, special forces and intelligence services. The other Shi'i political parties in government, the Sadrists and the Islamic Supreme Council of Iraq, had neglected the army in favour of using their own militias and influence in the Ministry of Interior to seize victory in the civil war that raged across central and southern Iraq from 2004 to 2007. As Iraq descended into civil war, Maliki quietly moved to take charge of the three arms of the security service least culpable of sectarian violence.

Since then, Maliki has secured his grip on the Iraqi security forces by creating two extra-constitutional structures. The first, the Office of the Commander in Chief, was originally envisaged by US advisers as a coordinating forum that the prime minister would chair. However, Maliki quickly realized its potential importance and increased its staff, influence and reach. He moved the organization into the Office of the Prime Minister and appointed his close ally, Farouk al-Araji, to run it and to staff it with trusted functionaries.<sup>39</sup> The Office of the Commander in Chief then began to issue orders directly to battalion heads, using their personal mobile phones, thus circumventing and destroying the army's chain of command

<sup>38</sup> Tim Arango, 'Iraq election official's arrest casts doubt on prospect for fair voting', *New York Times*, 16 April 2012, [http://www.nytimes.com/2012/04/17/world/middleeast/iraq-arrest-calls-fair-elections-into-question.html?\\_r=2&ref=middleeast](http://www.nytimes.com/2012/04/17/world/middleeast/iraq-arrest-calls-fair-elections-into-question.html?_r=2&ref=middleeast); 'Iraq election chief gets prison sentence for graft', AFP, 28 Aug. 2012, [http://www.google.com/hostednews/afp/article/ALeqM5hGq3HTU-mfY0SGVgSothEHiOsb\\_w?docId=CNG.682a24f16b365825cf867757eef8144e.d81](http://www.google.com/hostednews/afp/article/ALeqM5hGq3HTU-mfY0SGVgSothEHiOsb_w?docId=CNG.682a24f16b365825cf867757eef8144e.d81), both accessed 25 Feb. 2013.

<sup>39</sup> Barak A. Salmon, 'Responsible partnership: the Iraqi national security sector after 2011', *Policy Focus*, no. 112, Washington Institute for Near East Policy, May 2011, p. 14.

and with it parliamentary oversight.<sup>40</sup> The office then involved itself directly in the appointment and promotion of senior army staff. 'Prime Minister Maliki pushed hard to place his own officials and senior officers in key roles, often by giving them temporary appointments that bypassed the [parliamentary] confirmation process and then keeping them in the role indefinitely. He pushed Kurdish, Sunni and less loyal Shi'i officers aside or removed them.'<sup>41</sup>

The second extra-constitutional innovation Maliki has deployed to control the security forces is the proliferation of operations centres. Commencing in February 2007, with the Baghdad Security Plan, the Baghdad Operational Command was created to coordinate all Iraqi forces, both police and army, in the city.<sup>42</sup> Provincial command centres were then set up across south and central Iraq in areas of violent instability. The centres brought together the command and control of both the police and the army under one general in each province. These generals are chosen and directed from a central office in Baghdad under Maliki's control. This allows the provincial command centres to undermine the Ministry of Defence's command and control of the army and gives Maliki the power to appoint and direct the most important generals in the most strategically sensitive areas of the country. Unsurprisingly, those generals appointed to run the command centres are politically or personally aligned to the Prime Minister.

Having increased his control over the army through the Office of the Commander in Chief and provincial command centres, Maliki then undertook direct management of the most effective fighting force in the country, the Iraq Special Operations Forces, created by the United States. Comprising 4,200 soldiers, this body is considered the best special forces organization in the Middle East.<sup>43</sup> In April 2007, as managerial responsibility for it was transferred from the US special forces to the Iraqi government, Maliki set up a ministerial body, the Counter-Terrorism Bureau, to control it.<sup>44</sup> This effectively removed the force from the oversight of parliament and from the control of either the Ministry of the Interior or the Ministry of Defence. Since then, its size, capacity and reach have grown exponentially. Iraq's special forces are in effect the personal coercive tool of its prime minister, his Praetorian guard, used to secure competitive authoritarianism. This body of men has become known across Iraq as the 'Fedayeen al-Maliki', a reference to their reputation as the Prime Minister's tool for covert action against his rivals as well as a bleakly ironic comparison to Saddam's brutal militia.<sup>45</sup>

<sup>40</sup> Linda Robinson, *Tell me how this ends: General David Petraeus and the search for a way out of Iraq* (New York: Public Affairs, 2008), p. 157.

<sup>41</sup> Anthony H. Cordesman with Adam Mausner and Lena Derby, *Iraq and the United States: creating a strategic partnership* (Washington DC: Center for Strategic and International Studies, June 2010), p. 268.

<sup>42</sup> International Crisis Group, *Loose ends: Iraq's security forces between US drawdown and withdrawal*, Middle East Report no. 99 (Baghdad, Washington DC, Brussels: 26 Oct. 2010), p. 7, <http://www.crisisgroup.org/en/publication-type/media-releases/2010/mena/loose-ends-iraqs-security-forces-between-us-drawdown-and-withdrawal.aspx>, accessed 25 Feb. 2013.

<sup>43</sup> Shane Bauer, 'Iraq's new death squad', *The Nation*, 22 June 2009, <http://www.thenation.com/doc/20090622/bauer>, accessed 25 Feb. 2013.

<sup>44</sup> US Department of Defense, *Measuring stability and security in Iraq*, Dec. 2009, [http://www.defense.gov/pubs/pdfs/Master\\_9204\\_29Jan10\\_FINAL\\_SIGNED.pdf](http://www.defense.gov/pubs/pdfs/Master_9204_29Jan10_FINAL_SIGNED.pdf), p. 66, accessed 25 Feb. 2013

<sup>45</sup> Nir Rosen, 'Iraqi security forces and the Iraqi political mess', *The National*, 3 Sept. 2010.

Iraq's intelligence services have similarly been targeted by the Prime Minister. Initially, the struggle for their control became apparent during a clash between General Mohammed Abdullah al-Shahwani, at the time the head of the National Intelligence Service, and Sherwan al-Waeli, who was appointed by Maliki in 2006 as Minister of State for National Security Affairs.<sup>46</sup> The National Intelligence Service was established by America's Central Intelligence Agency and Shahwani had enjoyed a long and close working relationship with Washington.<sup>47</sup> Waeli, conversely, although close to the Prime Minister, also had long-standing links to the Iranian government. Things came to a head in August 2009, after a series of serious explosions in the centre of Baghdad. Shahwani argued in the Iraqi press that there was clear forensic evidence linking the attacks to Iran. In the subsequent fallout Shahwani was forced to resign, thus delivering uncontested control over the intelligence services to the Prime Minister and his allies.<sup>48</sup> Once he gained this power, Maliki set about purging serving intelligence officers who were not aligned with, or members of, his own party.<sup>49</sup>

### **The drivers of Iraq's competitive authoritarianism**

The comparative study of post-colonial democracies indicates that the most effective brake on the authoritarian aspirations of politicians or military officers is the extent to which the state's civilian institutions have a meaningful and valued presence in the population's day-to-day lives. Once a state has imposed order on society and gained control over the monopoly of collective violence across the country, its legitimacy rests on its capacity to deliver services to its population and become central to their day-to-day 'strategies of survival'.<sup>50</sup> If the state's provision of services to civilians is regarded as a pivotal factor in the population's quality of life, it accrues legitimacy. This in turn reflects a population that values the state and is prepared to actively mobilize against its takeover by an authoritarian ruling elite. The survival of democracy in Iraq could then lie in the capacity of its civilian institutions to deliver much-needed services to its population. In addition to playing a major role in building support for continued democratic government, the civilian capacity of the state also has a central role in the re-creation of a unified Iraqi national identity. By delivering the services a population needs, the state becomes the central vehicle for and focus of a unified national identity. Nationalism follows the creation of the state.<sup>51</sup>

<sup>46</sup> International Crisis Group, *Loose ends*, p. 11.

<sup>47</sup> Patrick Cockburn, 'The US can quit Iraq, or it can stay. But it can't do both. Iraqis have a clear idea who they believe funds their secret police', *Independent*, 11 Nov. 2008, republished at <https://www.commondreams.org/view/2008/11/11-5>, accessed 28 Feb. 2013.

<sup>48</sup> David Ignatius, 'Behind the carnage in Baghdad', *Washington Post*, 25 Aug. 2009, [http://articles.washingtonpost.com/2009-08-25/opinions/36876520\\_1\\_maliki-security-forces-adel-abdul-mahdi](http://articles.washingtonpost.com/2009-08-25/opinions/36876520_1_maliki-security-forces-adel-abdul-mahdi), accessed 28 Feb. 2013.

<sup>49</sup> Shashank Bengali, 'WikiLeaks: Maliki filled Iraqi security services with Shiites', *McClatchy Newspapers*, 3 Dec. 2010, <http://www.mcclatchydc.com/2010/12/03/104726/us-cables-say-maliki-filled-iraqi.html#ixzz179L9Gy2T>, accessed 25 Feb. 2013.

<sup>50</sup> Joel S. Migdal, *Strong societies and weak states: state-society relations and state capabilities in the Third World* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1988).

<sup>51</sup> See Andrea Kathryn Talentino, 'The two faces of nation-building: developing function and identity', *Cambridge Review of International Affairs* 17: 3, Oct. 2004, pp. 557, 571.

## *The weakness of civil institutions in Iraq today*

The Iraqi state inherited by the US-led occupation force in 2003 had been dramatically weakened by the 1980–88 Iran–Iraq war, the 1990–91 Gulf War and finally by the invasion of 2003. However, the greatest damage done to the state before 2003 was caused by the harshest and most intrusive sanctions regime in diplomatic history, imposed on Iraq in the aftermath of its invasion of Kuwait.<sup>52</sup> The most noticeable effect of these sanctions was the retreat from society of the official civil institutions of the state, beyond a rationing system set up by the government.

The arrival of US troops in Baghdad in the first week of April 2003 caused the final collapse of state institutions. The removal of the Ba'athist regime was greeted by an explosion of looting that US authorities had neither the troop numbers nor the political will to halt. In the ensuing anarchy, 17 of the Iraqi government's 23 central ministry buildings were destroyed.<sup>53</sup> The total cost of the damage in monetary terms is generally considered to be around US\$12 billion, equivalent to as much as one-third of Iraq's annual gross domestic product.<sup>54</sup> Bizarrely, the CPA contributed to the institutional collapse of the Iraqi state by pursuing a thoroughgoing process of de-Ba'athification from May 2003 onwards. General Order No. 1 not only disbanded the Ba'ath Party but also banned the top four levels of the party's membership from holding government jobs and any former members of the Ba'ath from occupying jobs in the top three management levels of any government institution. The de-Ba'athification order purged government ministries of their top layer of management, making between 20,000 and 120,000 people unemployed.<sup>55</sup> The administrative capacity of the state had been destroyed by over a decade of sanctions, three wars in 20 years and then the three weeks of uncontrolled looting triggered by the arrival of American troops in Baghdad. The decision to pursue de-Ba'athification in May 2003 removed what was left of the state: its institutional memory and a large section of its skilled personnel.

From 2003 to 2011, the US government spent an estimated US\$61.11 billion trying to rebuild the civil and military institutions of the Iraqi state in what Stuart Bowen, the Special Inspector General for Iraq Reconstruction, described as 'the largest relief and reconstruction effort for one country in US history'.<sup>56</sup> Although

<sup>52</sup> Nikki van der Gaag, 'Iraq; the pride and the pain', *New Internationalist*, no. 316, September 1999, p. 8.

<sup>53</sup> David L. Phillips, *Losing Iraq: inside the post-war reconstruction fiasco* (Boulder, CO: Westview, 2005), p. 135.

<sup>54</sup> Larry Diamond, *Squandered victory: the American occupation and the bungled effort to bring democracy to Iraq* (New York: Times Books, 2005), p. 282; George Packer, *Assassins' gate: America in Iraq* (New York: Farrar, Straus & Giroux, 2005), p. 139; James Dobbins, Seth G. Jones, Benjamin Runkle and Siddharth Mohandas, *Occupying Iraq: a history of the Coalition Provisional Authority* (Santa Monica, CA: RAND), p. 111.

<sup>55</sup> Phillips estimates that General Order No. 1 made 120,000 unemployed out of a total party membership of 2 million: Phillips, *Losing Iraq*, pp. 145–6. Paul Bremer cites intelligence estimates that it affected 1 per cent of the party membership, 20,000 people: see L. Paul Bremer III with Malcolm McConnell, *My year in Iraq: the struggle to build a future of hope* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 2006), p. 40. George Packer (*Assassins' gate*, p. 191) estimates 'at least thirty-five thousand'. The large variation in estimates indicates the paucity of reliable intelligence on the ramifications of such an important policy decision.

<sup>56</sup> Special Inspector General for Iraq Reconstruction, *Quarterly Report and Semiannual Report to the United States Congress*, 30 April 2012, p. 2, [http://www.sigir.mil/files/quarterlyreports/April2012/Report\\_-\\_April\\_2012.pdf#view=fit](http://www.sigir.mil/files/quarterlyreports/April2012/Report_-_April_2012.pdf#view=fit); Special Inspector General for Iraq Reconstruction, *Hard lessons: the Iraq reconstruction experience* (Washington DC: US Government Printing Office, 2009), p. vii, [http://www.sigir.mil/publications/hard\\_lessons.html](http://www.sigir.mil/publications/hard_lessons.html), both accessed 25 Feb. 2013.

US financial support for reconstruction, along with the US troop presence, had rapidly declined by the end of 2011, the Iraqi state today does not lack the revenue to continue rebuilding its own institutions. Iraq has seen its own government budget increase from US\$24.4 billion in 2005 to US\$100.4 billion in 2012. In 2012, 32 per cent of this budget was earmarked for reconstruction.<sup>57</sup>

Among the cumulative results of draconian sanctions, three wars, the post-regime change looting, civil war and chronic political corruption was a sustained neglect of national infrastructure and an inability on the part of the state to deliver even basic services to its population. This remains the state of affairs today. For instance, the last major water treatment plants built by the state before 2003 were finished in the 1980s; some plants that service Baghdad have survived from the 1930s. In 2011, the United Nations estimated that only 26 per cent of the population was covered by the public sewerage network. This leaves 83 per cent of the country's wastewater untreated. Two-thirds of Iraqi households rely directly on the public water supply for drinking water, but surveys in 2012 suggested up to 25 per cent of them have such a water supply for only two hours per day. Overall, UN figures suggest 7.6 million people or 25 per cent of the population lack access to safe drinking water.<sup>58</sup>

From at least the 1990s onwards, it has been the government's ability to supply electricity to its population that has become the popular touchstone of its efficiency and legitimacy. Given the centrality of electricity supply to popular conceptions of government capacity, the CPA made the national grid's reconstruction a key priority after the invasion, earmarking US\$5.7 billion for the purpose and setting a target of 6,000 MW of electricity output.<sup>59</sup> By the time the CPA was closed, it had increased prewar production levels by only 200 MW.<sup>60</sup> By April 2012 the Iraqi government had managed to raise output to 7,918 MW. However, even these year-on-year increases have not kept pace with consumer demand. After sanctions were lifted in 2003 and Iraq's borders opened to consumer goods, especially refrigerators and air-conditioning units, demand is estimated to have increased by 10 per cent a year.<sup>61</sup> The Ministry of Electricity estimates that its supplies are meeting 60 per cent of demand; however, nationwide surveys carried out by the Iraqi Knowledge Network in 2011 found that the average household received just 7.6 hours of electricity from the national grid each day, and 79 per cent of those surveyed rated electricity delivery as bad or very bad.<sup>62</sup>

<sup>57</sup> See Joel Wing, '2010 Iraq budget passed', 28 Jan. 2010, <http://musingsoniraq.blogspot.co.uk/2010/01/2010-iraq-budget-passed.html>, accessed 25 Feb. 2013; Special Inspector General for Iraq Reconstruction, *Quarterly Report*, 30 April 2012, p. 9.

<sup>58</sup> See Special Inspector General for Iraq Reconstruction, *Quarterly Report*, 30 Jan. 2011, p. 98; 30 April 2011, p. 119; and 30 Jan. 2012, p. 76, [http://www.sigir.mil/files/quarterlyreports/January2012/Report\\_-\\_January\\_2012.pdf](http://www.sigir.mil/files/quarterlyreports/January2012/Report_-_January_2012.pdf), accessed 25 Feb. 2013.

<sup>59</sup> Ali A. Allawi, *The occupation of Iraq: winning the war, losing the peace* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2007), pp. 257–8.

<sup>60</sup> Special Inspector General for Iraq Reconstruction, *Hard lessons*, p. 152.

<sup>61</sup> Ben Lando and staff of Iraq Oil Report, 'Power problems may continue through summer', *Iraq Oil Report*, 21 Jan. 2011, <http://www.iraqoilreport.com/energy/electricity/power-problems-may-continue-through-summer-5296/>, accessed 28 Feb. 2013.

<sup>62</sup> Iraq Knowledge Network, 'Essential services fact sheet', Dec. 2011, <http://www.iauiraq.org/documents/1583/ServicesFactsheet-English.pdf>, accessed 25 Feb. 2013.

The popular resentment at the continuing weakness of state institutions and their inability to deliver the level of services required is amplified and exacerbated by the justified perception that widespread corruption among the ruling elite is the major cause of state weakness. In August 2011, with temperatures reaching 120 degrees Fahrenheit, the worst suspicions of the Iraqi population were confirmed. The Minister of Electricity, Ra'ad Shalal al-Ani, was forced to resign when it emerged that he had signed US\$1.7 billion of suspect contracts for developing Iraq's electricity industry with two dubious companies from Canada and Germany. Beyond the incompetence of US reconstruction efforts, the dominance of political violence between 2003 and 2007 and the fractured nature of Iraq's cabinet, pervasive corruption is a major cause of state institutional weakness. In both 2010 and 2011, Transparency International's Corruption's Perception Index placed Iraq at 175 out of 182 countries.<sup>63</sup> The World Bank came up with comparable figures in its Worldwide Governance Indicators. It rated countries out of 100 on the basis of the rigour of their anti-corruption institutions: Iraq scored 5 points.<sup>64</sup> Judge Radhi Hamza al-Radhi, the most senior government figure responsible for pursuing corruption from 2008 to 2011, identified the government's contracting process as 'the father of all corruption issues in Iraq'.<sup>65</sup> Contracts are frequently awarded to companies run by or very close to senior Iraqi politicians. These companies are then given large cash down-payments before work begins; subsequent complaints of poor or non-existent work are ignored as the companies are protected by the self-same politicians who ensured they won the contracts in the first place.

Given the rampant corruption among the governing elite and the inability of the state's civil institutions to deliver the services the population desperately needs, Iraqi society's capacity to mobilize in support of its democracy must be in question. Turnout at elections, although dropping, remains comparatively high. However, organized civil society, the population's bulwark against authoritarianism, has been fractured by the effects of the civil war. Given the extended violence to which Iraq's population has been subjected since 2003, it would be a very brave civil society activist who would seek to mobilize popular protest against the inefficiency and corruption of the ruling elite. Nevertheless, this did indeed happen in February 2011, when protests at government inefficiency spread across the whole country. However, the government, with comparative ease, used both overt and covert coercion to suppress these popular protests.<sup>66</sup>

<sup>63</sup> See Transparency International, *Corruption Perceptions Index 2011*, <http://cpi.transparency.org/cpi2011/results/>, accessed 25 Feb. 2013.

<sup>64</sup> Special Inspector General for Iraq Reconstruction, *Quarterly Report and Semiannual Report to the United States Congress*, 30 Jan. 2012, p. 9.

<sup>65</sup> Special Inspector General for Iraq Reconstruction, *Quarterly Report and Semiannual Report to the United States Congress*, 30 July 2011, p. 8.

<sup>66</sup> Suadad al-Salhy, 'Iraqis protest power and food shortages; 3 shot', Reuters, 3 Feb. 2011, <http://www.reuters.com/article/2011/02/03/idINIndia-54637220110203>; Michael S. Schmidt and Duraid Adnan, 'Protests spread to more Iraqi cities', *New York Times*, 17 Feb. 2011, <http://www.nytimes.com/2011/02/18/world/middleeast/18iraq.html>; Human Rights Watch, 'Iraq: police allow gangs to attack protesters; authorities obliged to protect peaceful protests', 24 Feb. 2011, <http://www.hrw.org/news/2011/02/24/iraq-police-allow-gangs-attack-protesters>; Stephanie McCrummen, 'After Iraq's day of rage, a crackdown on intellectuals', *Washington Post*, 27 Feb. 2011, <http://www.washingtonpost.com/wp-dyn/content/article/2011/02/26/AR2011022603345.html>, all accessed 25 Feb. 2013.

### *The dominance of Iraq's military institutions*

The suppression of the February 2011 protests reflects both the continued weakness of the civil institutions of the Iraqi state, dogged as they are by corruption and political incoherence, and the starkly contrasting effectiveness of its coercive capacity. It is, indeed, this dichotomy between the Iraqi state's ability to secure order and its inability to deliver services that has aided Maliki's march towards a new authoritarianism.

The disbanding of the Iraqi army in May 2003 played a central role in the United States' ambitious plans to re-establish Iraq's political life and place clear limits on the power of the state the occupying power was rebuilding in Baghdad.<sup>67</sup> Right across the post-colonial Middle East, regime change was more likely to be delivered by military coup than political uprising or democratic elections. Iraq suffered the Middle East's first ever post-colonial coup in 1936, only four years after it gained independence. From then on the officer corps of the army was a major player in the country's politics, violently removing the monarchy in 1958 and triggering a number of coups over the ensuing decade. From 1968 onwards, however, the Ba'ath Party worked hard to keep the military out of politics, frequently purging the officer corps of those regarded as politically unreliable, creating a series of competing military organizations, and using ties of family and clan to break the coherence of the armed forces and tie its upper echelons to the ruling elite.<sup>68</sup> By 1988, Iraq had the fourth largest military in the world with 1.7 million people mobilized.<sup>69</sup> However, its officer corps was politically neutered, recruited from sections of the population loyal to the Ba'ath Party and fractured in a way that made a successful coup almost impossible.

The US government's disbanding of Iraq's armed forces in 2003 represented an attempt to end the military's influence on the country's politics. This radical approach to exogenous political and social engineering unsurprisingly played a major role in fuelling the insurgency. So, in the face of growing violence, the US set about rebuilding the Iraqi military as quickly as it could. In the face of an array of potential hazards—insurgency, civil war, military coup—the Iraqi armed forces were expanded with such haste and to such a size that they now, once again, pose a threat to Iraq's democracy. However, given Maliki's control over the armed forces, the current threat is not of a coup but of an overbearing military being used as a tool to impose competitive authoritarianism.

By 2011, US\$24.49 billion had been spent in the attempt to rebuild the country's armed forces.<sup>70</sup> In January 2012, the Iraqi security forces employed a total of

<sup>67</sup> See Dodge, 'The ideological roots of failure'.

<sup>68</sup> See Toby Dodge, 'Cake walk, coup or urban warfare: the battle for Iraq', in Toby Dodge and Steven Simon, eds, *Iraq at the crossroads: state and society in the shadow of regime change* (London and Oxford: International Institute for Strategic Studies and Oxford University Press, 2003), pp. 59–75.

<sup>69</sup> See General James L. Jones, *The Report of the Independent Commission on the Security Forces of Iraq* (Washington DC: Center for Strategic and International Studies, Sept. 2007), p. 55, <http://csis.org/program/independent-commission-security-forces-iraq>, accessed 25 Feb. 2013.

<sup>70</sup> Anthony Cordesman, *Iraqi force development: a progress report, working draft* (Washington DC: Center for Strategic and International Studies, 23 Aug. 2007), p. 8, [http://csis.org/files/media/isis/pubs/070823\\_iraqi\\_force\\_development.pdf](http://csis.org/files/media/isis/pubs/070823_iraqi_force_development.pdf), accessed 25 Feb. 2013; Special Inspector General for Iraq Reconstruction, *Quarterly Report and Semiannual Report to the United States Congress*, 30 July 2011, p. 70.

933,103 people, spread across the Ministry of Defence, the Ministry of the Interior and the Prime Minister's Counter-Terrorism Force.<sup>71</sup> The fact that these forces are primarily designed to impose order on Iraq's own population, not to protect the country from external aggression, is apparent in the discrepancy in size between the Ministry of Interior and the Ministry of Defence, with the former double that of the latter.<sup>72</sup> The remilitarization of Iraqi society since 2003 is further reflected in the total number of people employed by the security forces, who now account for 8 per cent of the country's entire workforce and 12 per cent of the adult male population.<sup>73</sup>

The priority that rebuilding the coercive capacity of the state played in Iraqi government policy is also represented by the expansion of the Ministry of Defence's budget, which grew annually by 28 per cent between 2005 and 2009, compared to an average increase of 45 per cent annually for the Ministry of the Interior.<sup>74</sup> Although a great deal of this money was misappropriated through corruption, this level of defence expenditure officially places Iraq fourth in the world rankings for military spending.<sup>75</sup>

The size and capacity of the Iraqi armed forces, combined with the lack of democratic oversight to which they are subject, reflect their function as the tool of Nouri al-Maliki's drive towards competitive authoritarianism. The Prime Minister, through the Office of the Commander in Chief, the proliferation of operations centres and his use of the Iraq Special Operations Forces, has the coercive capacity both to strike against his political opponents, as he did in December 2011 and 2012, and to demobilize popular protest movements, as he did in February 2011 and again in January 2013. The fractured nature of Iraqi civil society and the alienation that the population feels from the civil institutions of the state mean that the societal opposition to Maliki's increasingly authoritarian rule remains incoherent and disorganized. The rest of the ruling elite, although clearly and increasingly threatened by the Prime Minister's actions, appear to lack the cohesion and leadership to move against him.

## Conclusions: the future of state–society relations in Iraq

Overall, the skewed reconstruction of the Iraqi state does not provide a sustainable basis for the consolidation of Iraq's democratic stability. Iraq's remilitarization, pushed through by the United States in an attempt to limit its own casualties and

<sup>71</sup> Special Inspector General for Iraq Reconstruction, *Quarterly Report and Semiannual Report to the United States Congress*, 30 Jan. 2012, p. 68.

<sup>72</sup> The Ministry of Defence employs a total of 279,103 personnel, spread between the Iraqi army (200,000), the air force (5,053) and subsidiary organizations. The Ministry of the Interior employs 649,800. The Iraqi police has 325,000 on its payroll, the Facilities Protection Service 95,000, Border Enforcement 60,000, Iraqi Federal Police 45,000 and Oil Police 35,000: Special Inspector General for Iraq Reconstruction, *Quarterly Report*, Jan. 2012, p. 68.

<sup>73</sup> Cordesman et al., *Iraq and the United States*, p. 312.

<sup>74</sup> Special Inspector General for Iraq Reconstruction, *Quarterly Report to the United States Congress*, 30 Oct. 2010, [http://www.sigir.mil/files/quarterlyreports/October2010/Report\\_-\\_October\\_2010.pdf#view=fit](http://www.sigir.mil/files/quarterlyreports/October2010/Report_-_October_2010.pdf#view=fit), p. 34, accessed 25 Feb. 2013.

<sup>75</sup> Central Intelligence Agency, *World Factbook 2010*, <https://www.cia.gov/library/publications/the-world-factbook/geos/iz.html>, accessed 25 Feb. 2013.



reduce the domestic political cost of occupying the country, was carried out with such speed and involved investment in Iraq's security forces on such a scale that the country is once again subservient to a huge military machine. The deployment of the military is now controlled by the Iraqi Prime Minister and used to defend his position within the competitive authoritarian regime he has constructed. This makes Iraq comparable not only to the repressive Arab regimes of the pre-'Arab Spring' Middle East but also to the country's own condition between its independence in 1932 and regime change in 2003.

The population, ill-served by government services and rightly blaming corruption among the political elite for this failure to deliver, is increasingly alienated from its state and vocal in its criticism. However, the state, empowered by a security service that is now the strongest military force in the country, can and frequently does rely on its coercive powers, both overt and covert, to suppress mass protest against its own incompetence. Thus the government, headed by a prime minister who has diligently centralized power in his own hands, is too reliant on unaccountable security services for its survival because it is unable or unwilling to physically deliver basic services to its population.

By the time US combat troops left Iraq at the end of 2011, 4,487 US military personnel had died.<sup>76</sup> In comparison, Iraq Body Count conservatively estimates that between 110,110 and 120,293 Iraqi civilians died violent deaths between the invasion and November 2012. Research carried out by Johns Hopkins School of Public Health puts the number even higher, estimating that as many as 654,965 people were killed between the invasion and 2006.<sup>77</sup> By September 2012, US\$212.32 billion of US and Iraqi government money had been allocated for postwar reconstruction of the Iraqi state.<sup>78</sup> In the aftermath of US troop withdrawal in 2011, in spite of the thousands of civilians who have died and the billions of dollars that have been spent, the lives of ordinary Iraqis, in terms of the relationship to both their state and their economy, are comparable to the situation they faced in the country before regime change. The significant differences—the composition of the current ruling elite and the democratic national elections—appear to be under sustained threat and were bought at an unimaginably high cost. In the face of such meagre results and with a comparable lack of success in Afghanistan, it is clearly time to rethink the costs involved in exogenous attempts at transforming the internal political systems of states targeted for intervention. Can external interveners actually deliver sustainable economic and political change to the states in which they intervene?

<sup>76</sup> See Michael E. O'Hanlon and Ian Livingston, *Iraq Index*, 31 Jan. 2012, p. 7, <http://www.brookings.edu/~media/Centers/saban/iraq%20index/index20120131.PDF>, accessed 25 Feb. 2013.

<sup>77</sup> See <http://www.iraqbodycount.org>; [http://www.jhsph.edu/research/centers-and-institutes/center-for-refugee-and-disaster-response/publications\\_tools/iraq/index.html#Release](http://www.jhsph.edu/research/centers-and-institutes/center-for-refugee-and-disaster-response/publications_tools/iraq/index.html#Release), both accessed 25 Feb. 2013.

<sup>78</sup> See Special Inspector General for Iraq Reconstruction, *Quarterly Report and Semiannual Report to the United States Congress*, 30 Oct. 2012, p. 3, <http://www.sigr.mil/publications/quarterlyreports/October2012.html>, accessed 25 Feb. 2013.