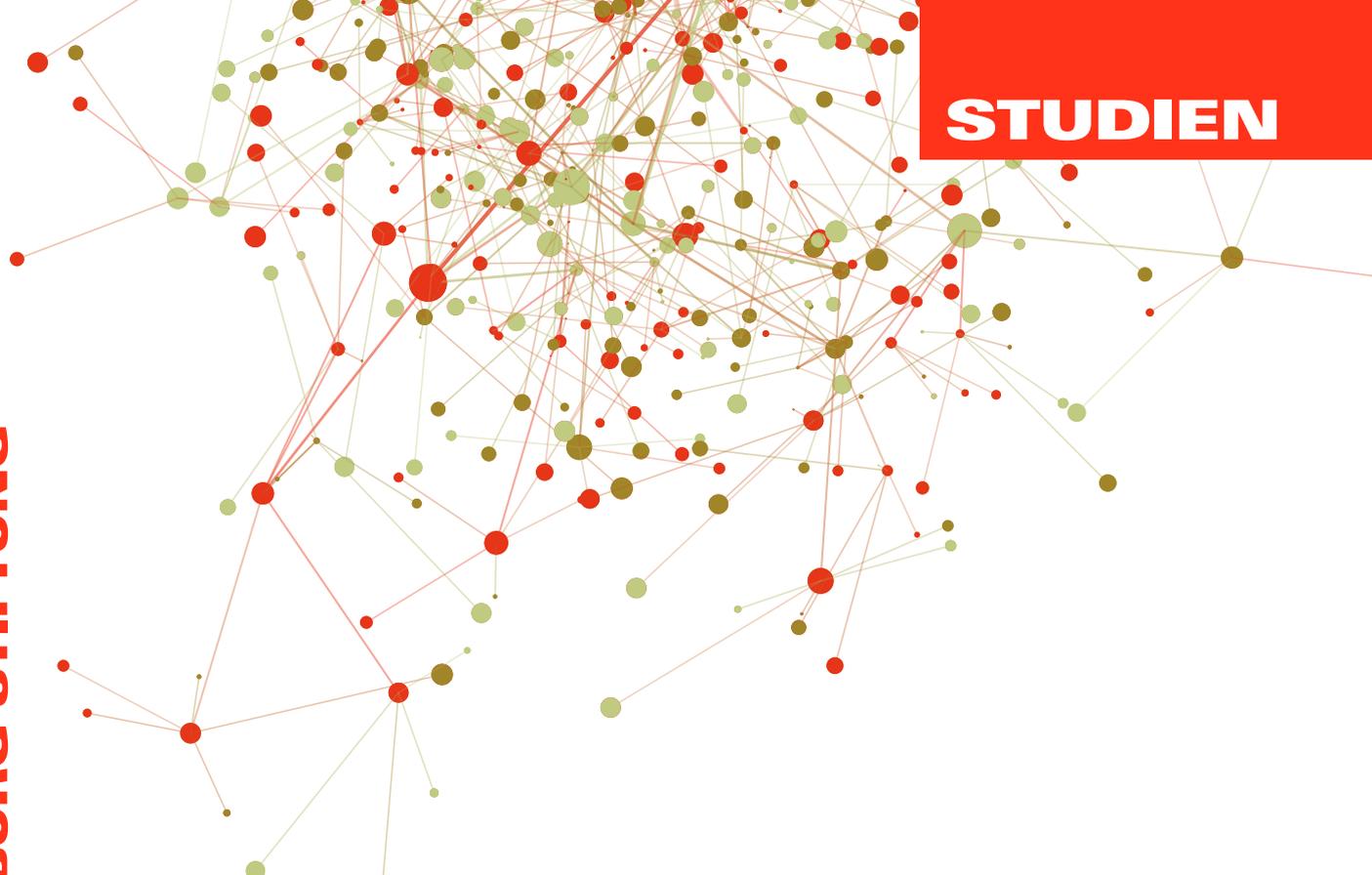


AUTHOR: DR. RIMA MAJED
RESEARCH ASSISTANT: DR. JANAN ALJABIRI

CONTEMPORARY SOCIAL MOVEMENTS IN IRAQ: MAPPING THE LABOR MOVEMENT AND THE 2015 MOBILIZATIONS



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Rima Majed (PhD), Assistant Professor of Sociology at the American University of Beirut.

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ABSTRACT

Most recent research on Iraq focuses on tendencies towards Islamization, sectarianism and violence. Knowledge about contemporary Iraqi political actors (political parties, groups, initiatives, movements) that define themselves as non-sectarian or progressive is scattered. Even if in 2015 some light was shed on the emerging demonstrations against a political system defined by corruption, patronage, socio-economic inequalities, and sectarianism, a deeper understanding of these emerging actors, their origins, developments, ideas, goals, and challenges is still lacking. In times of rapid changes in the Arab world with new political constellations emerging and prospects for future changes in the region shaping up, an understanding of social and political actors, programs, and options is of major importance. This study attempts to fill a gap

in the literature by looking at contemporary social movements in Iraq. It focuses on two case-studies: (i) the post-2003 labor movement, and (ii) the 2015 mass mobilization. It first starts with a thorough desk review of primary and secondary sources (books, academic articles, and newspaper archives), then relies on 24 semi-structured interviews and a focus group discussion with representatives of trade unions and protest coordination committees in order to analyse the dynamics of the social and political mobilization of these groups in post-war Iraq. This study shows that the emergence of trade union organizations and social movement organizations in the post-war era played an important role in shaping Iraq's current political, social, and economic landscape beyond the meta-narratives of war and sectarianism.

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LIST OF ACRONYMS

CPA	Coalition Provisional Authority	KRG	Kurdistan Regional Government
CSO	Civil Society Organization	KRI	Kurdistan Region of Iraq
FWCU	Federation of Workers Councils and Unions in Iraq	LDIWR	League for the Defense of Iraqi Women's Rights
GDP	Gross Domestic Product	MENA	Middle East and North Africa
GFIW	General Federation of Iraqi Women	NGO	Non-Governmental Organization
GFIW	General Federation of Iraqi Workers	OCAI	Organization of Communist Alternative in Iraq
GUOE	General Union of Oil Employees	OPEC	Organization of the Petroleum Exporting Countries
IGC	Iraqi Governing Council	OWA	Office of Women's Affairs
ICP	Iraqi Communist Party	OWFI	Organization of Women's Freedom in Iraq
IFC	Iraq Freedom Congress	PMF	Popular Mobilization Forces
IFOU	Iraqi Federation of Oil Unions	RLS	Rosa-Luxemburg-Stiftung
ILO	International Labor Organization	SOCU	Southern Oil Company Union
IMF	International Monetary Fund	UN	United Nations
ING	International Non-Governmental Organization	US	United States
ISCI	Islamic Supreme Council of Iraq	UUI	Unemployed Union of Iraq
ISIL	Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant	WCPI	Workers' Communist Party of Iraq
IWL	Iraqi Women's League		

INTRODUCTION

The sweltering Iraqi summer of 2018 brought with it upheaval in the city of Basra. While fieldwork for this study was underway, mass mobilizations erupted in the oil-rich south of the country and quickly spread to other regions—namely the capital Baghdad. The intensity of the protests came to disrupt the routine functioning of the government at the local and national level, and managed to return the basic demands of citizens to the core of politics and national discourse. Despite promises of reforms at times, and heavy repression at others, the protests have persisted for several months. The demands of the protesters were simple: water, electricity, and jobs, as well as an end to corruption. At that time, it was clear that Iraqi society was simmering with discontent, but little did we know that a full-blown uprising would explode a year later, in October 2019, which would be the biggest mass mobilization in the history of contemporary Iraq.

The events of summer 2018 were not the first time such a wave of mass protests had erupted in Iraq, neither was it the first time that it started in the South—specifically in Basra—and then spread to other parts of the country. The summer of 2015 had witnessed very similar mobilizations over demands related to water, electricity, and employment, but also anti-sectarianism and anti-corruption. Those mobilizations came as an extension of previous movements that had started in 2011 against the backdrop of the Arab uprisings and the high hopes for change that swept the Arab region and its various societies at that time.

Of course, these upheavals do not come out of nowhere. The difficult living conditions of most Iraqis, the absence of the state and its basic provisions, in addition to widespread corruption and the lack of stability and security, account for only a part of the bitter reality that pushes people to mobilize *en masse* every now and then. Therefore, understanding these waves of mass mobilization, in which thousands—sometimes millions—of Iraqis gather in the streets, requires a look into Iraq’s contemporary (post-2003) history in order to untangle the main political, social, and economic developments that give rise to them.

Despite being one of the richest oil countries in the world, the Iraqi population has suffered immensely over the past four decades. Since Saddam Hussein assumed power in 1979, Iraqis have endured his brutal dictatorship, in addition to two devastating wars¹ with catastrophic human and economic consequences (Ismael & Ismael, 2015; Sassoon, 2016). Following Iraq’s invasion of Kuwait in 1990, the UN Security Council imposed economic sanctions on Iraq in the form of a trade embargo that brought hyperinflation, increased poverty, and malnutrition. Although an oil-for-food program was established in 1996 to ease the effects of the sanctions, the Iraqi population still suffered difficult living conditions that led to the

destruction of the middle class and a huge brain drain that had devastating social implications (Sassoon, 2012). At that time, the country was held under the iron grip of Saddam Hussein’s dictatorship that left no room for any kind of dissent or mobilization.

Following the 9/11 attacks in the US and its alleged links to terrorist groups from the Arab and Islamic world, the US launched its ‘global war on terror’ and started calling for the end of the Ba’ath rule in Iraq. In March 2003, a US-led coalition invaded Iraq under the pretext of the presence of weapons of mass destruction in the country. The invasion quickly led to the fall of Saddam Hussein’s regime and the establishment of a transitional government—known as the Coalition Provisional Authority (CPA)—in May 2003. The chief executive of the CPA, Paul Bremer, issued orders to dissolve the Iraqi army and exclude all Ba’ath party members from the new government as part of the ‘de-Ba’athification’ policy that was put in place (Ismael & Ismael, 2015). This decision created a chaotic environment where insurgency groups started to form and tensions between sectarian militias started to mount. Following two years of chaos and violence, Iraq passed its new constitution in October 2005 and held parliamentary elections in December of that year.² But this did not put a stop to the attacks and violence; they rather increased. In 2006, Iraq witnessed the most violent attacks and war crimes, which often had sectarian overtones. On 30 December 2006, sectarian tensions took a new turn with the hanging of former president Saddam Hussein on Eid al-Adha, the Islamic Festival of Sacrifice. The timing of the execution and the fact that despite all of his crimes, Saddam Hussein was only convicted for the 1982 Dujail massacre—in which many Shia were killed—reveal a careful attempt at further sectarianizing the Iraqi conflict along Sunni–Shia lines. Although US-led coalition forces had started to train Iraqi army personnel in 2006 in preparation for their withdrawal from Iraq, it was not until 2009 that US troops handed over security duties to Iraqi forces, and they only completely exited Iraq in December 2011.

In 2011, Iraq suffered increased political instability. The withdrawal of US troops came with a surge in insurgency and violence. In addition, social discontent and mass mobilizations intensified in light of the Arab uprisings. Moreover, the development of the uprisings in neighboring countries had a massive impact on political and military dynamics in Iraq. As the Syrian revolution plunged into an armed conflict in 2012–13, Iraqi fighters from both sides of the divide³ crossed the border to join the war.

¹ The first war is the Iran–Iraq war that took place between 1980 and 1988. The second war took place in 1990–1991 with Iraq’s invasion of Kuwait.

² The first elections were boycotted by the main Sunni factions, while Shia and Kurdish factions formed electoral blocs and participated in the elections.

In 2014, the Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant (ISIL) surprisingly seized control of almost one third of Iraqi territories in a matter of weeks, including major cities such as Fallujah, Mosul, and Tikrit. This was accompanied by an alarming economic deterioration due to the dramatic fall in oil prices from over \$100 a barrel to less than \$40 a barrel. At that time, Nouri al-Maliki had to step down as Prime Minister and Haider al-Abadi was appointed to form a new government. This was the start of another round of civil strife that lasted until December 2017 and witnessed the expansion of ISIL over Iraqi territory. The defeat of ISIL in Iraq came following brutal battles mainly led by the Kurdish Peshmerga and the Shia-dominated Popular Mobilization Forces (PMF),⁴ in addition to coalition-led airstrikes in both Syria and Iraq. During the last month of the war against ISIL, and following the victories of the Peshmerga forces to regain most territory, a referendum was held in Iraqi Kurdistan regarding Kurdish independence. Although the vast majority (92 percent) of Iraqi Kurds voted in favor of independence, the referendum was considered illegal and non-binding; and the federal government in Baghdad revoked many of the prerogatives it had previously granted the Kurdish region, leading to increased tension between Baghdad and Erbil (capital of Iraqi Kurdistan).

In the meantime—and despite the ongoing war against ISIL and the mounting sectarianism and intermittent conflict between Sunni, Shia, and Kurdish factions, which led to increasing debate over splitting Iraq into three autonomous regions⁵—the summer of 2015 witnessed the biggest mobilizations in the contemporary history of Iraq. Hundreds of thousands of protesters took to the streets to make socio-economic demands and to try to shift political debate away from sectarian conflicts. Anti-corruption and anti-sectarian chants were heard in the streets of Basra, Baghdad, and other cities in Iraq. The largely spontaneous and unorganized upheaval was later joined by Shia cleric Muqtada al-Sadr⁶ who mobilized a huge number of his constituency and steered the mobilizations into a political process of negotiation with the government. The coalition that was built between the al-Sadr movement and the Iraqi Communist party during the mobilizations of 2015 resulted in the formation of *Sa'iroun* (or the Alliance Towards Reforms) that won the Iraqi parliamentary elections in May 2018.⁷ A month later, the Basra upheaval started, carrying the same socio-economic demands and calls for dignity and social justice as in 2011 and 2015.

Why are such upheavals recurrent in contemporary Iraq? Who are these protesters? What are their main demands? What are their main forms of organization? What role do civil society organizations and labor unions play in these mobilizations? And how do they shape an alternative political sphere in the Iraqi polity beyond the focus on sectarian politics or war and violence?

The following report attempts to answer these questions by shedding light on the dynamics of

non-sectarian and progressive actors in Iraq today. These movements are designated 'progressive' for two reasons: (1) this report is mainly concerned with non-sectarian, leftist, and labor movements; and (2) these movements consider and label themselves 'progressive'. The report begins by providing an overview of Iraq's main social, political, and economic structures (Chapter 2). Chapter 3 then maps the main political and social actors that potentially constitute this alternative and progressive space in Iraq. This is followed by two case studies that take a closer look at the dynamics within the labor movement and the 2015 mobilizations. The choice of these case studies stems from the lack of research on their formation, development, and role in contemporary Iraq. While social movements such as the Islamist movements⁸—or even the feminist movement⁹ in Iraq—have been well covered in the literature, we know very little about the labor movement and the waves of mobilization since 2011. Therefore, chapter 4 focuses on the labor movement in Iraq and sheds light on the situation of trade union activism in the country. Chapter 5 deals with the 2015 mobilizations in greater detail and attempts to analyse their main dynamics, actors, and the challenges linking them to the 2011 and 2018 waves of mobilizations. It is important to note here that given the time constraint for fieldwork, the scope of this research focuses mainly on the Arab part of Iraq, paying special attention to Baghdad and the southern provinces. It is also crucial to note that the fieldwork was carried out in 2017–18, and so the uprising of 2020 is not within the scope of this report.

METHODOLOGY

This study was designed to provide an initial mapping of the main progressive actors in contemporary Arab Iraq.¹⁰ The research methodology adopted includes a thorough desk review of primary and secondary literature, as well as 24 in-depth interviews with activists and unionists, and a focus group discussion with 10 unionists from the main workers' federations in Iraq. The lack of official data and

³ Arab Sunni, Shia, and Kurdish fighters have been involved in the war in Syria.

⁴ While the PMF is predominantly composed of Shia units, it also includes some smaller Sunni, Christian, Yazidi, and Shabak units (O'Driscoll & van Zoonen, 2017).

⁵ The ethno-sectarian division of Iraq includes a Sunni Kurdistan in the northeast, an Arab Sunni region in the west, and a Shia region in the southeast.

⁶ Muqtada al-Sadr is a Shia cleric, politician and militia leader who enjoys broad support in Iraq today, especially in poor Shia communities. He gained popularity following the 2003 US-led invasion of Iraq, when he formed the Mahdi army—a Shia militia—to fight the foreign occupation. Later on, his militia was also involved in civil war and sectarian violence. He is the son of influential Shia cleric Grand Ayatollah Mohamad Sadeq al-Sadr, and the son-in-law of Grand Ayatollah Mohamad Baqer al-Sadr.

⁷ The May 2018 elections saw the lowest rate of voter turn-out since 2003. This has been perceived by many analysts as being a sign of discontent and a form of boycott by many Iraqis who opted not to vote in the elections.

⁸ See for example: Abdel-Jabbar, F. A. (2003), Cole, J. (2003), Fuller, G. E. (2003), Nasr, V. (2004), Hashim, A. (2005), Hegghammer, T. (2006), Kazimi, N. (2006), Robinson, G. E. (2007), Byman, D. L., & Pollack, K. M. (2008), Cockburn, P. (2008), Napoleoni, L. (2011), Conway, M. (2012), Hashim, A. S. (2013), Haddad, F. (2014), Al-Tamimi, A. J. (2015), Celso, A. N. (2015).

⁹ See for example: Efrati, N. (2004, 2005, 2012), Al-Ali, N. & Pratt, N. (2006, 2008, 2010), Al-Ali, N. (2007), Oliver, K. (2007), Sjoberg, L. (2007), Ali, Z. (2018).

¹⁰ The study focuses explicitly on Arab Iraq and does not cover the Kurdish areas of Iraq.

statistics made the desk review challenging. I have tried to use the sources that I considered the most reliable or valid. The fieldwork included two visits to Baghdad during 2017–18, in addition to numerous informal meetings and discussions with researchers, activists, protesters, and unionists. The field visits lasted around one week each, with a full schedule of meetings, interviews, and informal discussions. It is worth noting that during my second fieldwork in June 2018, protests had just erupted in Basra and quickly spread to Baghdad, where the internet was completely cut off for four days. Given that most of the interviews and the focus group took place while the protests of summer 2018 were unfolding, these developments became the focus of most discussions, which clearly impacted the fieldwork. Thus, while the study initially was intended to focus on the mobilizations of 2015, it ended up having to address the 2018 protests as a continuation of the previous wave we were studying.

The sampling method included a mix of snowball sampling and purposive sampling. Some of the main leaders in the 2015 mobilizations and the labor movement were identified through the desk review (purposive sample), while others were identified throughout the fieldwork during casual conversations or interviews (snowball sample). My two main facilitators in Iraq were a member of the Workers' Communist Party of Iraq (WCPI) and a member of

the Iraqi Communist Party (ICP). They both helped me arrange interviews with activists and unionists through their networks. I then built on these initial contacts to broaden my sample and try to reach activists from different groups. Although the fact that my main facilitators are party members could have created some bias, my position as a non-Iraqi (or outsider), in addition to the expansion of my sample through snowballing and the use of probing and cross-checking techniques have helped me to validate the information gathered throughout the fieldwork. I conducted 24 in-depth interviews in total, in addition to a focus group discussion with 10 unionists representing the main workers' federations in Iraq. All interviews were conducted in Arabic. Interviews related to the 2015 mobilizations included members of the ICP, WCPI, Sadrist Movement, *Mustameroun* Coordination Committee, *Madanioun* Coordination Committee, *Muntafidoun* Coordination Committee, as well as independent activists. Similarly, interviews related to the labor movement included representatives of the main Arab workers' federations in addition to two unionists from Kurdistan. Some unionists were also activists in the protest movements of 2015, so they were interviewed in both capacities. While efforts were made to obtain a gender-balanced sample, I only managed to interview six women. This reflects the domination of men in the leadership positions of these movements.

CHAPTER 1: UNDERSTANDING IRAQ'S SOCIAL, POLITICAL, AND ECONOMIC STRUCTURES

This chapter provides an outline of the political, economic, and social structures of contemporary Iraq. It sheds light on the country's political system, its ruling parties and coalitions, and the major internal (and external) political, economic, and social developments and challenges facing Iraq today. While the discussion in this chapter is focused on post-2003 Iraq, it is important to note that the structural transformations that took place there after 1991—in terms of the autonomy of Kurdistan, the sanctions imposed on Iraq, and the ensuing hyperinflation and currency devaluation—have continued to shape the country's economy and society even after 2003 (Sassoon, 2010, 2012, 2016; Yousif, 2010). This chapter lays the groundwork for the discussion about social movements and progressive actors in the following chapters.

THE POLITICAL STRUCTURES

The political system in post-2003 Iraq is a federal, parliamentary, and consociational democracy. While the constitution sets Islam as the formal religion of the state (where no law should contradict Islam), it also decrees that no law should violate the principles of democracy. The US approach to Iraqi society as 'deeply divided' along sectarian and ethnic lines led to the adoption of a model of power-sharing known as 'liberal consociationalism' through the 2005 constitution (McGarry & O'Leary, 2007). This system claims to represent the main sectarian and ethnic groups and accommodate for their conflicts through negotiation and consociation at the elite level. Although not explicitly stated in the constitution, the rule of thumb since 2003 has been that the President of the Republic is Kurdish (with a Shia and a Sunni deputy¹¹), the Prime Minister is Shia (with a Kurdish and a Sunni deputy), and the Speaker of the House is Sunni (with a Shia and a Kurdish deputy). Although a federal arrangement is in place, most executive power lies in the hands of the Prime Minister (and, to a lesser extent the President), which means a shift in the sectarian power dynamics post-2003 give Shia leaders a major role in the governance of the country. This post-2003 political structure has made Iraq a country built on a number of structural contradictions that only served to weaken the state and leave it vulnerable to cycles of unrest and violence. Three main features of the Iraqi political system need to be highlighted in this discussion of its structural contradictions:

Federalism: There is no agreement on the nature and scope of federalism in Iraq (Al-Qarawee, 2014). Following the war in 2003, both Shia and Kurdish parties advocated for federalism in reaction to the previous regime's dictatorship, "preferring a weak central government" (Mansour & Abdel Jabbar, 2017, p.7).

This materialized in the 2005 constitution that adopted federalism and recognized the Kurdistan region¹² as a federal entity of Iraq. This meant that the Kurdistan region was autonomous and had its own regional government, parliament, and president (Yehya, 2017). Today, Iraq has 18 governorates (see Appendix 1), 15 in the Arab part of Iraq directly under the Baghdad Central Government, and 3 governorates (Erbil, Suleimaniya, and Duhok) under the Kurdistan Regional Government (KRG). While the constitution proposes a federal and decentralized arrangement, control over the country's natural resources is mainly centralized in Baghdad. The constitution states that oil and gas are the property of the Iraqi people in all regions and provinces; and that the federal government, with the regions and the provinces, will manage present oil and gas fields provided that their revenue is distributed fairly and proportionately with the country's population distribution. This means that there is a tension or contradiction in the constitution itself, as it calls for decentralization and federalism while specifying that natural resources are to be centrally managed (McGarry & O'Leary, 2007).

Therefore, the adoption of federalism did not prevent conflict from arising. For example, Kurdish and Shia parties engaged in political and military conflicts over the oil-rich city of Kirkuk in October 2017. Despite the constitutional agreement on federalism, "the struggle escalated because of competition within the central government and between the central government and regional and provincial authorities" (Al-Qarawee, 2014, p.12). These conflicts over resources are not exceptional or new. More recently, there have been demands for autonomy for the oil-rich south, specifically the city of Basra. The argument is that while the south is producing most of the country's wealth, it is not benefiting from it, and economic and everyday living conditions remain dire. Such tensions over resources (interwoven with nationalism) have pushed the debate beyond federalism to calls for full independence, as with the Kurdish referendum in 2017.

Consociational Democracy and Sectarian Politics:

There is also no consensus over what democracy means in Iraq. Given that the post-war political system was based on sectarian and ethnic divisions, a special system of power-sharing, known as 'consociational democracy', was adopted. Within this system, the main ethnic and sectarian communities (i.e. the Shia, Sunni, and Kurdish groups) are supposed

¹¹ Note that the majority of the Kurds are also Sunni, but in this context the ethno-national identity (Kurdish) becomes more salient than the ethno-religious or sectarian one (Sunni). Therefore, when we say 'Sunni' in the Iraqi context, we mainly mean Arab Sunni.

¹² The Kurdistan Regional Government (KRG) was established in 1992 and benefited from a no-fly zone following the Kurdish revolt against Saddam Hussein in the aftermath of the Gulf War. This was the first experience of autonomy for the Kurdistan region, albeit not under federalism (until post-2003).

to be represented in the parliament, cabinet, and presidency through their leaders. Ethnic or religious minorities are marginalized from the main positions of power, since those are reserved to the leaders of the three majority groups. Thus power is divided—albeit unequally—between the leaders of the main communities, making the new system of governance one that is based on the representation of some but not others. This had a significant impact in terms of asserting the Shia political parties' power over the state and society post-2003. Taking advantage of the new political realities, Shia political leaders interpreted the numerical majority of the Shia population¹³ as justifying their claim to rule the country, in the name of representing the Shia majority of Iraqi society as their own constituency. These leaders aspired to have their political and economic interests, as well as their social and cultural traditions, predominate. This meant that demographically smaller groups would have a much smaller share of political power. Such an identity-based system of rule also meant that non-ethnic and non-sectarian groups would have much smaller chances of gaining power. Thus the new 'democracy' brought to Iraq post-2003 managed to institutionalize a political arrangement whereby sectarian and ethnic "demography is democracy" (Mansour, 2017, p.5).

The adoption of consociational democracy—which is an oxymoron—shaped the political structures and institutions in post-2003 Iraq. Since then, elections have been sectarian-driven and identity-based. Inspired by this identity-focused political arrangement, it became common in election campaigns for rival political parties to provide no clear economic or political policy platforms upon which voters can base their choices and cast their ballots (Diamond et al, 2009, p.55). Sectarian politics and its intricate system of clientelism sufficed for democratic elections to be held. Since the adoption of the new constitution, Iraq has had four national and local elections (in 2005, 2010, 2014, and 2018), all of which were won by some kind of Shia alliance. These consisted of the Dawa party¹⁴ (along with other Islamic parties such as 'Islamic Supreme Council of Iraq')¹⁵, the al-Sadr Movement,¹⁶ and the al-Fadhila or 'Virtue' party.¹⁷ So while power is still shared by a Kurdish President, a Shia Prime Minister and a Sunni Speaker of the House, most executive power lies in the hands of the Shia Prime Minister, and most military and militia power is held by Shia leaders. This, in addition to the demographic size of the Shia community as a majority, explains the rise of so-called 'Shia power' in post-2003 Iraq.

Militia Rule: A third main contradiction in the political structure of post-2003 Iraq is the fact that power—especially military power—does not lie within state institutions but rather beyond them. Despite the fact that Article 9 of the constitution clearly states that militias are prohibited and that the army should not interfere in politics, militias linked to some Shia political

parties have significant influence on shaping socio-political realities in Iraq. The country saw a surge of militias aiming to fill the political vacuum after the 2003 war. The militias began attacking civilians in the southern parts of Iraq in May 2003 in an attempt to impose the type of political system they desire, which is permeated with Islamic law. They used violence against women, leftists, and political freedom activists without state intervention (Thurber, 2013). By 2017, the number of militias in Iraq reached 60 groups, allied under the umbrella of the Hashid Shaabi (Popular Mobilisation Forces, PMF) (Mansour, 2017, p.4). It is estimated that the PMF has between 60,000 and 140,000 fighters¹⁸ (Mansour & Abdel Jabbar, 2017, p.3). In the fight against ISIL, the PMF was sanctioned and funded by the state. It received over \$1 billion to cover its fighters' salaries from Iraq's state budget, in addition to funding from other sources, including Iran, religious clerics, and political figures (Mansour & Abdel Jabbar, 2017, p.18). The PMF forces became so dominant that, for example in the province of Diyala, the Fifth Iraqi Army Division reports to the Badr militias,¹⁹ not to the state military forces (Parker & Landay, 2016). Shia militias therefore emerged as one of the most powerful and important actors in Iraq. In 2017, these militias were legalized under the PMF making them 'a state within the state', and in 2018, stipends for more than 122,000 armed men from paramilitary groups were allocated out of the national budget (Ali & Khalaf, 2018): here again, this created a contradiction with the Iraqi constitution.

THE ECONOMIC STRUCTURES

The Iraqi economy mainly relies on rent extracted from the oil sector, making it a rentier economy par excellence. While the productive sectors in Iraq have been in decline since 2003, the economy heavily depends on oil exports, making it very sensitive to international oil prices. With the liberalization of the Iraqi market following the fall of the Ba'ath regime, inequality and

¹³ Around 60–65 percent of Iraqi population is Shia, while 20 percent is Sunni, and 15 percent is Kurdish (Al-Qarawee, 2014, p.21).

¹⁴ The Dawa party, established in 1957, is the country's oldest Islamic Shia political party.

¹⁵ The Islamic Supreme Council of Iraq was established in Iran in 1982, and has been led by Ammar al-Hakim since 2009. In 2017, Al-Hakim split from his party, which was founded and run by his father and then his uncle, and founded a new party called 'al-Hikma', departing from the Islamic name.

¹⁶ The al-Sadr Movement was established in Iraq after the war in 2003.

¹⁷ The first elections in December 2005 were won by the United Iraqi Alliance (which won 128 seats out of 275), which includes all Shia political parties: Al-Dawa al-Islamia, the Supreme Council of the Islamic Revolution in Iraq, the al-Sadr Movement, and the al-Fadhila party. In the second legislative elections in March 2010, the first Shia alliance split and entered the elections in two groups: the State of Law Coalition led by Nori Al-Maliki and the Dawa party, which won 89 seats out of 325. The other Shia bloc, the National Iraqi Alliance, which consisted of the Islamic Supreme Council of Iraq led by Ammar al-Hakim, the al-Sadr Movement led by Moqtada al-Sadr, the Fadhila party, and other breakaways from the Dawa party, secured 70 seats. In 2014, the Shia political groups went to elections in further separated blocs to compete for over 328 seats in Parliament. The State of Law, representing the al-Dawa party, won 92 seats, the al-Sadr Movement won 34, the Islamic Supreme Council, which ran in a bloc called the Citizen (al-Muwatin), departed from the use of Islamic symbols in the elections and won 29 seats, while al-Fadhila won only 6 seats. Finally, in the 2018 elections, the alliance of the al-Sadr Movement with the Communist party (Sa'iroun or Forward) won the elections with 54 seats.

¹⁸ For more information on the PMF, see Mansour and Abdul Jabbar (2017).

¹⁹ The Badr militia was established in Iran in 1982 and fought alongside the Iranian army against the Iraqi army in Iraq-Iran war 1980–88. The Badr forces form the military wing of the Supreme Council of Islamic Revolution.

clientelism arose and spread, leading to the formation of a new class of oligarchs who control both the state and the economy. Finally, Iraq's economy is characterized by high rates of youth unemployment, a large informal sector, and discrimination against women in the labor market. These main aspects of the Iraqi economy are discussed in the following.

Rentier Economy: Iraq is one of the richest countries in the world in terms of natural resources: it is the second-largest crude oil producer in the Organization of the Petroleum Exporting Countries (OPEC), it holds the world's fifth-largest crude oil reserves, and it ranks as the world's fourth largest oil exporter (Schol, 2018). Oil revenues form the core and main source of the Iraqi gross domestic product (GDP). Moreover, Iraq has 2 percent of the world's gas reserves (Bacci, 2018). As a rentier state, Iraq's economy continues to rely heavily on petroleum exports: in 2015 they provided some 90 percent of government revenue, and 58 percent of the country's GDP (World Bank Group, 2017, p.1). The adoption of neoliberal policies and the transition from a centralized economy to an open and free market post-2003 was heavily influenced by the recommendations of international institutions such as the World Bank and the International Monetary Fund (IMF) (Costantini, 2017). For example, as early as September 2003, Paul Bremer introduced new "laws that lowered corporate taxes from almost 40 to 15 percent, permitted foreign companies to own 100 percent of Iraqi assets, and entirely exempted corporations working with the CPA from taxation" (Ali & Khalaf, 2018, p.338). In addition, foreign companies such as oil firms or private banks were encouraged to invest in Iraq and hold long-term lease contracts that could extend to up to forty years (Ali & Khalaf, 2018, p.338). All these new economic transformations have put Iraq on track for a rapid neoliberalization. Given that the Iraqi economy suffers from a serious lack of economic diversity, this has left it particularly vulnerable to oil price shocks. The focus on oil meant that other sectors, especially the productive sectors such as manufacturing industry and agriculture, have largely been neglected. Agriculture accounts for only 3.3 percent of the total GDP, while it employs almost 21.6 percent of the labor force (Cordesman & Sakayan, 2015, p.25).

Clientelism and Nepotism: The (neo-)liberalization of the economy and the adoption of a free market economy were coupled with the survival of a large governmental sector in terms of employment. Thus, Iraqi political parties and leaders utilized state institutions and its financial resources to allocate jobs and social benefits to their followers, in order to win political support and attract voters; thus enhancing a culture of clientelism, nepotism and patronage that was already inherited from the previous regime (Gunter, 2013, Ismael & Ismael, 2015). This capitalist model of governance in which social resources are unequally

distributed for political gains led to the widespread looting of state resources in the form of institutionalized corruption (Sassoon, 2016; Ismael & Ismael, 2015). This has resulted in Iraq being placed 169th out of 180 on the global corruption index (Transparency International, 2018). As argued by Sassoon (2016, p.17), "regime change did not lead to changes in the fundamentals of Iraq's political economy", but rather the flood of money after 2003 created "an all-encompassing corruption that seeped into every facet of life" instead of creating development.

Therefore, both economic and political powers are concentrated in the hands of a few sectarian or ethnic political elites who control access to the massive oil revenues through the control of state institutions (Yousif, 2010). In fact, Sassoon (2012) shows that the transformations after the 1991 Gulf War and the imposed sanctions on Iraq have led to the demise of the Iraqi middle class and to an enormous brain drain that has heavily affected the fabric of Iraqi society. The ending of sanctions after 2003 has allowed for a new middle class to emerge, especially with those who returned from exile and who played important roles whether in the political process or in the economic life of the country. These post-2003 economic developments, some of which had already begun in the early 1990s, led to a transformation of the country's class structure and the emergence of a new class of oligarchs who control most of its wealth. This has led Iraq to become an oligarchic capitalistic state, like many other countries in the Arab Middle East, whereby power and wealth are held by a small group of individuals or families (Gunter, 2013; Alexander, 2015).

Unemployment, Underemployment,²⁰ and the Informal Sector: Iraq has one of the youngest populations in the world, with Iraqis under 24 years old accounting for 59 percent of the population (ILO, 2016). Recent research has shown that around 500,000 youth join the labor force every year (Patel, 2018, p.7), with most of them struggling to find jobs. Youth under the age of 19 form 50 percent of Iraq's population and the unemployed rate among Iraqi youth in general is at 34.6 percent (Tull, 2018, p.4). While the oil sector is the biggest contributor to the GDP, it employs around only 1 percent of the labor force in Iraq (ILO, 2016).²¹ Moreover, as noted in the 2016 ILO report, women and youth participation in the labor market is low, with 33 percent of male youth (14 to 24 years old) and 60 percent of female youth being unemployed" (ibid., p.1).

Under the recent World Bank and IMF obligations to reduce state employment, state subsidies, and social welfare provisions, the public sector has started to downsize in the past two years. Prior to that, public sector employment had rapidly expanded in the post-2003 period, given that this was a major outlet

²⁰ According to the ILO, underemployment means working less than 35 hours per week.

²¹ Because oil extraction relies mainly on machinery.

for clientelism and nepotism. While public sector employment was at around 1.2 million in 2003, this number had peaked in 2015 to reach over 3 million out of a population of over 35 million (see Appendix 2). Thus, it has been noted that the public sector employs around 42 percent of labor force (World Bank Group, 2017, p. 64). However, efforts to decrease the size of the public sector have been applied as of 2016, considerably reducing public employment. Yet the state remains the largest employer in Iraq. The private sector is still weak and unable to provide enough jobs for the youth, but efforts are underway to enhance its role as a driver of economic development, as per the recommendation of international organizations (Costantini, 2017).

On the other hand, the Ministry of Planning estimated the number of informal workers²² in 2014 at around 1 million throughout Iraq. The World Bank estimated that the informal sector accounts for “between 25–40 percent of annual GDP in comparable developing countries, hence Iraq’s real rate of employment in the informal sector is likely to be much higher than the government’s 3 percent estimate” (Save the Children, 2014, p.20). The expansion of this sector in Iraq, like in other parts of the world, takes place during economic crises, especially in wartime and during civil conflicts. Some estimates of the size of the informal sector have reached as high as 65 percent of the country’s labor force (Looney, 2006, p.9). More recent reports estimated that “in 2012, 66.9 percent of all workers were informal sector workers and virtually all private sector employment was informal” (UNESCO, 2019, p. 48). However, workers in this sector face many challenges, including fluctuating incomes, difficult working conditions, legal and physical risks, and often low social standing. Some of the dangerous effects of informal business growth include the recruitment of workers below the legal age for employment, a lack of healthcare, disability benefits, job security, and pension plans. As a result of this economic structure, Iraq has high unemployment²³ and underemployment rates (Al-Kaabi, 2017); which means that every year thousands of graduates from Iraqi universities—in particular young people and women—join the unemployment army. This includes university graduates who end up in precarious jobs, such as working as street vendors, workers in restaurants, hotels, gas stations, or taxi drivers (Baghdad Post, 2017). Others join the military or the militias in the hope of receiving a steady monthly salary or securing social insurance for their families if they die. One of the common drivers for the young people to join Islamic Shia militias (i.e the Popular Mobilization Forces) is the urge of the youth to receive income and benefits (IRIS, 2017). Similarly, many young people from the Sunni denomination joined ISIL in the hope of finding a “sense of purpose, regular salary, insurance for the families of deceased fighters and transcending traditional tribal and party structures” (IRIS, 2017, p.12). Following the defeat of ISIL and the demobilization of

the fighters since late 2017, new challenges are facing the labor force: it is expected that tens of thousands of men (ex-ISIL fighters and PMF militiamen) will need to be reintegrated in civil life and find new jobs (O’Driscoll & van Zoonen, 2017).

Moreover, the reduction of the state social provisions in line with the neoliberal policies was dealt with by the poorest sectors of society through the adoption of coping strategies and mechanisms that Assef Bayat (2013) calls “quiet encroachments”. For example, the housing crisis pushed hundreds of thousands of people to occupy lands and illegally build their own houses, creating a new phenomenon known as *al-Hawsim* (IAA, 2015, p.42), or belts around the city. This phenomenon became widespread in all Iraqi governorates after 2003, with low-standard housing units spreading over “municipal land inside and on the periphery of cities without being officially enumerated and registered” (Center for Human Services, 2015, p.5).

THE SOCIAL STRUCTURES

The post-2003 Iraqi social landscape is characterized by (1) a strong wave of the sectarianization of society, (2) a significant role being played by tribes, and (3) a lack of safety and security given the increased militarization that led to a culture of hyper-masculinity and violence. Over the past decade, Iraq has seen a dramatic increase in criminal activities committed by different groups such as “militias, sectarian groups, political parties, tribe members that all seek to enhance their influence and resource bases” (William, 2009, p.x). Women, activists, and minorities have been the main targets of this violence.

The Sectarianization of Society: Since 2003, there have been repeated and active efforts by Islamic Shia political parties to change the secular Personal Status Law No. 188, issued in 1958, and replace it with religious personal status laws (Ali, 2017). In fact, while the law already combined some aspects from both Hanafi (Sunni) and Jafari (Shia) interpretations of the Shari’a (Ali, 2018; Cherland, 2014, p. 71), it also presented some important gains in terms of women’s rights. As early as 2003, Islamic Shia political parties proposed Resolution No. 137 to the Iraqi Governing Council (IGC) in an attempt to replace Law No. 188. This first attempt was defeated within two months. In October 2013, another draft law was proposed by the Virtue Party to abolish Law No. 188. Once again, this was also stopped by the broad opposition of civil society organizations, leftist groups and parties, and several MPs—including some Sunni groups—who refused Shia based jurisprudence and preferred to maintain a unified civil personal status law (Cherland, 2014, p.93). While this new attempt at sectarianizing personal status laws also failed,

²² Informal workers are workers that are not officially declared to the state. Therefore, their labor is not monitored or taxed by the state, and their working conditions are usually precarious.

²³ The unemployment rate rose to 25 percent in 2016 (Al-Kaabi, 2017).

Iraqi society was already suffering from widespread illegal practices such as under-age marriages,²⁴ honor killings, and gender-based violence. The spread of such practices is complex and multifaceted, but it is clearly linked to deteriorating economic conditions, the militarization and sectarianization of Iraqi society, and the weakness of the judicial system given the difficulty of enforcing law in post-2003 Iraq.²⁵

However, the attempts by Islamic and sectarian groups to control and change personal status laws do not come out of nowhere. In fact, post-2003 Iraqi society has witnessed a strong wave of sectarianization, coupled with increased militarization, given the proliferation of insurgency groups, sectarian militias, and Islamic parties that were previously banned under the Ba'ath regime. Social norms have become increasingly conservative, especially for women who, for example, have been forced by militia groups to abide by Islamic dress code in many regions across the country (especially in the south). A necessary condition for the spread of these militia groups was the chaos that followed the 2003 invasion, the war and destruction that resulted, the poverty that was widespread, and the development of a sectarian culture that formed the ideological framework of post-2003 Iraqi society. The rapid proliferation of mosques, religious organizations, and Islamist groups, as well as the increased mobilizing power of sectarian parties and militias, saw sectarian and religious parties consolidate their political power and become broadly accepted and tolerated. As a result of this overlap between social and political sectarianization, unprecedented levels of clientelism and nepotism have left non-followers at a disadvantage in terms of services and benefits. Thus, clientelism has become an essential element of ethnic and sectarian politics and a central mobilizing tool in the absence of state provisions. Clientelism functions in Iraq through both positive sanctions, such as making promises of securing jobs for the unemployed; and negative sanctions, such as penalizing public sector employees who do not support and adhere to their 'sectarian patron'. In both cases, this culture of clientelism has created a form of 'cruel optimism'²⁶ whereby ordinary people continue to support sectarian leaders in the hope that their promises of provisions and protection will materialize.

Tribalism: Given the post-war chaotic situation and the absence of law reinforcement, tribal culture emerged as a powerful tool to enforce order (Haddad, 2011). In fact, tribes have always existed in Iraq; but while they were considered a regressive force and were curtailed during the early years of the Ba'ath regime, they resurfaced after the defeat of the Iraqi Army in 1991 (Abdel Jabbar & Dawod, 2003; Haddad, 2011). At that time, tribal men were invited by Saddam Hussein to provide military and political support for his deteriorating power in return for economic benefits. The political use of tribes has continued after 2003 and they were clearly

used by the US and the CPA, as well as by Islamist parties, to achieve their own political objectives (Otterman, 2005).

This increase in the role of tribes was combined with the spread of tribal customs, traditions, and norms (Carroll, 2011). Accordingly, the traditional role of the family was also strengthened and individual or personal rights were marginalized. The violation of women's and children's rights as a result of the spread of conservative tribal and religious values reached unseen levels in Iraq. Tribal laws have expanded to govern various aspects of social life and tribe leaders have intervened in a wide range of issues related to personal affairs, such as settling disputes between extended families, mediating conflicts over property, taking revenge in cases of killing, and reinforcing patriarchal values (Puttick, 2015). This social organization meant that tribes emerged as yet another actor constituting 'a state within a state'.

Lack of Security and Safety: The absence of state law and order has had severe impacts on security. The lack of safety and security in Iraq has taken various forms, ranging from increased rates of criminality to violence by the state and some political groups, in particular militias, against political activists, as well as sectarian violence and the imposition of an Islamic way of life in several regions around the country. In fact, Iraq "scores the lowest in terms of safety in the MENA region and the fourth lowest across the globe, with a score of 6.6 out of 100, making it amongst the most dangerous countries in the world" (Al Kaabi, 2017). The security vacuum that was created following the invasion and the fall of Saddam Hussein in 2003 formed an ideal environment for the growth of powerful militias—connected to political parties—as well as insurgent groups and organized crime networks. The deterioration of the security situation through the spread of attacks and bombings, targeted killings, kidnappings, organized crime, and human trafficking turned the violence into an everyday event (Ihsanoglu, 2007, p.915). The number of orphans in Iraq rose to 600,000 (Omar al-Jaffal, 2016), and the number of widows was estimated to be between 3 and 5 million by 2016 (WPD, 2016, p.2). The government's neglect of orphans and widows led to increased rates of child labor, human trafficking, and sexual abuse. Despite the fact that there are no accurate statistics on the violation of children's rights, commentators believe that the numbers of trafficked children have increased since 2005, reaching around 150 children per year

²⁴ There is no accurate data about child marriage since it is illegal, however the UN and several NGOs confirm that child marriage is a major problem in Iraq (UNICEF, 2017, p.45). According to the Population Reference Bureau, in Iraq "25 percent of girls marry before age 18 and 6 percent do so before age 15" (PRB, 2013).

²⁵ It is worth noting here that Iraq is the only Arab country to stipulate in its constitution that 25 percent of members of parliament must be women. On paper, Iraq is considered one of the most progressive Arab countries in terms of women's rights, yet the post-2003 militarization and Islamization waves have created a gap between the progressive laws and the oppressive lived reality of women in Iraq.

²⁶ In reference to Lauren Berlant (2011).

(Sarhan, 2009). Sarhan (2009) explains that at least 15 Iraqi children were sold every month, internally or abroad. Thus, it is believed that at least 12 networks of organized gangs are operating in Iraq, offering between £200 and £4,000 per child, depending on children's background and health (ibid.).

In such an unsafe and dangerous environment, the reliance on local militia, tribal or sectarian leaders for protection becomes a matter of survival. Therefore, clientelism in Iraq does not solely take the shape of economic welfare and social services, but it also (and perhaps primarily) relies on the provision of safety and protection for in-group members. Out-group members, or individuals who do not give their allegiance to the leaders, do not benefit from their protection and backing. Therefore, activists taking part in opposition demonstrations face severe punishments such as kidnapping and killing. For example, civil rights activist and journalist Hadi Al-Mahdi was killed in his house in 2011 following his involvement in organizing protests in Baghdad in the wake of the Arab uprisings. Similarly, journalist Afrah Sawqi was kidnapped by militiamen in 2016 and later released following the intervention of Prime Minister Al-Abadi. More recently, a series of assassinations of prominent Iraqi women has once again exposed the depth of the relationship between militia rule, violence, and hypermasculinity in Iraq. In September 2018, human rights defender and activist Suad Al-Ali was shot dead in broad daylight in Basra following her support and involvement in the protests

taking place in the city. Similarly, a wave of killings has targeted Iraqi women who work in the beauty sector in Baghdad: Tara Fares, the famous 22-year old Iraqi beauty queen, model, and social media influencer was assassinated in September 2018; Rafeef Al-Yasiri, owner of a medical beauty center was killed in August 2018; a few days later, Rasha Al-Hassan, a beauty expert and manager of a beauty center in Baghdad was also found dead in her home (Al Arabiya, 2018). These killings show that the targeting of women in Iraq is not only driven by their political activism, but it is also often driven by their (direct or indirect) challenge to conservative gender norms. This danger around challenging gender norms applies not only to women, but also to those who challenge society's heteronormativity in general. In October 2018, Hamoudi Al-Moteri, a 15-year old Iraqi boy was brutally killed in Baghdad for allegedly being homosexual (Rawles, 2018). While these are not the first attacks on women or queer people in Iraq, the post-war violence and instability—coupled with militia rule, Islamization, and a terrifying surge in social conservatism—has made Iraqi society a dangerous space for women and all non-conforming groups.

It is within these social, political and economic structures that some progressive actors are struggling against the odds to create a better alternative for Iraq and its people. The following chapter highlights some of the main progressive political and social forces shaping the activists' scene in Iraq today.

CHAPTER 2: MAPPING PROGRESSIVE SOCIAL AND POLITICAL ACTORS IN IRAQ

This chapter discusses the question of who the current progressive political and social actors are in Iraq post-2003. It looks at the different types of actors that emerged in recent years, especially following the Arab uprisings and the shifting broader regional context. The main aim of this chapter is to provide a short overview of each actor, focusing on its development as well as its main agenda, causes, ideas, and political actions and forms of contestation.

INTRODUCTION

Following the fall of the Ba'ath regime and the end of decades of dictatorship and sanctions, new political spaces and opportunities opened up for alternative and progressive groups in Iraq. Despite the US-led occupation and the violence and chaos that ensued post-2003, Iraq witnessed structural changes that gave way to the rise of political parties and dissent groups from different ends of the political spectrum. During this transitional period, thousands of exiled, imprisoned, or retired activists returned to their political activism in Iraq. The first few years following the fall of the Ba'ath regime witnessed the establishment of thousands of NGOs and CSOs,²⁷ hundreds of newspapers and news platforms, and dozens of trade unions. This was a time during which a burgeoning new scene of parties, associations and organizations was being shaped (NCCI, 2011). Since then, the non-sectarian, progressive, democratic, and/or leftist politics in Iraq have mainly been advanced by several old and new groups such as the leftist and communist parties, some civil society organizations (in particular women's organizations), some social movement organizations that took shape in 2011, 2015 and more recently in 2018, as well as the trade union movement. While new political opportunities have allowed these different groups to operate in the Iraqi public sphere post-2003, this did not happen without serious risks and threats. Many activists, unionists, journalists, and intellectuals were threatened and targeted by various groups including former Ba'athists and Islamic militias. Although this has hampered the ability of the full development of a progressive front that operates freely in today's Iraq, the windows of opportunity are not completely shut and several actors are playing an important role in shaping Iraq's political landscape.

The following takes a closer look at these emerging actors and will briefly introduce each of them in an attempt to map the progressive scene in contemporary Iraq.²⁸ This mapping includes (1) the main leftist and communist parties, (2) the women's movement, (3) the trade unions, and (4) the mass movements of 2011, 2015, and 2018.

LEFTIST AND COMMUNIST PARTIES IN IRAQ:

Two main communist parties and several smaller organizations shape the leftist and communist scene in Iraq today. The first is the Iraqi Communist Party (ICP), the oldest party in the country and the biggest and most influential communist organization in Iraq. The second is the Workers' Communist Party of Iraq (WCPI), a smaller, younger, and more radical organization. In addition to these two parties, several smaller and more recent communist and leftist organizations have emerged in the past few years, mainly as offshoots from the ICP or the WCPI. Examples include groups such as the Union of the Communists in Iraq, established in 1998, or the Organization of Communist Alternative in Iraq (OCAI), which defected from the WCPI in 2018.

Whereas the main communist parties in Iraq stood against the Ba'ath regime under Saddam Hussein, the post-2003 era witnessed the adoption of two different strategies and tactics within the communist camp: while the Iraqi Communist Party decided to participate in the post-2003 US-led political process, the Workers' Communist Party of Iraq strongly opposed it and boycotted the elections. Although the Iraqi Communist Party initially opposed the US military intervention in Iraq (Abdel Jabbar, 2010), it ended up consenting to take part in the post-war political process that was initiated by the US and its allies in cooperation with Islamic and Kurdish nationalist parties. The ICP considered this step to be a pragmatic decision to participate in the new era of Iraqi politics instead of being sidelined or remaining marginal.²⁹ Thus the party advocated for economic reforms and democracy, including participation in elections, celebrating a new era of the revival of civil society organizations as important vehicles for social and political change, and investing in organizing or taking part in social protests that pressure the government towards social, political, and economic change. On the other hand, the WCPI opposed this transitional process and refused to give legitimacy to the US, warning that the newly adopted sectarian and ethnic power-sharing system will result in creating what the party has called a "black scenario" in Iraq.³⁰ The adherents of this analysis emphasized the notion that both the US and its allied parties in Iraq will primarily serve the interests of the capitalist class against the interests of the Iraqi working class. They therefore

²⁷ It is estimated that between 8,000 and 12,000 CSOs were registered within the first few years following 2003 (NCCI, 2011).

²⁸ It is important to note here that while a full mapping would have also covered Iraqi Kurdistan, this was not possible in this case due to time and funding constraints, and following the guidelines of the Rosa Luxemburg Stiftung for this study. For a mapping of the Left in Iraq that includes Kurdistan, see Karin Mlodoch's (2014) chapter in the Rosa Luxemburg Stiftung's publication *Mapping of the Arab Left: Contemporary Leftist Politics in the Arab East*.

²⁹ Author's interview with Jassim El Helfi, ICP central committee member.

³⁰ Author's interview with Nadia Mahmoud, member of WCPI's political bureau.

boycotted the ‘political process’, refused to participate in the elections, and focused on organizing from below, reaching out to workers, the unemployed, women, and the youth. In fact, both the ICP and the WCPI established—or at least encouraged the formation of—women’s organizations, trade unions, and other organizations to address social needs, discrimination, and inequalities. In the following pages, the two parties’ programs, political views, and type of activism are explored. A brief introduction to some of the other leftist and communist groups is then provided.

Iraqi Communist Party (ICP, *al-Hizb ash-Shiyyūʿī al-Iraqī*):³¹ The ICP is the oldest political party in Iraq. While communist groupings had started to appear in Iraq as early as the 1920s (Mlodoč, 2014), the ICP was officially established in 1934. It operated underground for years, which led it to develop a well-organized network of party cells, mass organizations, and front groups across Iraq and abroad. During the monarchy (1921–1958), the ICP was formed of workers, as well as middle class and educated urban communities involved in civil activism. The party was active in community institutions and organizations, such as trade unions and women’s leagues, and it played a crucial role in the struggle against the monarchy and the British Empire (NCCI, 2011). The ICP became the leading oppositional political force in Iraq in the aftermath of the Second World War and the rise of the Soviet Union as a major power. Mlodoč (2014, p.151) notes that “[b]etween 1944 and 1946 alone, 16 labor unions, 12 of which were connected to the ICP, emerged and organized between 30% and 60% of Iraqi oil, railway, electricity, and port workers. Communist women pioneered the struggle for women’s rights and founded the League for Defense of Women’s Rights in 1952, later renamed the Iraqi Women’s League.” Despite the monarchy’s harsh repression of the ICP, the party still managed to organize and lead the struggle. However, following Abdel Karim Qassem’s coup d’état that overthrew the monarchy in 1958, the ICP gained wider influence and was able to pressure Qassem to adopt agrarian reforms, and to pass the progressive Civil Personal Code (Law No. 188 of 1959³²) that protects women’s rights. At that time, the party had reached a peak in terms of its mobilizing power and its ability to shape politics in Iraq. Yet this started to change with the advancement of the cold war and the gradual decline of Soviet power in the region. In 1963, the Ba’ath party took power following a coup d’état against Qassem. One of the first political moves of the Ba’ath regime was “the murder of thousands of communists and unionists” (Mlodoč, 2014, p.151) and a crackdown on potential opposition groups. However, despite the violence against the communists, the ICP was pushed (by the Soviet Union) into a merger with the Ba’ath party within the Progressive National Front in 1973. At that time, the Ba’ath regime looked progressive given its nationalization of the

economy, its provision of welfare and high living standards, and its rapid economic development and modernization. However, it was not too long before the dictatorial aspects of the regime revealed themselves. The Ba’ath party quickly centralized all power in its hands and eliminated any possible opposition either through violence or cooptation. For example, both trade unions and women’s organizations were crushed and came under the tight control of the regime. It allowed only one state-controlled organization for unions (the General Federation of Trade Unions, GFTU) and one for women’s organizations (the General Federation of Iraqi Women, GFIW). The situation further deteriorated in 1979, after the ascendance to power of Saddam Hussein and the brutal end of the ICP–Ba’ath alliance, resulting in the execution, imprisonment, torture and exile of thousands of Iraqi communists. The ICP was then banned and its bases severely weakened. For more than two decades, the party had to re-organize itself from exile (and from Kurdistan post-1991) in its struggle against Saddam Hussein’s Ba’ath regime. However, despite strongly opposing the Ba’ath regime, the ICP refused to join the US and UK-led Iraqi Opposition Conferences in 2002–2003 in preparation for the invasion of Iraq (Mlodoč, 2014, p.157). The party opposed the US-led war on Iraq, while also rejecting armed resistance against the occupation. At that time, the ICP raised the slogan “no war, no dictatorship” (Mlodoč, 2014, p.157). It was not until the fall of the Ba’ath regime in 2003, that the ICP was once again able to operate freely in Iraq. Following the fall of Saddam Hussein and the establishment of a new political order, the ICP decided to enter the political process “despite the fact that this process was under the US influence. This tactic was aimed at avoiding isolation and seeking to meet the practical objectives” (Abdel Jabbar, 2010). Thus, the party entered the governing council—established by the Coalition Provisional Authority (CPA) led by Paul Bremer—through its leader Hamid Majid Mousa. He sat on the 25-person Iraqi Governing Council (IGC),³³ which included 22 men and only 3 women (Al-Ali & Pratt, 2006). The ICP justified its collaboration with the CPA and its membership in the Iraqi Governing Council as a means of infiltrating the country’s new political institutions and expanding its power base (Center for Security Policy, 2004). Since then, the party effectively participated in all local and national elections hoping to gain enough seats in order to “put the political process on the right track” (ICP, Central Committee Meeting, 2015).³⁴ However, in most of the elections—whether running on its own or allying with other political groups—the party won very few or no seats (Mlodoč,

³¹ For more detailed accounts on the ICP, see Abdel Jabbar (2010), Ismael (2008), Mlodoč (2014), Sluglett (2006), and Franzén (2011), or visit the party’s official website: <http://www.iraqicp.com>.

³² This is the law that recently many Islamists have been trying to change.

³³ Created in July 2003 by the CPA, the IGC is a consultative body with limited authority.

³⁴ For more details, see: <http://www.ankawa.com/forum/index.php?topic=778827.0>.

2014, p.159). It was not until the latest elections in 2018, that the party had an electoral victory³⁵ following its alliance with the al-Sadr Movement under the Sa'iroun or Forward campaign (Aldroubi, 2018).

Since entering the 'political process' and agreeing on the 2005 constitution, the ICP has called for economic reforms, social and political reconciliation among fighting political parties, and an end to corruption and to the Mohassassa or power-sharing system, in order to establish a state based on citizenship rights and social justice (ICP Tenth Conference documents, 2017).³⁶ Economically, the ICP criticizes Iraq's reliance on oil and calls for diversifying the Iraqi economy (ibid.). The party calls for the promotion of national industry, agriculture, and tourism as job-generating sectors that can also contribute to GDP growth. Moreover, the ICP supports foreign investment in Iraq's infrastructure; however, they advocate for prioritizing local over migrant labor (ibid.).

The ICP's goal is to establish a state of law, with a certain level of security that protects the political process and the constitution (Image 1). It calls for militias to be integrated into the state apparatus and argues that weapons should be restricted to the state (ICP political statement, 2018).³⁷ The party's political report presented and accepted at the 10th ICP conference in December 2017 warns that "sever punishments should be taken against those who challenge the state authority, its status, and prestige".³⁸ Thus, the ICP calls for the passing of a National Guard law (ICP Tenth Conference documents, 2017),³⁹ and perceives state authority as central in this period.

Finally, it is important to mention that despite returning to Iraq's political life after 2003, the ICP is facing major challenges both at the external and internal levels. While rejected and accused by some Islamic circles for being atheists, the party was recently accused by some of its own members from the central committee of being too close to the Islamists following its alliance with the Sadr movement in 2015.⁴⁰ The first challenge is that despite joining the governing council and adhering to the 'political process' by participating in elections and joining forces with different political groups in power, the party has faced violent attacks by Islamic parties and militias, during elections and during waves of protest. In fact, a number of ICP members were threatened, kidnapped (Habib, 2017), and even killed, as was the case with Kamil Shia'a, who was murdered in 2008.⁴¹ Moreover, the ICP offices have repeatedly been attacked and set on fire (MacDonald, 2018). On the other hand, the recent alliance between the ICP and the al-Sadr movement since 2015 has angered many party members, with talks about a wave of resignations taking place within the party in light of this political alignment. While the ICP's rationale for allying with the al-Sadr movement is to reach a broader popular base (that of the Sadrist movement) with its ideas and values, and to be able to influence political decisions at a higher level,⁴² some of its members are



Image 1: ICP banners in front of party headquarters in Baghdad. The one on the left reads "Toward the strengthening of our military and security forces". The one on the right says: "For the unification of our efforts to complete the return of the displaced and migrants to their homes". Photo by the author, 2018.

opposed to such a political alliance with one of the main Islamist groups in the country. It is important to mention here that while the ICP played a crucial role in the protest movements of 2011 and 2015, it made no serious attempt to forge alliances with other leftist or communist parties. Instead of consolidating a leftist front, the divisions among the different parties and organizations only deepened. The alliance of the ICP with the Sadrists in 2015 deepened the rift within the leftist camp, and left most organizations skeptical and dismissive of each other. While the party was a leading organizer of the 2011 and 2015 protests, it took a more marginal role in 2018 given the fact that the mobilizations happened in the aftermath of the elections in which the Sa'iroun (Sadrist–Communist alliance) list had won.

The Workers Communist Party of Iraq (WCPI, *al-Ḥizb al-Shuyuʿī al-ʿUmmālī al-Trāqī*):⁴³ The Worker's Communist Party of Iraq was established on 21 July 1993 in the Kurdistan Region of Iraq (KRI). The party was formed by unifying six left-wing organizations: four from Kurdistan and two from the rest of Iraq. The WCPI adheres to the theories advanced by Mansoor

³⁵ Although the ICP only won 2 seats in parliament, it is believed that its alliance with the al-Sadr movement will give it more influence in Iraqi politics.

³⁶ For more details, see: <http://iraqicparchives.com/index.php/party/program-regulation>.

³⁷ For more details, see: <https://www.sotaliraq.com/2018/06/16/%D8%A8%D9%8A%D8%A7%D9%86-%D8%B5%D8%A7%D8%AF%D8%B1-%D8%B9%D9%86-%D8%A7%D9%84%D9%85%D8%AC%D9%84%D8%B3-%D8%A7%D9%84%D8%A7%D8%B3%D8%AA-%D8%B4%D8%A7%D8%B1%D9%8A-%D9%84%D9%84%D8%AD%D8%B2%D8%A8-%D8%A7%D9%84/>.

³⁸ For more details, see: <http://m.ahewar.org/s.asp?aid=542170&r=0&cid=0&u=6i=6&q=>.

³⁹ For more information, see: <http://m.ahewar.org/s.asp?aid=542170&r=0&cid=0&u=6i=6&q=>.

⁴⁰ Interview with Raed Fahmi (2018), available at: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=fno4C1O4060>.

⁴¹ For more information, please check: <http://www.iraqicp.com/index.php-sections/party/9270-2018-08-23-13-23-59>.

⁴² Author's interview with Jassim El Hefi, ICP central committee member.

⁴³ The WCPI's official website can be accessed at <http://www.wpira.net/Default.aspx>.

Hikmat,⁴⁴ the founder and theorist of the Workers' Communist Party in Iran. During its fifth congress in 2012, the WCPI adopted its current program which states that the party aims to organize the social revolution of the working class in order to establish a socialist state.

Prior to 2003 the WCPI was mainly active in the KRI, and only to a lesser extent in the rest of Iraq since it was banned. Affiliation with the WCPI was a punishable offense, thus the party—like all other opposition parties—chose to work in secret. Following the fall of the Ba'ath regime in 2003, the WCPI was able to expand its work to other parts of Iraq and to open party offices in various regions of the country.

Since its inception, the WCPI stood against economic sanctions, called for the overthrow of Saddam's regime, criticized political Islam, and supported the Kurdish right to self-determination. On the eve of 2003, the party opposed the US plan for regime change in Iraq, claiming that this had to come from Iraqis' struggles rather than being led by an imperial power such as the US. The party viewed the US-led war for regime change in Iraq as a pretext to impose the will and interests of the US and its local allies. Therefore, the WCPI criticized the Islamic and Kurdish national parties, that were part of the Iraqi opposition, for their participation in the conference held in London on the eve of the war on Iraq (on 15 December 2002). It accused these parties of being complicit in a war that was going to create an even worse situation for Iraqis. Consequently, the party opposed the 2003 war and the subsequent occupation of the country. The WCPI boycotted the US-led 'political process', calling for the immediate ending of the occupation, and the de-legitimization of all the local parties that cooperated with the occupation forces to rule the country. As a result, the WCPI criticized the governing council established by the CPA, and has boycotted all elections since 2005. It called for elections to happen under the supervision of neutral international forces in order to guarantee the free participation of Iraqis away from any form of blackmail, bribes, violence, or terrorism against voters or candidates. Similarly, the party rejected the new 2005 constitution, and considered it to be a 'ticking bomb' that could lead to sectarian wars since it divides the Iraqi people along religious and ethnic lines.

As previously mentioned, the WCPI has been known for its strong stance against political Islam. This has led to several confrontations with Islamist political parties, which has cost the party the lives of two of its leading members (Shapoor Abdel Kader and Kabeel Adel) who were killed on 18 April 2000 by Islamic groups, as claimed by the party. After 2003, the party engaged in political confrontation with Islamic militias. Party members were kidnapped and party offices were raided and attacked. For example, the party offices in Nasiriyah city, in the south of the country, were attacked and set on fire by Islamic groups twice in 2003.

While the WCPI did not participate in the post-2003 'political process', it has focused its efforts on trying

to organize from below. The party has called for the establishment of district councils to protect citizens and provide them with security. It started forming small armed groups from its party members to protect the residents of the areas surrounding the party offices in 2003–2004. On the other hand, the WCPI concentrated its efforts on organizing workers, the unemployed, women, and broader social movements for economic and social demands. It encouraged its members to form trade unions and establish a union for the unemployed; it similarly supported the founding of a women's organization by party members, and it established the Iraq Freedom Congress (IFC). These initiatives formed the core of the party's focus in the years following the fall of the Ba'ath regime.

The Unemployed Union of Iraq (UUI) was set up in May 2003 in Baghdad by members of the WCPI. The UUI organized itself out of the protests of the unemployed, demanding jobs and unemployment benefits. The UUI established branches in seven provinces in Iraq (Baghdad, Basra, Mosul, Nasiriyah, Kirkuk, and to lesser extent Dyala and Diwania⁴⁵) and claimed to represent around 130,000 members (see Image 2). The UUI organized several protest actions country-wide, specifically in front of the US Provisional Authority headquarters in Baghdad and in other cities. In July 2003, the UUI organized a 45-day strike in front of Paul Bremer's office, demanding unemployment benefits of US\$100 per month (Velasco, 2003). The US forces attempted to remove the protesters' tents and disperse the demonstrators; however, the protesters responded by forming a human blockade. In response, US forces arrested the secretary of the UUI (Qasim Hadi) along with more than 55 members of the union (UUI, 2003).⁴⁶

Following this event, and given the growing threats surrounding the unemployed movement, UUI activities gradually decreased until it ceased to operate in 2007. Many of its leading members sought asylum abroad, while those who remained in Iraq either gave up their activism or joined other unions and organizations such as the Iraq Freedom Congress, the WCPI, the OWFI, or other groups. However, despite the official disbanding of the union, some of its activities have continued in Nasiriyah, in particular the defence the vendors, daily wage laborers, and contractual workers.⁴⁷ Another main organization encouraged and supported by the WCPI was the Federation of Workers Councils and Unions in Iraq (FWCUI) (Image 3). Established in July 2003,

⁴⁴ Mansoor Hikmat is an Iranian Marxist who established workers' communism in Iran and Iraq. He opposed both the USSR and the Islamic rule of Iran based on his Marxist reading of state capitalism and imperialism. He is best known for returning to the original texts of Marx as the basis of political analysis. Hikmat denounced the possibility of a progressive national bourgeoisie, and called for the workers to rely only on themselves and form their own councils without any alliance with the bourgeois class. Hikmat is also known for strongly opposing Islamism. For more on Hikmat, see <http://www.m-hekmat.com>.

⁴⁵ Correspondence with the former secretary of the UUI (Qasim Hadi) on 2 November 2018.

⁴⁶ For more information, please check: <http://www.m.ahewar.org/s.asp?aid=9000&r=0>

⁴⁷ Correspondence with the former secretary of the UUI (Qasim Hadi) on 2 November 2018.

The workers' movement in Iraq urgently need support & solidarity in order to play a role in getting the society out of the ordeal of war, hunger, and unemployment.



The Unemployed Union of Iraq (UUI)

was set up in May 2003 in Baghdad. It is a genuine representative of the protest of the unemployed and destitute people. Through the demands of a job or unemployment benefits the UUI wants to make a difference in the lives of the workers and save the lives of thousands of unemployed families who are under the threat of hunger and unemployment.

The UUI now has 130,000 members and it has established branches in seven provinces in Iraq. The UUI has held scores of protest actions so far in front of the US Provisional Authority headquarters in Baghdad and other cities. It has organized a 45 day strike in front of Paul Bremer's office. Consequently the secretary of the UUI (Qasim Hadi) was arrested along with 55 members of the UUI by the US forces.

The UUI has managed to find 600 work opportunities for unemployed people and provide workers with free medical services as a result of its protest actions. The workers in different sectors such as power, water supply, hospitals, laboratories, rail ways, transportations, and petrol are members of the UUI. The struggle and achievements of the UUI have worried the US officials, the Governing Council, and the allied political parties.

The UUI also publishes a paper inside Iraq called "The Workers' Councils" (Al-Majalis Al-Ummalyia) in Arabic and a paper in English called "The Voice of Iraqi Workers".

Simultaneously, the UUI has established a solidarity network in Europe, Australia, and Canada to build international support for the workers in Iraq. The workers' movement is looking forward to hear from you!

The Union of the Unemployed in Iraq- UUI.

Bab-Al-Sharki, Al Rasheed St.

Old Labour Union Bldg, Baghdad, Iraq.

E-MAIL: <union_u_iraq@yahoo.com>

<http://www.uuiiraq.org>

Bank Account Lloyds TSBUII Sort code:30 94 51

Bank Account: 11610268

Image 2: Leaflet distributed by the UUI in 2003. Source: <https://users.resist.ca/~gidget/nefac/uui.pdf>

the FWCUI followed similar political lines to the WCPI: it opposed both the US-led occupation of Iraq and the Islamist-led government. The FWCUI exposed the impact of neoliberal policies on workers, advocated for fairer labor and social security laws, defended workers' rights on issues such as claiming unpaid salaries, and engaged in different workers' strikes in Baghdad, Basra, and other cities in the central and southern parts of Iraq. The president of the FWCUI resigned from the WCPI in



Image 3: Entrance to the Federation of Workers Councils and Unions in Iraq. The banner has the name of the federation in Arabic, Kurdish, and English. Photo by the author, 2017.

May 2018,⁴⁸ thus disassociating the two organizations from each other.

Besides labor organizations, the party also encouraged the formation of women's organizations. In 2003, three female members of the WCPI political bureau formed the Organization of Women's Freedom in Iraq (OWFI), a mass organization that focuses on women's rights. The OWFI was formed following the dissolution of the Independent Women's Organization that was active in Iraqi Kurdistan from 1991–2003. The organization has engaged in a wide range of activities to defend women's rights and empower women to resist forced veiling imposed by Islamic militias. Similarly, the OWFI has organized an intensive campaign against the replacement of the 1959 personal status law by Islamic Shari'a law. The OWFI has also campaigned against honor killing and all forms of gender-based violence. In addition, the organization has opened shelters to support those subjected to violence, especially those escaping the threat of honor killings or trafficking.

The OWFI helped around 500 women from 2007 to 2017 (OWFI Press Release, 2017),⁴⁹ and has "expanded to have six shelters all over the country".⁵⁰ As with the FWCUI, in July 2018 the OWFI broke away from the WCPI following the resignation of Yanar Mohammad and three other members from the WCPI central committee. The resignation came as a result of a clash with some members of the WCPI central committee that were "actively sidelining socialists and communists, which hindered the possibility of strengthening the communist movement and building a serious revolutionary workers' party", according to a member of the OWFI. Finally, another major achievement of the WCPI was the establishment of the Iraq Freedom Congress (IFC). Established on 18 March 2005, the IFC aimed to liberate Iraqi society from both the US occupation and the hegemony of Islamic parties, and to establish a secular non-religious and non-nationalist state in Iraq (IFC formation

⁴⁸ See <http://www.ahewar.org/debat/show.art.asp?aid=599879>.

⁴⁹ For more information, see: <https://www.almubadarairaq.org/?p=4077>.

⁵⁰ Interview with Yanar Mohammed, president of OWFI available at: <https://www.globalfundforwomen.org/yanar-mohammed-a-daring-human-rights-defender-in-iraq>.

statement, 2005).⁵¹ The strategy to achieve this aim was announced in its political statement that called for returning to the masses who will determine their own political fate. Driven by these objectives, the IFC worked with trade unions and student unions, and formed an office to focus on defending women rights, as well as the rights of LGBTIQ+ people. The IFC also advocated for Kirkuk to be treated based on its demographic reality, which brought Arab, Kurdish, and Turkmen-speaking communities together. The IFC dissolved at the end of 2011, following the end of the occupation and the withdrawal of US troops from Iraq. The WCPI is facing many challenges, both internally and externally. First, the main challenge that the party faces is the use of violence by Islamic militias. The party entered into political confrontation with Islamic militias in 2003, leading to repeated attacks on the party offices and the kidnapping of several of its members. Given that the party has no military capacities, this led to its retreat. Second, the party's views and agendas are perceived by many—including other leftist groups—as being extremist, radical, and unrealistic. The party's insistence on adopting a socialist and class-based discourse seems to have alienated them other more 'liberal' leftist groups that prefer to focus their political activism around issues of 'democracy', 'human rights', participation in the 'political process', and 'elections'. According to the WCPI, this divide between the 'bourgeois left' and the 'working-class left' poses a real challenge for the advancement of the leftist socialist agenda in Iraq. Third, the fact that most WCPI founding members are based abroad might have a negative impact on its work inside Iraq. Fourth, the party suffers from several financial challenges since it has no major support from outside the party. Finally, a decade and a half after its official launch in Iraq, the WCPI is suffering today from splits within its ranks and the increasing difficulty of retaining some of its members who, in some cases, have preferred to leave the party and establish their own organization.

While the WCPI remains a smaller party compared to the ICP in terms of popular base and support, it has actively been engaged in all protest waves in Iraq and has tried to organize in different forms to mobilize and recruit supporters. During the 2011 protests, the WCPI participated in the movement and helped organize some of the mobilization. At that time, the ICP played a leading role in the movement and suffered a considerable crack down by al-Maliki's government. In response, the WCPI (under the banner of the Iraq Freedom Congress) issued several statements in support of the ICP and denouncing state repression.⁵² According to the WCPI, the party had repeatedly tried to reach out to the ICP prior to 2005; however, these attempts never materialized in terms of cooperation between the two parties. The ICP has been reluctant to work with the WCPI, despite discursively welcoming and embracing the idea of collaboration between the parties.⁵³ Yet things changed after 2015 when the

WCPI quickly withdrew from the streets following the mobilization of al-Sadr in the movement. At that time, the WCPI denounced the ICP for its alliance with the Sadrists and refused to participate in the protests. More recently, the WCPI was involved in the 2018 protests. As explained by the party's secretary general, the WCPI learned its lessons from 2015, and so in 2018 it decided to move away from the mass protest tactic and work on the organizing the protests in the form of local councils at the neighborhood or district level in order to limit the possibilities of the movement being coopted and security threats. The WCPI also played a crucial role during the three waves of protests in covering the events through their daily newspaper supplements.

Other Leftist and Communist Organizations in Iraq

In addition to the two main communist parties in Iraq (the ICP and the WCPI), several smaller leftist and communist organizations have mushroomed in the aftermath of 2003. In the following, some of the main smaller leftist organizations are briefly introduced.

ORGANIZATIONS THAT SPLIT FROM THE ICP CENTRAL LEADERSHIP: It is one of the biggest organizations that split from the Iraqi Communist Party on 17 September 1967. Following the 1958 revolution in Iraq, the ICP leadership was divided on the question of the future of the revolution. The central committee supported Abdul Kareem Qassim and asked the masses to do so, in line with the USSR. However, the other faction, which became known as the Central Leadership (CL) or command, agitated for the continuation of the national liberation revolution towards a socialist revolution. This formed one of the biggest divisions within the party (Halliday, 2004). Thus, the central committee supported the Ba'ath party revolution that took place on 17 July 1968, while the Central Leadership sought to fight the Ba'ath regime through guerrilla warfare strategies (Alexander, 2008). Most of the members of the Central Leadership had fled Iraq during the Ba'ath regime, especially in the era of Saddam Hussein. In the aftermath of 2003, some members of the CL returned to Iraq, and many of them engaged in political work with other leftist organizations.

ORGANIZATIONS THAT SPLIT FROM THE WCPI THE UNION OF THE COMMUNISTS IN IRAQ (*Itihād as-Shiyu 'iyin fi l-'Irāq*): This organization was established in 1998 following the split of some members from the WCPI in Iraqi Kurdistan. The organization was first named The Movement of the Emergence of the Communist Workers – Iraq. The founders of the organization stated that "the modern history of Iraq did not witness the formation of revolutionary workers parties or organizations that aim to liberate the working class

⁵¹ For more information, see: <http://www.m.ahewar.org/s.asp?aid=33828&r=0>.

⁵² Author's correspondence with Samir Adil, secretary general of the WCPI.

⁵³ Author's correspondence with Samir Adil, secretary general of the WCPI.

from the imperialist and capitalist oppressions and form societies free from exploitation” (Abdullah, 2003). According to Nizar Abdullah, the leader of the organization, it was established “to fill a historical vacuum for the communists, and to affirm the necessity of the working class to build its party in Iraq through the direct activation of the role of the socialist workers leaders in particular and communist fighters in general” (ibid.).

THE LEFTIST WORKERS’ COMMUNIST PARTY OF IRAQ (*al-Hizb al-Shuyuʿi al-Ummālī al-yasārī al-ʿIrāqī*): The LWPI was established on 17 October 2004. This took place—according to the party’s political statement—as the WCPI abandoned the socialist and revolutionary traditions of workers communism as presented by party founder Mansoor Hikmat (LWPI, 2004).⁵⁴ The departure from these traditions manifested itself, according to the LWPI, through the split that took place within the Workers’ Communist Party of Iran. The latter divided into two wings: those who supported Hameed Taqvaei who was based in Canada; and those who followed Koroosh Modarisi. The WCPI supported the latter, who later on formed their own party, the Worker-Communist Party of Iran – Hikmatist on 24 August 2004. A group of WCPI members and Iranian members supported Taqvaei, and jointly formed the newly-born LWPI party who were mainly based in the USA and Canada.

THE ORGANIZATION OF COMMUNIST ALTERNATIVE IN IRAQ (OCAI, *Munazamat al-Badīl al-Shuyuʿi fī l-ʿIrāq*): The OCAI is a new organization that was established on 25 July 2018. It came about following the resignation of three members⁵⁵ of the central committee from the Workers Communist Party of Iraq (WCPI). Other WCPI members, especially those who worked with the OWFI, have also resigned from the party and joined the newly-formed organization. According to its political statement released in July 2018,⁵⁶ the OCAI defines itself as an internationalist communist organization with the strategic aim of “overthrowing the capitalist system and forming a communist society”. To this end, the party aims at organizing working councils and mass councils that would strive to “defeat the current bourgeois, Islamic and nationalist system in Iraq and to seize political power and establish workers-led government” (ibid.).

While emphasizing the importance of the class struggle, the OCAI also focuses on women’s issues. In its statement, the organization highlighted the close link between the emancipation of women and proletarian socialist struggle. Thus, the organization adopts a Marxist feminist approach that considers that empowering women’s resistance is crucial in the face of “repression, persecution and social pressures as well as the tribal, male chauvinist and reactionary culture” (ibid.).

The organization held its first conference on 17–19 September 2018. This meeting was attended by the

founding members in addition to numerous activists from communist and unionist circles; as well as feminist and youth activists (Closing Statement, 2018). In addition, the OCAI has worked closely with the OWFI to denounce the brutal killing of four women in Iraq (in August and September 2018) who were seen as being outspoken or challenging the norms of a conservative society. As a newly established organization, the OCAI is in the process of establishing its website, newspaper, and other social media tools that could be used as a window to understand the organization’s work.

THE WOMEN’S MOVEMENT IN IRAQ

The women’s movement in Iraq has historically been a key player in presenting women’s issues to the public. While women’s organizations have existed since the inception of the Iraqi state in 1920, these organizations were mainly led by the wives of elites who were involved in charitable associations at that time (Al-Ali & Pratt, 2008). During the 1930s, the focus of women’s organizations started to shift to women’s education with the establishment of the first women’s college in Iraq. However, it was during the 1940s and 1950s that the women’s movement gained momentum and came to the forefront of progressive politics in the country. At that time, the movement was tightly linked with leftist politics, given the establishment of the League for the Defense of Iraqi Women’s Rights (LDIWR) in 1952 by Naziha al-Dulaimi, a prominent female member of the Iraqi Communist Party.⁵⁷ The League was later renamed the Iraqi Women’s League (IWL).

During the 1950s, the women’s movement achieved many gains following its lobbying for the unified personal status law that was passed in 1959. However, the women’s movement—like all other progressive movements in Iraq—was heavily curtailed during the reign of Saddam Hussein. Under the Ba’ath regime, only organizations that worked under strict governmental control were allowed to exist and operate. Thus, the General Federation of Iraqi Women (GFIW) became the only women’s organization to officially operate in Iraq under Ba’ath rule. This was the case until 1991, when several women’s organizations were able to emerge and re-organize their activism in the Kurdish Region of Iraq (KRI) (Al-Ali & Pratt, 2008). These included organizations such as Al-Amal⁵⁸ or the Rewan Women’s Center, as well as women’s unions and organizations that were directly linked to political parties that became active in the KRI post-1991. However, it was not until the fall of the Ba’ath regime in 2003, that women in central and southern Iraq were able to openly engage in women’s rights and feminist activism. Thus,

⁵⁴ For more information, see: <http://www.ahewar.org/debat/show.art.asp?aid=25294&r=0>.

⁵⁵ Among them Yanar Mohammad and other members of the OWFI.

⁵⁶ For more information, see: <http://www.ahewar.org/debat/show.art.asp?aid=606523>.

⁵⁷ Naziha al-Dulaimi was also the first woman in Iraq and the Arab world to become a cabinet minister.

⁵⁸ Al-Amal is one of the biggest NGOs in Iraq, and it is directed by activist Hana Edward.

women's organizations and initiatives—as well as other types of CSOs and NGOs—have started to mushroom all over Iraq since 2003. Many women's organizations have relocated from Kurdistan to the capital Baghdad and expanded their work to include other regions of the country. Established by both religious and secular women activists, women's organizations were in many cases closely linked to political parties (Ali, 2018).



Image 4: OWFI Baghdad Office. Photo source: Michael T. Luongo⁵⁹

For example, the OWFI (Image 4) is linked to the WCPI, and the LDIWR is linked to the ICP. Organizations such as the National Council of Women (NWC), the Iraqi Women's Higher Council (IWHC), the Iraqi Independent Women's Group, and the Society for Iraqi Women for the Future have mainly been founded by prominent women with close ties to political parties.

Despite the seemingly free and supportive environment for women's organizations post-2003, the reality on the ground has unfolded in a much grimmer way. The US-proclaimed interests in advancing women's rights in Iraq and supporting women's organizations were little more than an instrument for achieving its political and security goals. As explained by Al-Ali and Pratt (2006), the US has attempted to coopt the women's movement for fulfilling its own objectives, instead of developing a voice for themselves. This was initially done through the CPA's Office of Women's Affairs (OWA), which played a major role in matching women NGOs with donors, thus controlling the scene of women's activism funding and steering it towards US interests. The Office of Women's Affairs organized weekly meetings with women's organizations, provided them with training and support, and acted as an umbrella for women's organizations in Iraq. In preparation for the first Iraqi elections, in March 2004 the US announced a 10-million-dollar fund for the Women's Democracy Initiative, which was aimed at educating Iraqi women on democracy, elections, and leadership (Al-Ali & Pratt, 2008). But while the OWA was attractive to many women's organizations, others were skeptical about working and meeting with the occupation forces (ibid.).

In fact, all post-2003 achievements of the women's movement in Iraq came against the wishes of the US

administration. For example, the Bush administration and Paul Bremer were clearly opposed to adopting a women's quota in Iraqi elections; however, in March 2004, women activists were able to reach a compromise for a 25 percent female quota to be adopted not only in the Transitional Administrative Law, but also in the permanent constitution⁶⁰ (Al-Ali & Pratt, 2008). This came at a time of heightened mobilization for the secular women's movement,⁶¹ which has been fighting to preserve the 1959 civil status personal code since early 2004. Following the issuance of Decree 137—that called for the adoption of a religious personal status code—by the Supreme Council for Islamic Revolution in Iraq (SCIRI) under the presidency of Abel Aziz Hakim in late 2003, women's rights organizations have joined efforts and mobilized in big numbers in order to reverse the decree and protect women's legal gains of the 1950s (Tabet, 2005). While the movement managed to stop Decree 137 from passing and formed a main turning point for the post-war Iraqi women's movement, many organizations have heavily criticized the head of the CPA, Paul Bremer, for taking a very long time to reverse the decree (Al-Ali & Pratt, 2006). This, if anything, shows the superficiality of the US's commitment to advancing women's rights in Iraq. In fact, the struggle of secular women activists to maintain a civil code for personal status is still ongoing in Iraq today. Several attempts were made to eliminate the existing civil code and replace it with a religious one. This is mainly due to the controversial Article 41 of the constitution that states that "Iraqis are free in their adherence to their personal status according to their own religion, sect, belief and choice, and that will be organized by law" (Al-Ali & Pratt, 2006). Thus, while the Iraqi constitution enshrines women's rights, it also holds the seeds for a potential crackdown on Iraqi women through a sectarianization of family law.

The challenges facing the post-2003 women's movement in Iraq are many. The movement has many internal divisions, mainly along the lines of Islamic-secular or diaspora-local activists (Al-Ali & Pratt, 2008).⁶² However, while these divisions have been an obstacle to the creation of a united women's movement in Iraq, the real challenges to advancing women's rights in Iraq lie elsewhere. The lack of security and stability, the widespread violence and militarization of society, the mounting conservative culture and the lawlessness that govern Iraq today form the real threats to the women's movement. Violence against women has clearly increased since 2003, and women have been systematically targeted mainly by Islamist militias, insurgent groups, and criminal gangs. An alarming

⁵⁹ To access the photo, see: <https://www.gaycitynews.nyc/stories/2010/19/w9593-gay-death-gay-life-2-2010-09-15.html>.

⁶⁰ This step made Iraq the first Arab country to adopt a female quota in its constitution.

⁶¹ Islamist women activists mobilized against the unified civil personal status code.

⁶² The Iraqi Women's Network (al-Shabaka) is an example of a network that includes more than 80 women's organizations with different political and religious views (Al-Ali & Pratt, 2008).

number of cases of sexual violence, rape, abduction, human trafficking, and killing of girls and women have been recorded (Al-Ali & Pratt, 2008). Women have also been subjected to conservative social norms that force them in some areas (such as in some southern cities) to veil, encourage them to marry at an early age, or prevent them from appearing in public spaces in order to preserve ‘family honor’. The threat of conservatism and violence is not only targeting women but it also extends to all individuals who do not conform to the hyper-masculinist and heteronormative culture, including queer, gay, lesbian, transgender, and transsexual people. However, whereas a women’s movement has developed to protect and defend women’s rights, queer activism is still very dangerous in Iraq. That said, some small and mainly underground initiatives have already formed to protect queer individuals and the LGBTIQ+ community. These initiatives have mainly developed within feminist and human rights groupings and organizations. However, death threats, violence against women activists, and the killing of women activists in Iraq is still ongoing and widespread. This poses a real challenge to the women’s movement and requires much bravery on the part of the women activists who are fighting for their rights despite the actual threats. Another challenge that the women’s movement is facing in Iraq is the growing NGOization of their struggle; especially in light of the flood of funding for women’s initiatives in the post-2003 era. As previously mentioned, many of those initiatives were funded by international donors to serve an international or imperial agenda, not a grassroots women’s movement. Thus, this might have coopted part of the women’s movement and created competition over funding and resources, instead of focusing on advancing women’s issues and demands from below. Finally, despite all the difficulties faced, the secular women’s organizations in Iraq are engaged in multiple vital struggles: (1) first, the struggle to maintain the current personal status code and to oppose the Islamist groups’ efforts to replace this law with Shari’a law; (2) second, the struggle for women’s quotas to be adopted in all elections at the different levels of the administrative divisions; and finally, (3) the struggle against everyday violence and targeted assassinations of women and activists in Iraq. These different struggles are taking place through legal battles, street mobilizations, pressure groups, and the creation of initiatives and spaces that support women and advance their causes in society.

THE LABOR MOVEMENT IN IRAQ

Another important movement in Iraq is the labor movement. The struggle of the workers in Iraq to form their own trade unions, and to combat privatization (especially in the oil sector) and state crackdowns, tells one of the most important stories of contentious politics in the country during the past century. It was through costly struggles and confrontations with governments that workers managed to form their

independent trade unions in Iraq. The first trade union was established in 1927 by railway workers,⁶³ and the first nationwide trade union federation, the General Federation of Trade Unions (GFTU), was legalized in 1948 (Humphries, 2006). This came as a result of a series of protests and strikes that took place in Iraq between 1944 and 1946, organized by railway and port workers’ unions as well as oil sector workers.

After the 1958 revolution, trade unions connected to the Iraqi Communist Party became particularly popular and were able to mobilize one million demonstrators celebrating the first of May in 1959 (Curry, 2016). However, after the Ba’ath party seized power in 1968, trade unions faced many restrictions that prevented them from representing their members. By the time Saddam Hussein came to power in the late 1970s, the Ba’athists had created their own federation and took over the GFTU, which served as a series of “state-run labor fronts” (Busch 2014). Thus, “trade unions had become a means for the government to spy on workers and to conscript them into military service” (Wendland, 2006).

In 1987, Saddam Hussein signed new labor laws that deeply affected the labor movement in Iraq. Two main laws stand out: (1) Decree No. 150, which transformed workers of the public sector to state servants, and (2) Decree No. 52, which banned trade unions in the public sector, restricting their organization to the private sector. This meant the end of the trade union movement in Iraq since the Ba’ath regime incorporated the unions into the state and declared that “there is no more need for trade unions, no right to strike” (Humphries, 2006). While private sector employees were authorized to establish and join their own unions, public sector workers—who form the bulk of the labor force—could no longer do so. This created a major challenge for the working class to organize and fight for its rights.

Prior to 2003, the only official trade union was the state-sanctioned General Federation of Trade Unions in Iraq (Isakhan, 2013, p.3). After the collapse of the regime in 2003, workers and unionists hastened to take advantage of the new political climate and opportunities and to reorganize and establish trade unions. These new political opportunities did not arise from a legal opening but rather from the mere collapse of the Ba’ath regime. Interestingly enough, while nearly all pre-2003 laws were abolished in Iraq after the fall of Saddam, those related to workers’ rights and trade unions survived and remained in place. Paul Bremer, chief executive of the Coalition Provisional Authority, kept the Ba’ath

⁶³ Unionist Falah Alwan makes the argument that the workers’ movement in Iraq has mainly taken the form of ‘general assembly’ and direct action, rather than traditional trade union organizations. Workers used strikes and direct mobilizations even before the establishment of trade unions. The first known workers’ strike dates back to 1876 in the city of Nasiriyah. This was long before the first unions were formed in 1927 the rail workers’ strikes. In fact, the year 1924 also saw a series of workers’ strikes in Basra outside the framework of unions. Thus, the history of workers’ struggle in Iraq preceded the formation of trade unions and the workers’ movement has often worked outside the frameworks of unions since its activism has mainly taken the form of ‘general assembly’ and direct actions in the workplace without necessarily being linked to unions or trade organizations. For more information, see: <http://www.ahewar.org/debat/show.art.asp?aid=529630>.

labor laws in place; thus, the infamous Decree No. 150 remained untouched. However, despite the legal status that still prevented workers in the public sector from organizing, several new unions and federations emerged in the aftermath of the 2003 collapse. The first union was formed by oil workers⁶⁴—in particular, thousands of workers from the national Southern Oil Company—on 20 April 2003, a day after the collapse of Saddam Hussein’s statue in Al-Ferdous square (Isakhan, 2013, p.4). Led by its president Hassan Jumaa Awwad Al-Asady, the Southern Oil Company Union (SOCU) quickly became one of the biggest and most influential unions in the country. It managed to remain independent of political parties, and it clearly stated its opposition to the US occupation and to the privatization of Iraq’s oil resources (Isakhan, 2013, p.4). According to its leader Hassan Jumma Al-Asady, the newly formed organization aimed “to protect the employees’ rights and to preserve future generations’ wealth, as well as to empower the Iraqi economy with oil revenues”.⁶⁵ Despite being officially illegal, the SOCU managed to score a number of victories during its first year of operation (Isakhan, 2013, p.5). This led many smaller oil and gas unions to join the SOCU, leading to it being renamed the General Union of Oil Employees (GUOE) in June 2004 (Isakhan, 2013, p.5). Moreover, many Iraqi political parties—especially the leftist ones—also formed their connected trade union federations after 2003. For example, unionists close to the Iraqi Communist Party⁶⁶ were the first to form a federation post-2003: the General Federation of Trade Unions in Iraq (GFTUI) was established on 16 May 2003 (Image 5). Similarly, the Workers’ Communist Party had also formed its own workers’ federations. In July 2003, the Federation of Trade Unions and Workers Councils was established, in addition to the Unemployed Union that was a short-lived (2003–2007) yet extremely interesting, experience. Moreover, the GFTU that had been under the control of the Ba’ath regime remained active under the control of an ex-Ba’ath member, Rasim Al-Awadi,⁶⁷ and “remained affiliated to the World Federation of Trades Unions (WFTU) and the ICATU” (Busch, 2014). Given its status, the GFTU still had access to its own bank account, owned many offices, and published its own newspaper (ibid.). On the other hand, a third trade union (The General Federation of Iraqi Workers, GFIW) was established by Jabar Tarish, and a fourth was established and led by Khalil al-Mashhadani under the name the General Federation of Worker’s Unions in the Republic of Iraq (GFWURI).⁶⁸ In 2005, these trade unions merged to form the General Federation of Iraqi Workers (GFIW).⁶⁹

Following the increased and effective activism of labor unions since 2003, and in the aftermath of the June 2005 strike of around 15,000 workers in Basra under the leadership of the GUOE demanding that a higher percentage of oil revenues be invested in the city, the government issued Decree No. 8750 in August 2005 in an attempt to curtail the labor movement (Isakhan, 2013, p.6).⁷⁰ The decree prohibited unions



Image 5: Entrance to the GFTUI office in Baghdad. Photo by the author.

established after 2003 from holding funds or assets, granting one exception to the General Federation of Iraqi Workers (GFIW) which, as previously explained, was created in September 2005 as merger between the previous GFTU, the GFTUI, and some new pro-government unions (Isakhan, 2013, p.6). As a result, trade unions’ assets were frozen, their bank accounts were closed, and organizing became much more difficult. The government’s restrictions on trade unions were harshly implemented, in particular in the oil industry. The oil ministry banned all unions in the oil sector; instructing oil companies not to engage with any trade union, and stating that unionists “have no right to use offices, vehicles or any other equipment” (TUC, 2007). It was not too long before trade unionists started to face multiple attacks, which sometimes amounted to threats to their personal safety. Many trade unionists and workers faced violence and terror; for example, active unionist Hadi Saleh was killed in 2005 (Muhsin & Johnson, 2006). Similarly, many unionists were kidnapped, detained, tortured or killed, and many union offices were targeted. Despite the fact that this crackdown on the labor movement was meant to limit the freedom of association and block the road for the formation of a strong labor movement in Iraq, several federations and unions have emerged and organized under the harshest conditions. For example, the GUOE continued to grow and attract oil workers and smaller unions in the south, until it became a federation of unions under the Iraqi Federation of Oil Unions (IFOU) (Isakhan, 2013, p.6). But this is not to deny the huge impact that the state and the militias had in curtailing

⁶⁴ During the author’s interview with Hassan Jumaa he explained that his trade union was revamped in 2003, but it was initially created in 1952.

⁶⁵ Interview with the author in June 2018.

⁶⁶ In addition to some ex-Ba’athists and some leftist and independent unionists.

⁶⁷ According to correspondence with one of the trade union leaders, Rasim Al-Awadi became the president of the GFTU in 2004 that was sanctioned by the governing council decree number 16.

⁶⁸ Based on authors’ correspondence with trade unionists.

⁶⁹ The GFIW was created in September 2005 in a meeting in Damascus under the auspices of the International Confederation of Arab Trade Unions (ICATU).

⁷⁰ This decree was based on the CPA Order 3 of 2004 that called for the dissolution of all existing entities (including trade unions).

the labor movement in Iraq. In fact, the oil sector trade unionists in particular faced severe penalties following their strikes in 2009–10, which has markedly affected their mobilization.

Under the premiership of Maliki (2006–14), trade unions suffered immensely. The appointment of the notorious Oil Minister Hussain Shahrastani to also act as Minister of Electricity in 2010 (in replacement of the deeply unpopular minister Karim Waheed) was a major blow to workers in both the oil and electricity sectors. Maliki needed a cabinet that was able to contain the popular discontent that had already erupted in southern Iraq since summer 2010. Upon taking office, Shahrastani issued an order to close down the electricity⁷¹ and oil unions and threatened to deploy Law No. 4 of the Terrorism Act of unionists did not abide by the order.⁷² Shahrastani's equating of unionists with terrorists by law caused serious fear amongst the workers and escalated the repression against the labor movement.⁷³ In December 2010, Maliki appointed Shahrastani—who had already proved his ability to use force and crackdown on the labor movement—as Deputy Prime Minister. At that time, the Arab uprisings had started in Tunisia, and the fear of their spread was on the mind of every Arab leader. As the 'Iraqi Spring' of 2011 started to take shape, Shahrastani escalated his crackdown on trade unions, imposing huge financial penalties on unionists who had organized strikes. Similarly, he issued Decrees No. 95 and No. 97 that ended the official recognition of the state-sanctioned GFIW, given that it had supported some of the mobilizations (Isakhan, 2013, p. 12). Shahrastani continued his systematic campaign against union activism by appointing—against the will of the unionists—a Ministerial Preparatory Committee that was charged with the supervision of Iraq's official trade sector, including the forthcoming union elections (Isakhan, 2013, p. 12). This was received with anger and frustration by trade unionists who saw in this undemocratic move the remnants of the old authoritarian regime. As a result, the Islamists within the GFIW held their own conference that was not attended by the leftists on 24 July 2012. This conference was approved by the government and was attended by a committee led by a representative of the Ministry of Labor and Social Affairs who was connected to the al-Sadr movement. The federation appointed Sattar Danbous as president and positioned itself as the only official labor federation in the country.

Shahrastani's iron grip over the labor movement continued until 2014, when he was appointed Minister of Higher Education. Since 2015, some new opportunities resurfaced for the labor movement in Iraq. An alliance between the main workers' federations (with the support of international organizations such as Solidarity Center⁷⁴) has successfully pushed for a new labor law that "allows for collective bargaining, limits child labor, improves rights for migrant workers, provides better protections against discrimination at work and is the country's first legislation to address

sexual harassment at work. The law also enshrines the right to strike, banned since 1987" (Connell, 2016). Although the Iraqi parliament voted in favor of this new law (Law No. 37 of 2015)⁷⁵ in August 2015, the law has not yet been fully implemented despite legally coming into effect in February 2016. Moreover, while the law is arguably the most progressive labor law in the Arab region, it still does not cover workers in the public sector. For this reason, a coalition of labor federations (with the exception of the GFIW) has been more recently pushing for the government to respect and implement the ratified international labor laws and to adopt a new law that guarantees the freedom of association (which would give public sector workers the legal right to organize in unions).

Thus, with regards to international commitments, the post-war governments have violated their obligations. Iraq ratified ILO Convention No. 98 which has enshrined the right of organizing and collective bargaining since 1962 (ILO, Ratifications for Iraq).⁷⁶ Moreover, trade unionists demanded that Iraq ratify ILO convention No. 87 on the Freedom of Association and Protection of the Rights to Organise Convention of 1948. As previously explained, the Iraqi government has attempted, like the previous regime, to impose one centralized trade union as the formal and legal one that represents all workers, depriving workers from forming their unions independently and freely. This brought many trade unions together to defend their right to organize separately, lobbying the Iraqi government to allow the workers to create their own unions and to organize in the public sector. However, it was only on 20 November 2017 that the House of Representatives voted in favour of a draft law that allows the Republic of Iraq to join the Freedom of Association and Protection of the Right to Organize Convention No. 87 of 1948.⁷⁷ This newly passed law is expected to come into force on 1 June 2019.⁷⁸ Thus, the debate over the legality of unions in the public sector is expected to come to an end in the coming year, especially that most of the federations have focused their activism and energy in the past years on gaining the legal right to organize in the public sector given the hostile environment they have been operating in since 2003.

After more than a decade and half of labor activism, trade unionism in Iraq is still a controversial issue. While Article No. 22 of the constitution, on 'Economic,

⁷¹ For more information, see: <https://www.al-nnas.com/ARTICLE/SKuba/27eng5.htm?f-bclid=IwAR2kbbiaM4615vEjYDgPdnaxcB-5ebHZx7LmVfxXshQf3HcNc3BHyyX9zeY>.

⁷² For more information, see: <http://burathaneews.com/arabic/news/99598?fbclid=IwAR0SazEz9ev0f0II9EGBhtvEuAb1iGxvnp8ejZIDwVCF5qfL85HKla75Tbs>.

⁷³ For more information, see: http://www.m.ahewar.org/s.asp?aid=223999&r=0&fbclid=IwAR2ULu5U8aqqN_226xGNglbTsYBly_gOvJqSaej2pU-d8ieR_ck6g_rWw.

⁷⁴ According to Butler (2015), the Solidarity Center has been working with the Iraqi federations since 2012 on drafting this new law.

⁷⁵ For more information, see: <https://www.internationallawoffice.com/Newsletters/Employment-Benefits/Iraq/Hannouche-Associates/New-Iraqi-Labor-Law-372015-comparative-table>.

⁷⁶ For more information, see: https://www.ilo.org/dyn/normlex/en/f?p=NORMLEX-PUB:11200:0::NO::P11200_COUNTRY_ID:102974.

⁷⁷ For more information, see: <http://www.industriall-union.org/iraqi-parliament-approves-ratification-of-ilo-convention-87>.

⁷⁸ For more information, see: https://www.ilo.org/dyn/normlex/en/f?p=1000:11200:0::NO:11200:P11200_COUNTRY_ID:102974.

Social and Cultural Freedoms', states that "the State shall guarantee the right to form and join unions and professional associations, and this shall be regulated by law" (Iraqi Constitution, 2005, p.11), Iraq still lacks a legal framework that meets International Labor Organization (ILO) standards. However, and despite the vague areas of law, trade unions in Iraq do exist on both left-wing and right-wing sides, as well as within Islamic and secular circles. On the left-wing side of the spectrum, they share more or less similar aims: raising working-class people's awareness about their rights through educational sessions and workshops, contributing to the proposal of new labor laws, fighting privatization, and lobbying the state to issue acceptable labor laws and to protect labor rights. Today, there are at least eleven main federations of trade unions in Iraq: three in Kurdistan, and eight in the rest of Iraq. Six of the eight federations outside Kurdistan have recently (in 2018) formed a new coalition to push through the legal barrier and coordinate their activism.

Given the crucial role played by trade unions in post-2003 Iraqi politics from below, the following chapter details the main actors in the labor movement, their main demands and their main challenges based on further research and fieldwork conducted with Iraqi unionists in 2018.

THE MASS PROTEST MOVEMENT IN IRAQ: WAVES OF 2011, 2015, AND 2018

The seismic outbreak of the Arab uprisings in December 2010 in Tunisia spread over the whole region, reaching different countries with varying intensities and effects. Iraq was no exception. While protests against the lack of electricity, rising unemployment rates, and the stark corruption had already been held since the fall of the Ba'ath regime (becoming particularly large in summer 2010) (Shadid, 2010), Iraq's 2011 mass movement came as a continuation of these earlier protests but with the renewed energy and the high hopes of the Arab uprisings. In fact, following the protests of summer 2010 in Basra and the resignation of the Electricity Minister (who was succeeded by Shahrastani), the Minister of Interior introduced new regulations that made it very difficult to obtain authorization for a protest (Amnesty International, 2011). However, with the revolutionary wave of 2011 sweeping the region, Iraqis defied the legal restrictions and took to the streets in huge numbers. In late January 2011,⁷⁹ protests started to gather in Baghdad in support of the Arab uprisings. This quickly escalated into a mass movement that spread all over the country, including Kurdistan. Protesters across region, sect, and ethnicity were making the same clear demands: electricity, clean water, jobs, and an end to corruption and the sectarian-based quota system (known as *muhasassa*). While the protests were not initiated by political parties or organizations, several leftist groups, civil society organizations, and labor unions joined in and called on others to participate. Similarly inspired by the Arab uprisings,

people in the Kurdistan Region of Iraq also took to the streets on 17 February 2011, demanding that the regional government of Kurdistan end the economic monopolies and human rights violations, and calling for social and economic justice and the democratization of the political system (Hassan, 2015, p.14). On 25 February 2011, protesters mobilized in their thousands on a 'Day of Rage' that ravaged the streets of most main cities in Iraq (including the mainly Shia center and south, the mainly Sunni west, and the Kurdistan region) against the government's failure to provide basic services (El Hefi, 2017, p.224). Amnesty International (2011) reported that the use of violence and repression against protesters led to at least 23 people being killed and hundreds more injured and arrested (McCrummen, 2011). At that time, the organization of the movement took the shape of coordination committees formed of individual activists or small organizations who used social media to mobilize people and coordinate the protests. Inspired by the Arab uprisings of the time, the 'Iraqi Spring' of 2011 (Abdel Jabbar & Abdel Hussain, 2017, p.25) gathered protesters every Friday for more than ten months, despite the violence and threats. Under street pressure, several provincial governors resigned, and Prime Minister Nouri Maliki was pressed to make concessions (Ottaway & Kaysi, 2011). On 27 February 2011, he announced that his government had one hundred days to address protesters' demands (Mohammed, 2011; Yehya, 2017, p.21). He made economic promises such as the creation of 288,000 jobs, the distribution of 15,000 dinars (i.e. \$15) monthly to each citizen as a food subsidy, and the halving of his own salary (of approximately \$350,000) (Ottaway & Kaysi, 2011). Maliki also promised to solve the electricity shortage problem by winter, through a plan to privatize it. Moreover, Maliki made some political concessions such as announcing that he will not be staying for a third term.⁸⁰ Despite these concessions, the protests continued and remained largely non-sectarian. They rather focused on demands related to people's everyday living conditions. However, the number of protesters started to dwindle with time (partly because of repression), and the demands of some protests started to shift as new players emerged on the scene. For example, the Shia cleric Muqtada al-Sadr "who returned to Iraq in January 2011, prohibited his followers from joining anti-government protests in February 2011".⁸¹ However, between May and September of the same year, al-Sadr mobilized hundreds of thousands of his constituency on several occasions either to denounce the US occupation or to condemn the government of al-Maliki (Gowen, 2011). By that time, the movement started to decline in the

⁷⁹ The first post-Arab uprising protest took place in late January 2011 at al-Firdous Square in Baghdad under the slogan "We are also Egyptians" (Abdel Jabbar & Abdel Hussain, 2017, p.25).

⁸⁰ This also came following the growing pressure by the Shia clerics, especially Ayatollah Sistani, to sideline Maliki (Abdel Jabbar & Abdel Hussain, 2017, p.36).

⁸¹ For more information, see: <http://web.stanford.edu/group/mappingmilitants/cgi-bin/groups/view/57>.

streets, despite some smaller mobilizations in various provinces.

The years 2012 and 2013 saw broad mobilizations in the predominantly Sunni western region, namely al-Anbar (see Appendix 4) (International Crisis Group, 2013), motivated by high unemployment rates and the economic crisis, in addition to the sectarian grievances linked to marginalization by the Maliki government (Yehya, 2017, p.21). At that time, Moqtada al-Sadr, a leading Shia cleric, supported the mobilizations of the predominantly Sunni al-Anbar governorate against his fellow Shia, yet rival, Prime Minister Nouri Maliki (Al-Marashi, 2016). If anything, this shows how analyzing Iraq through a Sunni–Shia prism fails to capture the real political dynamics of intra-sectarian divides. Similarly, during that time the Kurdistan region was also witnessing protests over the regional government’s failure to pay the salaries of public sector employees. These protest movements were spontaneous, and were also met with violent repression by the government (Yehya, 2017, p.21). Although little coordination seems to have taken place between activists in Iraqi Kurdistan and the rest of Iraq, protesters were making very similar demands related to the deteriorating socio-economic conditions. Demonstrators in Kurdistan expressed an range of grievances, most prominently their sense of political and economic marginalization under the Shia-led Maliki government in Baghdad. However, the 2014 invasion of ISIL, the fall of Mosul and the subsequent war, in addition to the dramatic fall in oil prices came as a blow to the movement. These catastrophic events became the national priority at the higher levels, therefore curtailing street mobilization despite the worsening living conditions.

However, despite the war and the political-sectarian tensions, a new wave of mass protests erupted again in summer 2015. As with the previous waves of mobilization, the movement started spontaneously and quickly spread throughout the country. This time, the magnitude and scale of the protests were unprecedented (Abdel Jabbar & Abdel Hussain, 2017, p.29). In mid-July 2015, protests broke out in the oil-rich southern city of Basra against power outages during the sizzling summer heat (Abdel Jabbar, 2018). Once again the protests were met with violence and repression. An 18-year-old protester, Muntadhar Ali Ghani al-Hilfi, was shot dead by a security patrol on 16 July 2015 during a gathering in front of the Basra power plant. Two other protesters were seriously wounded (Abdel Jabbar & Abdel Hussain, 2017, p.27). This was the spark that ignited the protest movement of 2015 that spread to Baghdad and most of the central and southern parts of the country—mainly the Shia majority cities⁸² (see Appendix 4)—under the famous slogan *Bismil deen baguna al-haramiya* (In the name of religion the thieves have robbed us). By end of July 2015, tens of thousands of protesters were gathering every Friday in the capital’s Tahrir Square. These numbers kept on rising with the number of protesters reaching hundreds of thousands (if not one million) in September 2015

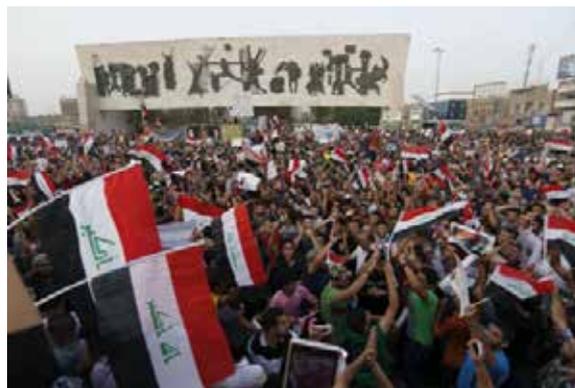


Image 6: Iraqi flags raised in Tahrir Square in Baghdad on 7 August 2015. Photo source: REUTERS/Thaier Al-Sudani.

(see Appendix 3). The national flag was widely used as a symbol of Iraqi national identity superseding any sectarian identity (Image 6). According to Iraqi Marxist thinker Faleh Abdel Jabbar (2018), these protests marked a clear shift from what he called “identity politics” to “issue politics”. He posits that while the Iraqi political scene has been dominated by sectarian and identity-based politics since 2003, the protests of 2015 formed a turning point where political attention became focused on socio-economic demands (redistribution) rather than identities (representation). While power in post-2003 Iraq mainly lies in the hands of Shia politicians, the 2015 uprising of the predominantly Shia regions denoted a clear divide between these politicians and their constituencies. This is especially important in the context of the protest movements that had developed in the western and northern part of the country since 2012 and that took on a sectarian overtone given that these predominantly Sunni areas were rising against a central government dominated by Shia politicians. This time, protesters from Shia-dominated regions were creating anti-sectarian slogans, accusing the sectarian leaders of corruption, and demanding basic rights related to electricity, jobs, and water.

Protesters were also very aware of the role played by religious leaders (or their representatives) in the staggering corruption taking place in the country, and thus devised their famous slogan against the theft of the country’s resources in the name of religion. Iraq’s senior Shia cleric, Grand Ayatollah Sistani, tacitly recognized the demands of the protesters as just and called on the government to address people’s grievances (Yehya, 2017, p.22). However, it was repeatedly reported that Sistani and his entourage were skeptical of some of the slogans that were often interpreted as being too radical⁸³ or too secularist

⁸² As per Abdel Jabbar and Abdel Hussain (2017, p.27), “The movement has grown geographically to include the cities of Baghdad, Hilla, Najaf, Karbala, Diwaniya, Kut, Amara, Nasiriya along with the city of origin, Basra. Thus, it has come to cover all the Shiite provinces as well as the two mixed provinces of Baghdad and Basra that have Shiite majorities”.

⁸³ As noted by Yehya (2017, p.22), Sistani was encouraging the protesters to adopt a reformist line, instead of the radical one. This was especially true when it came to some separatist demands that were repeatedly made by activists in the oil-rich city of Basra.

(Abdel Jabbar & Abdel Hussain, 2017, p.36). In fact, another main slogan that took over the chants and the placards in Tahrir Square was *Ilmanieh, Ilmanieh, la Sunnieh, la Shieeh* (Secularism, Secularism! Neither Shia nor Sunni!). Even in the religious Shia city of Najaf, activists were using clearly secular and anti-sectarian slogans (Abdel Jabbar & Abdel Hussain, 2017, p.36). This non-religious and non-sectarian outlook of the protest movement of 2015 posed a real challenge to Shia clerics and politicians who were faced with the mounting discontent of their own constituencies. In fact, Yehya (2017, p.23) argues that the Shia cleric Muqtada al-Sadr decided to join the protests later in 2015, in an attempt to 'hijack' the movement and contain the Shia dissatisfaction by "reinventing himself as a leader of reform", as one of the protest organizers put it. This move was made possible through an alliance with the Iraqi Communist Party, the main party behind the biggest coordination committee in Baghdad: *Mustameroun* (roughly translated as 'Continuing') (Aldouri. 2017). This Sadrist-Communist alliance came at the cost of a division within the movement between those who saw a good opportunity in building bridges with the Sadrists, and those who insisted on the secular and non-sectarian nature of the movement and who refused to ally themselves with al-Sadr, who was seen as a main figure of corruption in Iraq. The latter group ended up splitting from the Mustameroun committee, and reorganizing themselves in a new coordination committee under the name Madanioun (or 'civil activists') (Aldouri. 2017). In the Iraqi context, the word 'civil' is often used as a substitute for the word 'secular', given the sensitivities that secularism might cause in terms of being understood as an attack on religions. Thus, ever since the Sadrist-Communist alliance came into place in early 2016, the movement has taken a new path with a focus on political demands that are not directly linked to the initial demands raised in summer 2015. A smaller committee was formed in order to meet with government officials and represent the demands of the protesters. One of my interviewees highlighted that some demands which had never been raised previously by the protesters during the first nine months of the movement—such as changing the members of the Election High Commission, for example—came to be among the main demands of this newly born alliance. Commentators such as Abdel Jabbar (2018) saw in this shift to more political demands a sign of maturity on behalf of the protesters and the representing committee; while others such as Yehya (2017) considered it a hijacking of the movement. However, despite the many promises made by the government to the protesters' representative committee, very few have seen the light. In April 2016, the street mobilizations escalated again when protesters, mainly led by the Sadrists, entered the Green Zone in Baghdad and stormed parliament. This move was seen by many analysts as a "show of force" on the side of al-Sadr (Yehya, 2017, p.30). As with the

previous wave of mobilization, the protest movement of 2015 declined in 2016 with few effective changes being implemented. However, the alliance of the communists with the Sadrists created a new political platform that developed and matured in 2018, when the two parties ran together for elections under the Sa'iroun list to win the biggest bloc in parliament.

Less than a month after the elections and the victory of *Sa'iroun*, mass protests erupted once again in summer 2018, in what looked similar to the 2015 protest movement. Again the protests started in Basra, because of electricity outages⁸⁴ and continuing unemployment. Very quickly, the protests turned violent, with police opening fire on demonstrators and arresting activists.⁸⁵ While the events of 2018 are still unfolding at the time of writing, one clear shift from the previous protests is that this time, neither the Sadrists nor any other religious or sectarian side has been able to contain, hijack, or make claims on behalf of the movement. Even the communist party and the previous coordination committees have had a very limited role in the current mobilizations. However, like the 2015 wave, the 2018 protests have been so far concentrated in the Shia-majority regions, especially in the south, with some protests gathering in Baghdad's Tahrir Square in support of the movement in the south. The demands for jobs, water, electricity, and an end of corruption and of the sectarian quota system (*muhasassa*) have radicalized. For protesters, this has now become a matter of dignity and survival.

Given the importance of this movement and the crucial role it is playing in shaping the progressive political scene in Iraq, a closer look at these protests, their main actors, their main demands and their challenges is provided in Chapter 5. It delves into the mass protests of 2015 based on research and fieldwork conducted in 2018, in the hope that this will help us understand the broader processes of contentious politics that have been unfolding in Iraq since 2011.

⁸⁴ It is said that Iran had "suddenly" decreased its energy supply to the region this summer, which led to more power outage thus leading to the mass protests. (<https://www.aljazeera.com/indepth/features/iraq-protests-180717074846746.html>)

⁸⁵ For more information, please check: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Ru-BYHyYwXfI&feature=share>

CHAPTER 3: CASE STUDY 1: THE LABOR MOVEMENT AND TRADE UNIONS IN IRAQ

This chapter discusses the formation and development of the labor movement in Iraq, with a focus on the post-2003 period. While we acknowledge that the labor movement in Iraq is broader than the activism of trade unions *per se*, and that workers have historically organized and mobilized in different shapes and forms, this chapter's focus remains on trade unions and federations specifically. It provides a timeline of the main events that have shaped union activism in Iraq, in addition to a mapping of the main union federations active in Iraq today. This is followed by a discussion of some fieldwork findings related to the labor movement's main goals, achievements, and challenges since 2011. It is important to note here that the chapter does not cover the labor movement in the Kurdistan region of Iraq.

TIMELINE OF THE LABOR MOVEMENT IN IRAQ

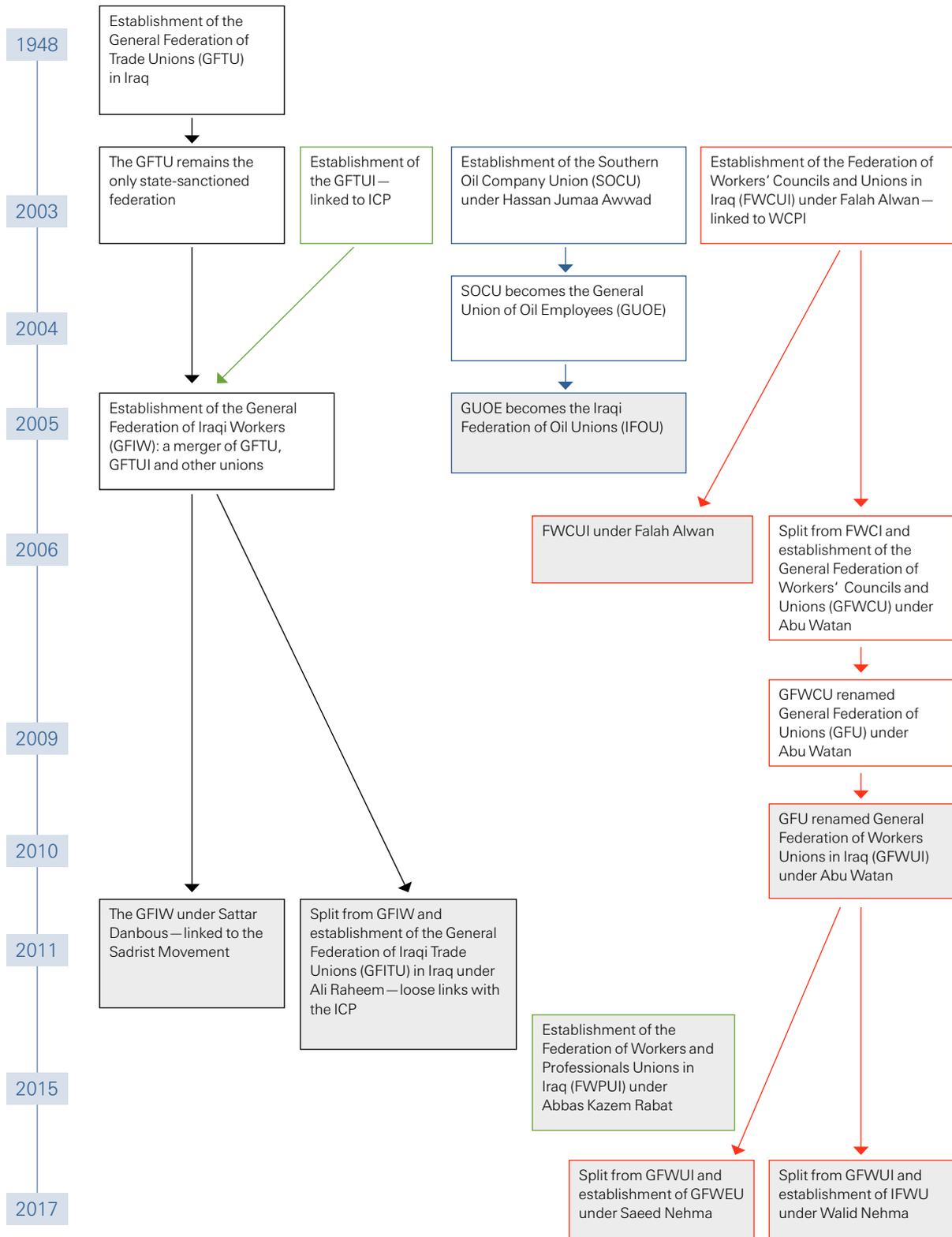
While an overview of the history of the labor unions in Iraq has been provided in Chapter 3, a brief timeline of the main events related to the development of the labor

movement in Iraq can help illuminate our discussion and put it into a broader context (Figure 1). It is also crucial to start our discussion with a reminder of the economic structures that shape the Iraqi labor force. As previously explained (in Chapter 2), Iraq's economy mainly relies on oil revenues, although this sector employs only around 1 percent of the labor force. Similarly, the country's productive sectors (such as industry and agriculture) have been badly hit after 2003, which means that the Iraqi economy suffers from a serious lack of diversification. The bulk of the country's labor force is currently either in the informal sector, underemployed, or unemployed. Moreover, of those employed, the majority is in the public sector (or in the mixed public-private sector as with many oil or electricity employees), while the private sector remains weak and unable to absorb a high number of workers. This structure of the labor market, combined with the fact that public sector workers have been legally prohibited from unionizing since 1987, poses serious questions related to labor organization and the role of unions and federations in Iraq today.

Figure 1: Labor Unions Timeline

Pre-1927	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> – The first known workers’ strike dates back to 1876 in the city of Nasiriyah. Several other workers’ strikes and direct actions occurred prior to the establishment of unions.
1927	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> – Establishment of the first union by rail workers
1948	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> – Establishment of the first nationwide trade union federation: the General Federation of Trade Unions (GFTU)
1958–1959	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> – Qassem’s revolution and overthrow of British-backed monarchy in 1958 – Unions affiliated with the ICP become very influential under Qassem, and organize one of the biggest May Day celebrations in the country in 1959
1968	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> – The Ba’ath party comes to power – The GFTU becomes a state-sanctioned “yellow federation”
1979	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> – Saddam Hussein seizes power
1987	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> – Saddam Hussein signs a new labor Law including Laws No. 52 and No. 150, transforming public sector workers into employees and banning them from organizing in unions
2003	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> – US-led invasion of Iraq: collapse of Saddam’s regime – No change in labor law under the CPA; public sector unions remain prohibited – The GFTU remains the only state-sanctioned federation – Re-establishment of the Iraqi Federation of Oil Unions (first named SOCU, then GUOE, then IFOU) – Establishment of the General Federation of Trade Unions in Iraq (GFTUI); it is linked to the Iraqi Communist Party – Establishment of the Federation of Workers Councils and Unions in Iraq (FWCUI) and of the Unemployed Union of Iraq; both are linked to the Workers’ Communist Party of Iraq (WCPI)
2003–2004	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> – Very active and strong labor movement, making several gains and expanding rapidly
2005	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> – Government issues Decree No. 8750, reaffirming the illegality of labor organization in the public sector – Establishment of the only state-sanctioned federation following Decree No. 8750: the GFIW (a merger between the GFTU, the GFTUI, and other smaller unions)
2006	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> – Hussein Shahrstani appointed Minister of Oil: crackdown on unions reinforced (until 2014) – Establishment of the General Federation of Workers’ Councils and Unions (GFWCU), a split from the FWCUI. This was later (in 2010) renamed the General Federation of Workers’ Unions in Iraq (GFWUI)
2010	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> – Mass protests erupt in Basra against electricity cuts resulting in the resignation of the Minister of Electricity and the appointment of Shahrstani as acting Minister of Electricity (in addition to being Minister of Oil); as a result, the crackdown on unions expands
2011	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> – Shahrstani issues Decrees No. 95 and 97 ending the official recognition of the GFIW and establishing a Ministerial Preparatory Committee to oversee unions’ elections
2012	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> – Division of the GFIW leading to the formation of the General Federation of Iraqi Trade Unions (GFITU), which is loosely linked to the Iraqi Communist Party, while the GFIW remains under Sadrist control
2015	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> – New labor law (Law No. 37 of 2015) voted in parliament after years of lobbying by union federations. This law is considered one of the most progressive labor laws in the Arab region. It comes into effect in February 2016 but is still not widely applied – Establishment of the Federation of Independent Workers and Professionals Unions in Iraq (FIWPUI)
2017	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> – In November parliament votes in favor of convention No. 87/1948, allowing freedom of association (this convention is expected to come into effect in June 2019, allowing public sector workers to legally form unions) – Further divisions within the unions’ federations lead to the birth of two new federations: 1) On 20 February 2017, the General Federation of Workers & Employees’ Unions in Iraq (GFWEU) is established under the leadership of Said Nehma; 2) on 30 December 2017, the Iraqi Federation of Workers’ Unions (IFWU) is established under the leadership of Walid Nehma Fares

Mapping of the Labour Movement in Iraq



MAPPING THE LABOR MOVEMENT IN IRAQ TODAY

As shown in the above diagram, there are eight main federations (highlighted in grey) operating in Iraq today (in addition to three main labor federations in Iraqi Kurdistan):

1. The General Federation of Iraqi Workers under the leadership of Sattar Dandous⁸⁶ (linked to the Sadrist movement and the only official federation in Iraq today)
2. The General Federation of Iraqi Trade Unions under the leadership of Ali Raheem (loosely linked to the Iraqi Communist Party⁸⁷)
3. The Iraqi Federation of Oil Unions led by Hassan Jumaa Awwad Al-Asady
4. The Federation of Workers' Councils and Unions under Falah Alwan (previously linked to the WCPI, since 2018 linked to the OCAI)
5. The General Federation of Workers' Unions in Iraq led by Abu Watan
6. The Federation of Workers and Professionals Unions in Iraq under the leadership of Abbas Kazem Rabat
7. The General Federation of Workers and Employees Union led by Saeed Nehma
8. The Iraqi Federation of Workers' Unions led by Walid Nehma Fares.

In 2018, six out of the eight main workers' federations created a coalition in order to push for the ratification of the law allowing freedom of association. The two federations that are not in this coalition are the state-sanctioned General Federation of Iraqi Workers (given its position against this law, which if passed would mean it was no longer the only official federation), and the Iraqi Federation of Workers' Unions (given the personal rift that took place in 2018 between Walid Nehma Fares and several of the other union leaders).

In the following, I discuss the main findings from the fieldwork in Iraq based on the focus group with ten union leaders, in addition to 14 in-depth interviews.

LEGAL REFORM AS A PRIORITY

The goals and priorities of the labor unions and their federations in Iraq are many, and their priorities have shifted over time according to historical developments. In the post-2003 period, labor unions have focused their activism around seven main goals, as stated by their leaders during the focus group discussion:

1. Passing a new law that guarantees freedom of association, thus legalizing the unionization of workers in the public sector. This has been a top priority for most union federations in Iraq in recent years.
2. Protecting and promoting the rights and interests of Iraqi workers: including the fight for better pay and better working conditions (especially in terms of safety and security), a fair and just social security plan, a good pension plan, and a necessary health insurance plan.
3. Raising awareness and educating the working class on the importance of union organization and on their rights within existing labor laws.

4. Recruiting more workers into the unions.
5. Involving more women and young people in union activism.
6. Being involved in drawing up economic policies and plans at the national level.
7. Fighting privatization and assuring a wise management of Iraq's wealth (this is especially relevant for unions and federations working in the oil sector).

While all the above stated goals were mentioned as important and crucial to the work and activism of labor unions and their federations in Iraq, one goal was often mentioned as the most pressing priority at this point: a legal reform to guarantee freedom of association, thus officially allowing unionization in the public sector. While it is understandable that legal protection would help unionists put forward their demands within the public sector, the prospects of implementing laws in a country where militia rule is heavily predominant and the judicial system is widely believed to be corrupt are questionable. However, as explained by one of the federation's leaders: "the law has been used against us repeatedly to curb our activism. How many of us have suffered pay cuts and have been taken to court because of our labor activism? Passing a law would at least prevent the government from using the legal stick against us."

Moreover, it is clear that most workers' federations are concerned with the broader economic policies in the country and are lobbying to preserve the country's wealth and fight privatization. This reflects their rejection of neoliberal policies that attempt to privatize national wealth and sideline the labor movement. In an interview with a main unionist from the oil sector, he explained: "this is the wealth of the next generations, as unionists and as workers our role is also political, we have to fight against the selling of our resources to private British, American, Russian or other foreign companies.... This is what the occupation of Iraq was about, and we saw it from the very start but the government did not listen to us, and it proceeded to give contracts to these companies!"

It is also worth noting that most stated goals of the main federations focus mainly on Iraqi workers and not the working class in Iraq more generally. This means that migrant workers are not part of the main goals and aims of the labor movement in Iraq today. Similarly, the leaders of the federations mentioned the importance of including more women and youth in their activism, however none of the federations are led by a woman despite the important role played by women unionists in the working class. These observations indicate that while the workers' federations in Iraq are trying

⁸⁶ Jabbar Tareh was leader of the GFIW between 2006 and 2012. In 2012, Sattar Danbous took over. A feud over power erupted in 2017 between the two men. Sattar Danbous emerged victorious and remains in his leadership position of the GFIW.
⁸⁷ Although Ali Raheem is not a member of the ICP, most unionists in my sample mentioned some links between the GFITU and the ICP. For example, the ICP secretary Raed Fahmi and other leading members of the ICP attended the third conference of the GFITU held on 31 March 2018.

to promote and protect the rights of workers, their immediate priorities are still focused on legalizing their very existence as unions, and their main understanding of the working class remains mostly nationalist in its focus on Iraqi workers first and foremost.

VICTORIES AGAINST THE ODDS

Between 2003 and 2005, the labor movement in Iraq became extremely active, especially in the oil sector and in the oil-rich city of Basra. Oil workers' unions were able to stage several strikes and sit-ins to fight the plans to 'privatize' Iraq's oil and to push against US control of the oil industry through private companies (Bacon, 2007). The mobilization of the oil workers in the early days of the US-led invasion of Iraq played a major role in instigating the public and highlighting the imperialist role of the US (and its allies) in controlling Iraq's oil sector through international private companies. The direct actions of the oil unions in the first two years following the US occupation turned out to be very effective on several occasions. For example, as noted by Bader-Blau (2007), "as early as August 2003, Iraqi oil unions were confronting companies that undermined oil workers' wage and work standards. Kellogg Brown and Root (KBR), a division of Halliburton, had been awarded a contract to repair and assess oil facilities to the south of Basra. The Iraqi Federation of Oil Unions staged a strike that ultimately kept KBR from replacing Iraqi workers with imported labor and secured raises for union members".

Several similar wins were scored in the early days of the labor movements in Iraq in the aftermath of the US-led invasion. Moreover, these labor mobilizations also played a major role in turning public opinion against the Iraqi cabinet and the Ministry of Oil, especially after 2006 when the ministry decided to grant multinational companies long-term contracts and licenses to operate in Iraq and extract oil. Iraqi unions saw in the decision a clear attack on the rights of the Iraqi people who should be the owners of the country's oil riches according to the constitution. When the country is suffering from high rates of unemployment, destruction and poverty, Iraqi unions considered that the revenues of oil should be a priority for the Iraqi people. Bader-Blau (2007) notes that a December 2006 joint statement by several unions indicated that "Iraqi public opinion strictly opposes the handing of authority and control over the oil to foreign companies that aim to make big profits at the expense of the people and to rob Iraq's national wealth by virtue of unfair, long-term oil contracts that undermine the sovereignty of the state and the dignity of the Iraqi people". As the labor movement in the oil sector became more and more powerful and central in shaping public opinion, crackdowns on unionists started to increase. Maliki came to power in 2006 and brought with him Shahrstani as Minister of Oil. The crackdown on union activists became severe from then on, with the government moving towards more privatization and more contracts

with multinational companies (Bacon, 2013).⁸⁸ Leaders from the oil sector in the labor movement have been arrested and persecuted, while the US military forces have played an important role in suppressing dissent in the oil sector and protecting international companies (ibid.). However, despite the repression and the severe conditions under which the labor movement is operating in Iraq, unionists managed to mobilize in the face of international oil companies and governments promoting privatization and neoliberal policies.

The main achievements of the labor movement in Iraq are in the legal sector. Labor activism since 2005 has focused on ratifying labor laws, especially as existing laws are the only remnants of the previous regime in Iraq's new constitution and legal reforms. The adoption of Law 37/2015 formed a breakthrough for workers and unions in Iraq. The law was first proposed in 2005 and it has been supported by several international labor organizations. It ratified the labor law that, among other things, enshrines the right to strike, prohibits child labor, provides the opportunity to organize contractual workers, addresses sexual harassment in the workplace, and fights discrimination. Although this law is considered to be one of the most progressive labor laws in the Arab region, it still did not guarantee the freedom of association of public sector workers. Therefore, unionists have focused all their efforts since 2015 on introducing a new law that would enshrine the right to free association and allow public sector workers to legally organize in their unions and federations. This activism and the pressure created by the labor movement in the past few years has recently led the Iraqi parliament to vote in favor of a draft law to join the Freedom of Association and Protection of the Right to Organize Convention No. 87 of 1948.⁸⁹ It is expected that this law will come into effect in 2020, thus ratifying the labor law and finally legalizing the unionization of public sector workers.

These are just a few examples to illustrate the importance of the labor movement in Iraq and its ability to pressure the government and to steer the ship in favor of workers and their rights. While these achievements are crucial in Iraq's contemporary history, the difficulties and challenges facing the labor movement today remain numerous.

CHALLENGES FACING THE LABOR MOVEMENT TODAY

The burgeoning labor movement that took shape in Iraq following the fall of Saddam Hussein's regime in 2003 had to face the many obstacles and challenges of organizing in the context of occupation, war, political instability, and the increasing neoliberalization of the economy. Therefore, as highlighted by the leaders of

⁸⁸ As noted by Bacon (2013), "The Ministry of Oil technically still owns the oil, but functions more as the multinationals' adjunct, while stripping workers of their rights".

⁸⁹ For more information, see: <http://www.industrial-union.org/iraqi-parliament-approves-ratification-of-ilo-convention-87>.

the main workers' federations, the challenges facing the labor movement in Iraq today are numerous.

1 Legal Barriers: Most unionists (with the exception of the state-sanctioned GFIW) consider the main obstacle facing the labor movement in Iraq today to be the legal prohibition of organization in the public sector, especially as the majority of Iraqi workers in the formal sector are employed by the state. As previously explained, Decree No. 150 of 1987 transformed all public sector workers into employees and prohibited them from unionizing. This decree was one of the very few laws that survived from the Ba'ath era in post-2003 Iraq. Unionists consider that the CPA and the subsequent Iraqi governments have tried as hard as the Ba'ath regime (if not harder) to control workers and deprive them of their rights. While unions and federations have emerged and effectively operated in the public sector (especially in the oil, gas, and electricity sectors) after 2003 despite being 'illegal', workers and unionists remain under constant threat of severe punishment and brutal treatment. The crackdown on the labor movement started as early as 2003, however it escalated in 2006 after Maliki came to power, and it reached a peak in 2011 when legal action against workers and unionists took place, in addition to brutal attacks targeting unionists. The Minister of Oil, Hussain Shahrستاني, threatened to use Law No. 4 of the Terrorism Act if unionists did not abide by his orders. In February 2011, Shahrستاني "issued official penalties of around \$50,000 US each to several refinery employees for having delayed production for less than 24 hours in order to protest conditions and pay (Minister of Oil, 2011). Such figures are exorbitant by international standards and impossible to pay for average Iraqis: the daily wage for skilled labor is around \$10 per day, unskilled labor as low as \$4.50. Similar fines were also issued to organizers of a combined IFOU and GFIW protest of more than 300 oil sector employees outside SOC headquarters in May 2011. They rallied against the deep-seated corruption among management and demanded their pay-rate match that of employees of foreign oil companies (Ikhasan, 2013, p.12). A member of the Iraqi Federation of Oil Unions recounted those events during the interview saying: "Around 13 workers and unionists from our federation were legally prosecuted because of their participation in a two hours' strike in the Basra refinery. They were fined huge amounts of money: some had fines of 34 million Iraqi Dinars, while another group was fined with 75 million Iraqi Dinars with a year imprisonment. Among those fined 34 million Iraqi Dinars was the vice president of our federation! We are now trying to use our connections with the new Oil Minister to waive those fines given that there is clear injustice in this case." Similarly, the punishment of active unionists was not only financial but also social. As noted by Bacon (2013), "many of the union's elected officers have been transferred from jobs they'd held for years to

remote locations far from their families, in an effort to break up its structure and punish activists". Therefore, the use of the law against workers and unionists has led the leadership of the labor movement in Iraq to focus its activism on ratifying the labor law in order to protect their organizations and their collective efforts at enhancing workers' rights.

2 Militia Rule and Political Instability: Another major challenge to the labor movement in post-2003 Iraq has been the threat of militias and the lack of stability. Many unionists clearly spoke of the real threat and danger posed by militias in places where there is an active and strong labor movement. One unionist explained that militias are the instrument deployed by the capitalist class (that often overlaps with the ruling political class) to curb the workers' movement and to advance the interests of the ruling elites and foreign companies at the expense of the Iraqi people. Attacks on leaders in the labor movement by militias date back to January 2005 when Hadi Salih, a prominent unionist, was tortured and killed in front of his wife (Bader-Blau, 2007). In fact, the first four years following the fall of the Ba'ath regime witnessed the killing of more than 37 labor leaders, most of which were targeted assassinations carried out by militias (Bader-Blau, 2007). On 11 January 2007 for example, eight oil engineers—all members of the Federation of Workers' Councils and Unions in Iraq—were on their way to a press conference to criticize the oil law when they were abducted by militia gunmen. Later on, four of those engineers were found dead (Bader-Blau, 2007).

In addition to the threat of militias and their negative effect on the labor movement in Iraq, political instability and the high turnover in cabinet and in governmental employees also had its share in obfuscating the effectiveness of the unions and their federations. Negotiations with the government and promises made by official leaders became completely futile in the context of political instability marked by either high turnover rates in ministerial positions or long periods of vacancies, as was the case in 2018 following the parliamentary elections and the failure to swiftly appoint a new cabinet. These constant changes and delays have a negative impact on trade union activism.

3 Unions Without Workers? While the numbers of workers enlisted in unions and federations remain disputed, interviews with the leaders of federations⁹⁰ suggest that each federation represents between 3,000 and 11,000 workers. Unionists have highlighted the important work they are doing in terms of trying to broaden their bases, but they have also mentioned the difficulties of recruiting workers into unions. The truth is that most Iraqi workers today are not organized in unions or associations. The reasons behind this inability of trade unions to attract most workers and organize them are

⁹⁰ Interviews were conducted with all federations' leaders except the GFIW.

both endogenous and exogenous. Given the structure of the Iraqi labor market and the fact that most workers are in the informal sector and most of the youth are either underemployed (the precariat) or unemployed, the focus of unions and federations on the formal sectors and on the officially employed workers means that a big portion of workers are neglected. One important initiative attempted to fill this void and managed to attract and organize a big number of members: the Union of the Unemployed in Iraq. However, it was harshly repressed by the US administration in Iraq and could only survive for a few years after 2003 (see Chapter 3). In addition to overlooking a big section of the workers and to neglecting the importance of organizing the precariat and the unemployed, the labor movement in Iraq is very much centered around the oil and energy sectors, which only employ a small percentage of the labor force. Moreover, unionists acknowledged that in many cases workers are uninterested in the broader legal battles they are waging (especially in the past few years) and they would only mobilize when their direct individual interests are threatened. This leads us to a broader exogenous obstacle that is not peculiar to Iraq. Organized union activism (like party activism) is in decline almost everywhere in the world given the rise of individualism with the advancement of capitalism and neoliberalism. Organizing collectively over long periods of time beyond moments of short mobilizations and direct action is becoming a real challenge. Add to this the specific context of Iraq where war, militia rule, and instability make the cost of participation in union activism even higher. The unionists interviewed also mentioned the lack of trust in unions, especially given the fragmentation of the labor movement, the cooptation of some unions by the state and the mushrooming of new leaderships. They also cited the role of tribal leaders and sectarian entrepreneurs in attempting to replace the unions by interfering in labor disputes and solving them through *wasta* (political backing) and political pressure. Given the local power of tribes and local sectarian leaders, many workers prefer to have recourse to these leaders to settle labor disputes instead of organizing in unions. These factors are among the many reasons why the majority of workers in Iraq are not organized in unions or councils. Thus, as previously mentioned, the labor movement in Iraq is broader and more complex than the movement of workers' unions, councils, and federations.

4 Internal Divisions: Another important challenge faced by the labor movement in Iraq is the growing fragmentation witnessed in the past few years. As shown in the mapping of the labor movement above (Figure 1), several new federations have recently emerged or split from older federations. When asked about the reasons for these splits within the labor movement, most unionists interviewed explained that these divides are driven by fights over leadership, divisions based on party affiliations, clashes of (mainly

male) egos, and competitions over resources that often take the shape of funded travels by international organizations to attend conferences or workshops abroad. Moreover, some interviewees mentioned that although sectarianism is still limited within the labor movement in Iraq, it is accurate to say that some of the divisions that took place within the movement had some degree of sectarian motivation, or were at least playing the sectarian card to consolidate a new leadership. Moreover, when asked about coordination and cooperation with unions and federations in Iraqi Kurdistan, most federations explained that there are no strong networks of coordination with their Kurdish counterparts despite the fact that the national federal laws are the same in Kurdistan, and thus affect the Kurdish workers' movement similarly.

5 External and International Labor Organizations:

Organizations such as US Labor Against the War, Hands Off Iraqi Oil (UK), the International Trade Union Confederation, the International Labor Organization, the Global Union Federations, the International Confederation of Arab Trade Unions, the British Trade Union Congress, the AFL-CIO Solidarity Center and many others have played a crucial role in supporting the labor movement in Iraq, providing training and workshops, and offering a platform for Iraqi workers during the war to express their priorities and concerns. These organizations also had an important—and often indirect—negative effect in shaping the priorities and the strategies of the Iraqi labor movement. The effects of these organizations on the labor movement were depicted during the interviews and the focus group session with the leaders of the workers' federations in Iraq. Five main aspects can be highlighted:

(1) International labor and trade union organizations have indirectly contributed to the fragmentation of the labor movement in Iraq by creating competition over resources and representation. In almost all the interviews conducted, unionists have mentioned the role of travel and participation in conferences abroad in creating tension between unionists and fights over who should represent the workers.

(2) Directly linked to this, material gains (sometimes in the form of corruption, such as providing fake invoices for higher per diems for example) became another indirect consequence of the involvement of some international organizations and their offering of small grants or funds (or even per diems and travel money). Attending meetings and participating in conferences abroad with some international organizations became a profit-making endeavor for some unionists. This has led to further fragmentation within the labor movement and to the widening of the gap between some union leaders and their bases of workers.

(3) Another, more direct, effect of some international organizations is the NGOization of the workers' movement and the transformation of labor 'struggles' into 'campaigns'; shifting the accountability of the

unions from their bases of workers to a pool of external and international 'allies', 'supporters' or 'donors'. This has been described by some unionists by the increase in the number of 'symbolic' mobilizations such as sit-ins to express workers' discontent, while the number of strikes (direct disruption of production) has decreased and it has become a less favorable tactic for unionists given the potentially high cost and threats of going on strike.

(4) Moreover, the impact of some international organizations is also clear through the adoption of many trade unionists of a specific 'lingo' that seems progressive but that does not clearly emerge from their own agendas or priorities. Throughout the fieldwork for example, it has come to our attention that trade unionists were often mentioning issues related to gender equality, youth representation, sexual harassment in the workplace, and child labor. They even asked us to invite a woman and a man from each federation for the focus group that took place in Baghdad, in an effort to respect gender balance. While this sounded like a very positive and progressive step, it later became clearer that women had very little role in decision-making or in leadership within these federations. The focus on gender and youth representation resonates with the recommendations of some international organizations. In one of the interviews, the leader of a federation was explaining the gender quota in his federation and the fact that at least three women are appointed (by male leaders from the executive committee) without elections in order to guarantee equal representation, when he spontaneously said: "...we are special in that sense, even the International Labor Organization and other international organizations encourage us to have a strong representation of women and youth, it is very important, a federation without the youth is a dead federation, most of our members are young, very few are my age... we have worked very hard to make our federation mainly based on the youth". Therefore, the awareness of the importance of inclusivity and representation of women and youth is in line with international organizations' recommendations, however it did not necessarily translate into a more balanced role within the leadership or the federations' agendas. All leaders of the main federations at the national level in Iraq are men over 50. This is surely not to say that there are no important women leaders within the Iraqi labor movement. To the contrary, women have played an extremely important role in the Iraqi labor movement and they continue to do so; however, their activism remains mainly at the local level. Many women unionists have played a key role in organizing female workers and reaching out to the more marginalized section of the labor force, however they rarely made it to the top leadership positions within workers' unions and national federations. One exception is Hashmeya Alsaadawe, a feminist activist who used to work at the Basra Electricity Company, who managed to organize the workers of her company and led many strikes and

direct actions to protect their rights and advance their cause.⁹¹ An active unionist since 2004, Alsaadawe became the first woman to head a national union in Iraq when she was elected president of the Electrical Utility Workers Union in Iraq. She is also the first female vice-president of the General Federation of Iraqi Workers in Basra.⁹² Therefore, although driven by good intentions, the adoption of some federations of the 'recommendations' of their international allies fall short of a genuine transformation in their dynamics and often remained at the level of discourse, symbolism and 'box-ticking'.

(5) Finally, while the labor movement in Iraq had been extremely active and effective in the first couple of years following the fall of Saddam despite the illegality of their activism and the severity of US repression, the subsequent focus on 'legal activism' as a priority can be partially described as a consequence of the role of international organizations that were supporting Iraqi workers at the time. The push by some international organizations for the ratification of the Iraqi labor law in order to enshrine the right of workers to legally organize in the public sector began as early as 2005. While this was not initially a demand by Iraqi workers who did not bother with the legality of their activism in a country governed by chaos, occupation, and war, legal reform quickly started to climb the ladder of priorities with international 'allies' highlighting it as an important step (or 'recommendation'), and helping to draft new laws to be taken to parliament. This was of course accompanied by the fact that the internal crackdown on the labor movement was increasingly using the law (especially under Shahrastani) to threaten and attack unionists and activist workers. During interviews, many unionists talked about the selective reinforcement of the law by the state, the lack of trust in the judiciary system, the lack of personnel in the governmental search committees in charge of reinforcing labor rights, and the rule of militia laws even in the labor sector. However, they still stressed the importance of legal reforms in protecting and facilitating the work of trade unions in Iraq. Without denying the importance of legal battles in certain cases, this seeming contradiction between the heavy focus on legal reform and the serious lack of trust in the ability or the willingness of the state to reinforce laws is worth pondering, particularly in light of the role and priorities of international and Western organizations in shaping the strategies and desires of the Iraqi unions and federations on the ground.

6 Racism and Nationalism: Finally, one important finding from the fieldwork is the fact that the vast majority of union federations did not include foreign workers despite the presence of a considerable

⁹¹ For more information, see: <http://idu.net/mod.php?mod=news&mod-file=item&itemid=13920>.

⁹² For more information, see: <http://araborganizing.org/on-the-ground-in-basra-an-interview-with-hashmeya-muhsin-al-saadawi/>.

community of migrant workers in Iraq, especially in the service sector (such as domestic workers, gas station workers, etc.). Most of these migrant workers are from South Asia. When asked about the lack of unionization of migrant workers, leaders of workers' federations had conflicting answers: some mentioned that they had not previously thought about it, others said that this was not a national priority given that their focus as unions is first on the rights of Iraqi workers, a few highlighted the legal obstacles given that most of these workers are in the informal sector and on visitor's visas, while some acknowledged that this is one of the main weaknesses of the labor movement and stressed the importance of reaching out to migrant workers and attempting to organize them. While some spontaneous first answers came across as racist and nationalist, at the end of the focus group session most

federation leaders reiterated the importance of taking the question of migrant workers more seriously in their activism; especially as "workers should be treated equally regardless of their identity, nationality, skin color, or gender", as one participant put it.

Finally, labor organizations in Iraq are still relatively young and evolving. While these organizations have faced extremely harsh conditions in their early days and continue to face several challenges today, they have also managed to make some important gains and achievements that have shaped the economic, legal, and social conditions of the Iraqi working class. As Bader-Blau (2007) put it so beautifully, "the fact that Iraqi labor has reemerged and is coalescing around an alternative, non-sectarian political vision reminds any observer of Iraqi politics that another world is possible."

CHAPTER 4: CASE STUDY 2: THE MASS PROTESTS OF 2015–2016

This chapter examines the protest movements that have unfolded in Iraq since 2011, with a special focus on the 2015–16 mobilizations. The chapter considers that the 2015–16 mobilizations cannot be understood outside their historical context. Thus it approaches these protests as a movement that builds on a previous wave of protests that erupted in 2010–11, and that is continuing to unfold in 2018. The chapter provides a timeline of the main events that have shaped these protest movements in Iraq between 2010 and 2018, in addition to a mapping of the main groups and organizations that formed the 2015–16 mass movement. This is followed by a discussion of the main fieldwork findings focusing on the movement's main demands, organizational forms, developments and unfolding, as well as its relationship with political parties and the state.

TIMELINE OF THE MASS PROTESTS 2010–2018

The Iraqi protest wave of 2011 following the Arab uprisings formed a breaking point in the history of contentious politics in post-2003 Iraq. As Abdel Jabbar and Abdel Hussain (2017, p.26) argue, this wave of mobilization “was different from all previous protests being neither sectoral (by workers, professionals, or students) nor local (confined to a certain locality) nor factional (owned solely by a certain community or sect).” A new repertoire of contention was being shaped in Iraq with demands focusing on drastic reforms “against the entire political system as an institution, culture and practice” (ibid.). Demands concerned with people's basic needs and everyday lives resurfaced as the center of politics in the country. Unemployment, corruption, lack of basic services such as water and electricity, as well as a fatigue with sectarian politics and the sectarian power-sharing system were among the main slogans raised by protesters. The 2011 protests erupted in all parts of Iraq, taking a truly national dimension beyond ethnic (Kurd vs. Arab) or sectarian divides. However, given most of the protests' demands were not met despite the government's promises for reforms—and given that the state continued to play sectarian politics in its attempt to contain dissent—the movement morphed in 2012–13 to become focused in the Sunni-dominated western and northern parts of the country (Appendix 4), where people expressed their grievances against the Maliki government in what often took a sectarian overtone.

Although the protests of 2012–13 were supported by some Shia leaders (such as Muqtada al-Sadr), the dominant sectarian framing of Iraqi politics meant that those mobilizations were often described as a Sunni uprising against the Shia-dominated government. However, it was not too long before matters came to a head again, despite the country being preoccupied with

the war against ISIL since 2014. A new wave of protests erupted in the southern city of Basra in summer 2015 when a young protester, Munthadhar al-Hilfi, was shot dead by police. The demonstrations quickly spread to other cities in the south and to the capital Baghdad. While most cities that witnessed these protests were predominantly Shia,⁹³ protesters were raising clear slogans against the Shia political and religious leaders. Under the famous slogan *Bismil deen baguna al-haramiya* (In the name of religion the thieves have robbed us), tens of thousands of protesters marched in the streets of Baghdad and several other cities in the south. Protesters were still demanding the provision of basic services such as electricity, the end of corruption, and a serious solution to Iraq's unemployment problem. Although centered in the southern and central parts of Iraq, these protests were non-sectarian in nature. In fact, many protesters shouted slogans against sectarianism and called for a secular state. The national flag was widely used as a symbol of Iraq's national unity against sectarian or ethnic divides. As expressed by one of my interviewees, “the common sentiment was that there should be opposition to the sectarian leaders and parties in government, because they are the ones looting the country and its people's wealth”. This reflected the growing frustration within the Shia community with their leaders who claim to represent them and govern in their name. The leaders of these groups or militias who attempted to address the demonstrators from the outset were often dismissed and shouted down. Moreover, protesters had identified many of the corrupt and sectarian leaders as being allies of Iran, thus raising slogans and shouting chants against Iran's intervention in Iraq's politics such as *Iran bara bara, Baghdad tibqa hurra* (Iran out, out, Baghdad will remain free). Even in religious cities like Najaf, the protest movement was able to raise some ‘controversial’ slogans against the intervention of religion (or ‘religious turbans’) in politics. However, slogans against religious and sectarian authorities were not enough. In many cities across the country, protesters chanted *Khubuz, hurriyyah, dawla madaniyah* (bread, freedom, civil state), highlighting the socio-economic demands as well as the non-sectarian nature of the protests. These were clear signs of people's rejection of sectarian manipulation and identity politics (especially within the Shia community that is perceived as ‘dominant’ in Iraq), and the return of demands-based and class-based politics to the Iraqi streets.

The state and para-state organizations' responses to these protests were coercive and violent. Many people were killed, wounded, kidnapped, or tortured by militias and then released—ironically—through the

⁹³ Note that both Basra and Baghdad have a mixed population.

Protest Movements Timeline (2010–18)

2010: June	– Protests break out in Basra over power cuts and the government’s failure to provide basic services. Demonstrations spread to the city of Nasiriyah
2010: 21 June	– Resignation of Minister of Electricity Kareem Waheed under street pressure
2010: 25 June	– The Ministry of the Interior issues new regulations making it extremely difficult to obtain official authorization for protests
2010–11: Dec–Jan	– The Arab uprisings unfold in Tunisia and Egypt
2011: 30 Jan	– Protest in al-Firdous Square in Baghdad under the slogan “We are also Egypt”
2011: February	– Protests start to spread to Kerbala, Basra, Diwaniya and other provinces including Iraqi Kurdistan – Examples include: – 8 Feb 2011: The ‘broom demonstration’ took place in Baghdad where protesters cleaned the streets from the famous al-Mutanabi street to Tahrir Square as a sign of protest at Baghdad municipality’s lousy work – 14 Feb 2011: Valentine’s Day demonstration in Baghdad where protesters handed pedestrians flowers with black hearts containing the names of politicians signaling that these politicians had no love for their country or its people – 17 Feb 2011: Big protests in the streets in Iraqi Kurdistan
2011: 25 Feb	– Iraq’s Day of Rage: the biggest protests all over the country, with most violence taking place in Iraqi Kurdistan. These events were later dubbed ‘the Iraqi Spring’
2011: 27 Feb	– Prime Minister Nouri Al-Maliki addresses the protesters making concessions and giving his government 100 days to meet the protesters’ demands. On 10 June, the expiry of the PM’s ultimatum to the government, hundreds of protesters gathered in Baghdad’s Tahrir Square to express their anger at the unmet promises of Al-Maliki and his government
2011: Mar–Sep	– Protests continue every Friday, but start to diminish in number and to take on more political demands (anti-US, anti-KSA, pro-Bahrain, anti-Iran) when some political parties (such as the Sadrists) came into play to mobilize their constituencies in the streets
2012–13	– A wave a protests sweeps over the predominantly Sunni western region (al-Anbar) and in Iraqi Kurdistan
2014: 4 June	– The ISIL invasion of Iraq begins from the North, starting a war that would last almost four years
2014: 10 June	– Mosul falls into the hands of ISIL and a state of emergency is declared in Iraq
2014: 14 August	– Prime Minister Nouri Al-Maliki steps down and is replaced by Haidar Al-Abadi
2015: July	– Despite the ongoing war against ISIL, mass protests erupt in the city of Basra over electricity cuts
2015: 16 July	– 18-year-old protester Munthadhar al-Hilfi is shot dead, sparking of a new wave of mass protests
2015: Jul–Dec	– Protests quickly spread to the capital Baghdad and some other southern cities such as Nasiriyah, Karbala, Hilla, and Najaf (mainly-Shia population), with protesters gathering every Friday under the famous slogan <i>Bismil deen baguna al-haramiya</i> (In the name of religion the thieves have robbed us)
2015: 24 August	– Muqtada al-Sadr calls on his followers to join the Friday protests against corruption and called for major reforms in the Iraqi system
2015: 31 Dec	– Millions of protesters celebrate New Years Eve in Tahrir Square
2016: 26 Feb	– Muqtada al-Sadr leads protest and addresses more than a million protesters in Tahrir Square in Baghdad
2016: 30 April	– Thousands of protesters (mainly supporters of Sadr) enter the Green Zone in Baghdad and occupy the parliament, after the parliament failed to approve the new government ministers – A state of emergency is declared in Iraq as protesters storm parliament in the Green Zone
2017: Feb–Mar	– Violent anti-government protests erupt with al-Sadr threatening to boycott the upcoming elections
2018: March	– Sadr and Communist Party announce electoral alliance under <i>Sai’roun</i> (March for Reform)
2018: May	– Electoral victory of the <i>Sai’roun</i> political bloc
2018: 8 July	– Protests erupt in Basra over power cuts and unemployment
2018: July–Dec	– Protests continue and spread to other cities in the south and to the capital Baghdad – Protests escalate with severe violence and repression (a number of people killed and several wounded)
2018: 5 Dec	– Inspired by the French ‘yellow vests’ movement, Iraqi protesters mobilize in Basra demanding jobs and better services

government's intervention. This further frustrated and angered the demonstrators, and their numbers kept on increasing (see Appendix 3). Protesters mobilized every Friday for 22 weeks from July 2015 to January 2016, with the exception of two Fridays that happened to be religious holidays: Eid al-Adha on 25 September 2015, and the Hijri New Year (coinciding with the start of Ashoura) on 23 October 2015.

However, while the protests had spontaneously erupted and spread since mid-July 2015, an important development occurred at the end of August 2015, when al-Sadr called on his constituencies to participate in the demonstrations. At that time, the protest movement had already gained much attention given its intensity and its size, and also given the repression it faced. Moreover, the movement had intimidated the Shia religious and political leadership, as the protesters were predominantly Shia and denouncing them. Thus top Shia clerics such as Ayatollah Sistani had to recognize the demands of the protesters and urge the government to quickly address them. Moreover, Shia clerics had already started to meet on weekly basis with some leaders of the movement (mainly from the communist party). But it was not until early 2016 that the movement entered a new phase with al-Sadr taking over the organization of the protests by calling for a million-man demonstration and organizing sit-ins close to the Green Zone. This intervention represented a major shift in the demands of the protesters: the calls for anti-sectarianism, anti-corruption, and improved electricity and job provision were gradually transformed into more 'casual' (or less radical) political demands such as changing the members of the Election High Commission and calling for a government of technocrats. Things escalated even further when, on 30 April 2016, protesters (mainly supporters of al-Sadr) stormed parliament in the Green Zone and occupied it for hours. This unprecedented move led the government to declare a state of emergency in the country.

In fact, the intervention of al-Sadr in the mobilization transformed the movement and divided the protesters into two camps: the first group hoped that the participation of al-Sadr would pressure the government into responding to their demands. They believed that his parliamentary bloc of 34 members and his broad popular support base, which could be counted in the millions, would be sufficient to pressure the government to act upon the protesters' demands. The second camp considered al-Sadr to be part of the government, and thus saw him as responsible for the lack of jobs, the poor services, and the rampant corruption. In fact, three ministers were members of the Sadrist bloc: namely, the Minister of Labor and Social Affairs, the Minister of Housing, and the Minister of Water Resources. However, al-Sadr's main entry point to the mass protests was through a section of the Iraqi Communist Party that welcomed him and saw in him an important ally. As previously mentioned, this led to a split within the ICP and within the movement, leading many activists to retreat from the streets, while the protests

became dominated by al-Sadr supporters and some activists from the ICP and civil society organizations. The movement had then entered a new phase.

Despite the high hopes of some of the protest leaders in their ability to achieve gains through the alliance with al-Sadr, the movement started to fizzle out by spring 2016, and it was unable to achieve many tangible reforms related to the initial demands of the protesters in summer 2015: electricity, water, jobs, and an end to corruption. Since the take-over by the Sadrist–Communist alliance, the movement focused its demands on political claims and negotiations, while people retreated from the streets. However, one of the main gains of this Sadrist–Communist political alliance that started during the protest movement of 2015–16 is that it resulted, two years later, in the *Sa'iroun* electoral alliance that won the May 2018 elections. Despite the electoral victory, these elections saw the lowest turn-out rates since 2005,⁹⁴ a sign of people's discontent with the political alternatives within electoral politics. Moreover, the results did not go uncontested: ballots were recounted and the country entered into a political deadlock that started with delays in announcing the parliamentary elections results and continued with the difficulties in forming cabinet. At that time, regional power dynamics were also shifting with the Trump administration ending the nuclear deal and imposing new sanctions on Iran, which affected geopolitical relations between Iraq and Iran. In July 2018, Iran stopped its power supply to the city of Basra in Iraq due to an outstanding bill of around one billion dollars.⁹⁵

Unsurprisingly, in the midst of the local and regional political deadlocks, a third wave of mass protests erupted once more from the city of Basra where electricity cuts were intensified during the unbearable summer heat, contaminated water was threatening the lives of its inhabitants, and unemployment and corruption were still as widespread as in most other parts of the country. The mobilization quickly gained momentum and started to turn violent with some protesters setting fire to the offices⁹⁶ of the Dawa Party, the Iranian-backed Al-Badr Organisation, the Shia Supreme Islamic Council Party, and the Iranian consulate in Basra. The state responded to the early protests with violent repression out of fear they would spread to other parts of the country. Internet services were cut off in the whole country for almost a week as a strategy by the state to hamper the effect of social media on the development of the protests. Despite Prime Minister Abadi making promises to address the protesters' demands and calling for the calming down of the streets, protests still managed to spread in the south and to reach the capital Baghdad. While this movement is still unfolding, its scope, composition and

⁹⁴ According to an Al Arabiya report by Hassan Al Saidi (2018), the turn out rate was as low as 32 percent.

⁹⁵ For more information, see: <https://en.mehrnews.com/news/135497/Iraq-cuts-electricity-supplies-to-Iraq-over-unpaid-bills>.

⁹⁶ For more information, see: <https://www.aljazeera.com/indepth/features/iraq-protests-180717074846746.html>.

demands are somehow comparable to the protest wave of 2015; but this time, it proved very difficult for almost any religious or political party (especially the Sadrist) to interfere or even openly participate in the protests. Despite some discreet support from these parties, the protesters in the city of Basra have responded to all religious and political leaders by the famous chant *Al shaab tole' wahdoh, la terkab el mawja* (the people have mobilized alone, don't ride the tide). Even the Iraqi Communist Party has been very cautious in its approach and has supported the protesters and their demands without attempting to organize or lead the protests. This time around, politics from below is taking a more radical form, despite the weakness of its organizational structures and the spontaneity of its mobilization strategies. Only time will tell whether this movement will be able to transform itself into a broader movement for change in Iraq.

MAPPING THE PROTEST MOVEMENT OF 2015

Building on the previous experiences of spontaneous mass mobilization from 2011, protesters in the 2015 movement organized themselves through coordination committees. Hundreds of committees formed across the country in the regions where mobilizations took place. But these committees did not necessarily have the same composition as those formed in 2011, even if they were surely built on pre-existing networks. Some loose networks of activists came together forming new Facebook groups aimed at coordinating their mobilizations. Other committees were formed of groups of independent activists, writers, or artists, in addition to some civil society organizations or political parties that operated under the names of the coordination committee. These committees took on the responsibility of announcing the dates of protests, providing platforms for the speakers to address the crowds, coming up with slogans and chants, deciding the routes of the marches, and ultimately, deciding the nature of these protests. The largest of these committees was *Mustameroun*, an alliance between members of the Iraqi Communist Party and some influential independent or leftist activists and civil society organizations. Although political parties did not play a major role in the onset of the protest wave, members of leftist parties and civil society groups played an important role in the subsequent stages of the movement in terms of offering an organizational framework, developing slogans and chants, printing and distributing placards, and mobilizing their supporters through Facebook calls and beyond.

The participants in the mass protests of 2015 were from different walks of life, with a majority of them being young people from both the working classes and the middle classes. The unemployed, as well as workers, teachers, truck drivers, farmers, students, and even members of the Popular Mobilization Forces (PMF) all participated in the protests that exploded in summer

2015. Initially, they were local in nature, focusing on specific demands, such as delayed salaries and imposing of taxes on trucks at checkpoints. Moreover, contractual workers demanded permanent employment including those in the electricity sector, and the PMF members mobilized to claim their salaries. But the movement quickly escalated to take on broader demands linked to sectarianism, corruption, unemployment, and basic services such as electricity and water.

Looking at the composition of the protest movement of 2015–16, eight main groups can be identified as participants or organizers within the coordination committees:

1 Leftist and communist parties: although these parties did not play a significant role in the onset of the movement, leftist, and communist parties in Iraq—specifically the ICP—played an important organizational role once the movement kicked off and started to spread. However, this role was not fulfilled under the parties' names or banners, it was rather carried out by individual members of the parties through their role in coordination committees. The mobilization of leftist and communist parties under different names and organizational forms is a remarkable development in party politics in Iraq, and in the Arab region more generally.

2 Women's organizations: women and feminist organizations, such as the al-Amal organization or the Iraqi Women Network for example, played a crucial role in mobilizing women and representing women's voices within coordination committees and in the slogans raised in the streets. Throughout the interviews, it was repeatedly mentioned that coordination committees have often tried to give women a bigger role by for example letting a female member read the protest's statement in Tahrir Square. These tactics of higher visibility for women within the movement are the result of the involvement of several feminist groups in the coordination committees.

3 Labor unions: organized workers played an important role in the early mobilizations in Basra and in other cities of Iraq. Their participation mainly came in their capacity as individual citizens, not organized unions. However, workers have benefited from unions' networks to mobilize their co-workers and organize sit-ins and marches.

4 Civil society groups: Dozens of civil society organizations and hundreds of activists concerned with issues of human rights mobilized through the coordination committees in the various cities of central and southern Iraq.

5 Youth and student groups: Despite not being organized, the youth formed the backbone of the protest movement and their participation came

through their involvement in the coordination committees as student groups or young activists.

6 Moja in Najaf: An independent group of young activists from the southern city of Najaf had organized a few years earlier around cultural and political matters. Despite the city being generally religious and conservative, Moja activists managed to establish a space for themselves as young, intellectual, critical, and anti-sectarian activists. They played a major role in the I Read, Therefore I Am Iraqi cultural campaign, and they formed the nucleus of the protest movements in Najaf during 2015–16.

7 Influential independent activists: A number of famous and respected intellectuals, artists, and writers have joined the protest movements and some coordination committees, giving the mobilizations credibility and importance in the eyes of several observers.

8 Sadrists: Since early 2016, Sadrists joined the coordination of the protests in an alliance with the *Mustameroun* coordination committee. This has led to the split of the committee and the formation of a new coordination committee by former *Mustameroun* members and some of their new allies who rejected the alliance with al-Sadr under the name of *Madanioun* (i.e. civil, also used to mean secular or anti-sectarian in the Iraqi context).

Although the mobilizations saw significant participation from the most marginalized groups in society such as women, the poor, or young people, the representation of these groups within the leadership of the movement and in the decision-making positions of the main coordination committees remained limited. Given that a large number of women were involved in grassroots activism, the main coordination committees made sure to represent them in the organizational committees, albeit to an extent that is not comparable to men's involvement. Similarly, while many unemployed and working-class youth took part in the coordination committees and tried to organize themselves, their representation and their voices remained far too limited. This became especially true in the second phase of the movement in 2016, when the political process took protesters off the streets, and transformed the movements into negotiation committees that were mainly dominated by older, more affluent, and more politically experienced men representing political parties or groupings.

MASS PROTESTS VERSUS IDENTITY POLITICS

Inasmuch as Iraq has been shaped post-2003 by sectarian and ethnic politics, the protest waves since 2011 highlight the complexities of identity politics, and its futility in times of popular uprisings. While vertical

and identity-based divisions can play an important role in dissipating class-based anger or masking class dynamics, this anger can quickly resurface in moments where mobilizations are framed outside the realm of identity and when demands become clearly targeted at the ruling class that controls the country's wealth. Such dynamics of mobilization can also be depicted in the labor movement that has been fighting for over a decade against privatization and in defense of preserving public wealth and its fair distribution. These remarks, however, are not to say that the movements taking place in Iraq are necessarily organized 'class wars', but rather to suggest that reading social dynamics in Iraq solely from the lens of sectarianism and overlooking class struggles and other social dynamics (such as gender or race) can be very misleading. The social 'explosions' that took the form of mass mobilizations on the streets of Iraq have formed a real challenge for the ruling elites and have seriously threatened the effectiveness of sectarian politics at times. Despite the fact that many of the leaders have attempted to deploy identity politics and sectarian tactics to transform the movement and give it a sectarian overtone, this has so far failed. The only mobilizations that have taken an overt sectarian framing were in 2012–13 when the predominantly 'Sunni' regions (Appendix 4) mobilized against the government (coded as 'Shia' dominated). However, the interchangeability of sectarian and political or socio-economic frames could not be adopted in all other waves of mobilization since 2011, mainly because the movement has been centered in the southern and central region that are predominantly 'Shia' (Appendix 4), with the exception of 2011 when it took place in all regions leaving no room for sectarian politics. In fact, the mobilizations of 2015 and 2018 of the predominantly 'Shia regions' (although protesters are not necessarily all Shia) against the government that is heavily controlled by 'Shia' politicians and influenced by Shia religious leaders has meant that playing the sectarian card could no longer work. The struggle was intra-sectarian and led by ordinary people against sectarian elites who claim to represent them. To clearly block the way for sectarian manipulation, protesters used anti-sectarian slogans (such as *Ilmaniye, Ilmaniye! La Sunniye, la Shi'iye!*, Secularism, Secularism! Neither Shia nor Sunni!), and clearly named the political and religious ruling class as their target. This has created a serious challenge for leaders who have tried to contain 'their' street either by attempts at cooptation, or through false promises of reforms, or (most commonly) through heavy repression by the state or its militias. However, despite the efforts at curbing the movement, protesters have managed to raise slogans that created a new repertoire of contention centered on demands linked to the interests of most Iraqis and cut across sectarian, ethnic, and regional divides. Chants against corruption, sectarian politics, and the theft of national resources in the name of religion, as well as slogans for bread, jobs, water and electricity have all rung out in the streets

of Iraq, changing the rules of the political game and transforming the relationship between the leaders and the protesters who have come to identify them as their enemies. Thus, mass movements since 2011 have been able to threaten identity politics in Iraq, and have introduced a new repertoire of contention that unmasked social dynamics, power relations and class struggles beyond the opacity of sectarian or identitarian politics.

A LEADERLESS MOVEMENT?

While the majority of the interviewees talked about the movement as being spontaneous and leaderless, it was clear that some forms of leadership had developed despite the fact that the movement did not have one charismatic leader or a clear and declared leadership.⁹⁷ Several leaders at different levels emerged and played an important role in leading the protesters in the streets and deciding on the organizational forms and the next steps of the movement. This leadership mainly took the form of coordination committees (which are mainly networks of activists) within which discussions and debates took place but decision-making was often in the hands of a few leading activists. The main coordination committee in 2015 was *Mustameroun*, which developed out of the 2011 movement's networks of activists and comprised already established leftist and progressive parties and organizations (such as the communist party). The bigger the parties and organizations within the coordination committees, the stronger their mobilizing structures given their organizational strength and their leadership potential. However, one thing that remains clear is that while many networks of activists and coordination committees formed and called for the protests separately, there was little coordination between those different 'leaders' or 'organizational frameworks'. Thus, despite the focus on spontaneity and leaderless-ness in the analysis of the mobilizations in Iraq (and more broadly in the discussions on new social movements in the past few decades), an in-depth look at the protests reveals that no movement can actually sustain itself over a certain period of time without any form of leadership and organization. This leadership need not be traditional, charismatic, or declared, but this does not mean that it does not exist. While social media plays an important role in connecting networks of activists and protesters and mobilizing broader sections of the population, social media platforms do not function without the presence of activists who set them up and 'control' them. Therefore, while the leaders of the movement were not always known to the broader public, there was surely a small group of influential activists who played the leadership role during the 2015 protests in Iraq. It is also worth noting that the only actors who were able to mobilize for a long period and transform the movement into a political process leading to elections were the two main political parties in the movement: the Communist Party and the Sadrist Movement. This speaks to the importance and centrality of organizations in movement politics.

THE DOUBLE-EDGED SWORD OF 'DEPOLITICIZATION'

The rejection of party politics in Iraq is understandable in a context where political parties have almost become synonymous with sectarianism, exploitation, militia rule, and corruption. Thus, one of the main mobilizing forces during the first few months of the mass protests of 2015 is its spontaneous and 'non-partisan' aspect. In an interview with Faleh Abdel Jabbar, president of Iraq Institute for Strategic Studies in Beirut and a main supporter of the ICP, he explained that the majority of the protesters were educated young Iraqis who form "a generation thirsty for life, and that hates political parties". Abdel Jabbar continued saying that this generation is non-ideological, which in his view is a positive development. In fact, huge numbers of protesters mobilized to the streets in a burst of anger, attracted by the fact that the protests were not organized by traditional political parties, and did not have a clear known leadership. The insistence on the 'non-politicized' nature of the protests and the rejection of political organizations and parties, meant that 'politics' and 'political parties' were narrowly understood and defined as being equal to the ruling parties and their politics. Therefore, the demonstrators repeatedly stated that their protests are apolitical and are not linked to any political parties (except with the Sadrists). In an interview with an activist from Baghdad, he explained: "during the first few months of the movement, there was no place for political parties within us... even if individuals are members of parties, their participation in the protests was in their individual capacity". This trend in pushing for the 'depoliticization' and 'individualization' of contention, and the rejection of organization or party politics is not peculiar to Iraq. While protests are at their core a political act, framing mobilizations as apolitical reflects a new understanding of the 'political' as being 'bad'. However, the dissociation from party politics in the Iraqi protests could also be understood as a way to avoid any harm or danger that could be caused by being a member of an opposition political group. Being unorganized individuals might protect protesters from being targeted as members of opposition political parties or groupings. These threats and possible dangers are not only, or necessarily, committed by the state; it is mainly non-state actors and affiliated militias that form the biggest threat to protesters, especially those who are organized or outspoken opposition activists. Thus, many protesters believe that party politics is not simply corrupt and unappealing, but it can also be dangerous and counter-productive. They prefer to shape their activism in the form of 'innocent' mobilizations that have no political goal beyond the very specific demands that are usually basic rights or broad calls for change. This is specifically true among

⁹⁷ With the exception of 2016 when the Sadrists participated in the leadership of the protests.

liberal, left-wing, or progressive individuals who are close enough to political groups or organizations but refuse to be enlisted members in parties. Their mobilization relies on loose networks and circles of activists, without the duties and attachments of party membership. Thus, despite the central role of some leftist and progressive groups in the 2015 mobilizations in Iraq, there remains an inability of parties and organizations to attract, recruit, and organize the large numbers of independent grassroots activists who are part of progressive networks but remain outside organization. However, these networks depend heavily on their proximity to organizations and parties, which form the main nodes in these connections, especially since it is these organizations that have the mobilizing power to sustain a movement. This became even more evident in 2016, when al-Sadr joined the movement and was able to re-mobilize large numbers of protesters in the streets, given the strength of his organizational structure. An independent member of the *Mustameroun* coordination committee highlighted the mobilization capacity of al-Sadr saying: “there is no doubt that by officially joining the movement al-Sadr had a big impact in sustaining the movement given his very large social base and his ability to mobilize sections of society that we cannot reach otherwise”. So while organizations and parties remain central in the mobilization and sustainability of a movement, trends towards ‘depoliticization’ and non-organization are the results of a disenchantment with party politics, a growing neoliberal context of rising individualism; as well as an uncertain security context that makes it safer for individuals not to organize in opposition political parties or fronts.

CULTURE AND CREATIVITY WITHIN THE PROTEST MOVEMENT

The mobilizations in Iraq since 2011 have not only created a new repertoire of contention, but have also produced a wealth of art and culture that is worth highlighting. Protesters have used some religious and social celebrations as occasions to extend their movement and reach out to a wider audience: for example, on 14 February 2011 a Valentine’s Day celebratory demonstration took place in Baghdad where protesters distributed black roses with the figures of political leaders printed on them, indicating the lack of love these leaders have for their country. Similarly, in December 2015, “a Christmas tree was set up in central Baghdad, in the holy city of Najaf and other cities against the customary practice of restricting celebrations to be a private family affair, usually associated with the middle classes” (Abdel Jabbar & Abdel Hussain, 2017, p.31). The celebration of Christmas by the protesters in public squares formed a ‘counter-culture’ that sent a message of coexistence and anti-sectarianism, even in the most religiously conservative cities of Iraq. In fact, the December 2015 protests culminated on New Year’s Eve in Baghdad’s

Tahrir Square that witnessed the biggest celebrations with an estimated 4 million people participating in the event (Abdel Jabbar & Abdel Hussain, 2017, p.30). Such celebrations have contributed to the development of a cultural scene that introduced new music, paintings, poetry, theater, and art in general. Rap music particularly flourished in the southern cities and in Baghdad where young protesters developed new songs and slogans. Similarly, artwork stemming out of the protests’ themes—such as artist Hazim al-Mali’s poster that featured the Iraqi flag with the Liberty Monument of Tahrir Square replacing the words ‘God is great’ (Abdel Jabbar & Abdel Hussain, 2017, p.32)—flourished and sent a message of national unity beyond sectarian divides. The protest movement also generated an impressive number of print and online publications such as *Yawmiyat El Hiraq* in 2011 (in *Ila al-Amam* newspaper of the WCPI), or *Sawt al-ihitaj al-jamahiiri* (The Voice of the Popular Protest) in 2015, or *Nahwa el Taghyeer* in 2018. All these publications adopted a Marxist perspective and were published by the WCPI. In addition, an alternative scene in theater appeared with groups such as the ‘Theater of the Barefoot’ (*Firqat Masrah al-Hofat*) addressing the socio-economic grievances of the protesters and giving the stage to amateur actors from the protesters to express their ideas and experiences. These, and many other cultural and creative activities, formed an important addition to the repertoire of contention in Iraq and gave way for the protests’ networks and outreach to develop and grow.

SADR’S PARTICIPATION AND ITS EFFECTS

While the participation of al-Sadr in the 2015 movement and his alliance with the ICP remain a highly contested and debated issue in progressive circles in Iraq, it is clear that this move has left a big mark on the development of the mobilization, especially in 2016. Some rejected the Sadrist’s participation in the movement and saw in it a ‘hijack’ of the protests and an attempt to derail the movement, as protesters had rejected Islamic figures and Islamic militia leaders since the early days of the protests. For example, an activist from the *Muntafidoun* coordination committee explained that looking back at the experience now, he regrets having participated in what “turned out to be a movement hijacked by al-Sadr”. He said: “we compared al-Sadr to a sponge, he absorbed the anger of the people and transformed the movement.” However, others perceived the alliance with the Sadrist as a positive move to bring Islamic groups to work with civil or secular groups, and considered that the politicization of the movement is a sign of maturity and pragmatism. In a 2017 interview with Faleh Abdel Jabbar, a leading Iraqi intellectual with close ties to the ICP, he praised the alliance with al-Sadr and the transformations of the movement saying: “talks about al-Sadr hijacking the movement are completely

wrong, the popular basis of the Sadrist Movement was in the streets from the start... the coalition between the communist party and al-Sadr is a sign of maturity of the movement... the results of this alliance will become clearer in the 2018 elections.” Therefore, Abdel Jabbar, like many other supporters of the ICP, read the developments of the movement in positive and hopeful terms.

Therefore, *Mustameroun*—the coordination committee closest to the ICP—welcomed this relation with al-Sadr, while *Madanioun* and other smaller coordination committees rejected this new development. Activists from *Madanioun* and *Muntafidoun*⁹⁸ highlighted in the interviews how the entrance of al-Sadr into the movement has derailed the demands and shifted the nature of the protests by transforming the main slogan of the protesters from the spontaneous and heartfelt *Bismil deen baqona el haramiyeh* (*In the name of religion the thieves have robbed us*) to *Shale gale*⁹⁹ (a popular Iraqi saying meaning ‘Enough (or down) with all’) in order to please al-Sadr and the Shia religious leaders who disliked the initial slogan that targeted them. The new slogan had a more Sadrist connotation, especially that it is a slogan that was used by Muqtada al-Sadr’s father, Mohamad Sadiq al-Sadr, during Friday sermons in the 1990s against Saddam Hussein’s dictatorship. Thus, the new slogan gave a different political dimension to the protests, and downplayed the initial demands of the protesters in 2015. This was coupled with a shift in

the protests’ claims through a focus on more detailed political demands and a drop of the more radical initial anti-sectarian and socio-economic demands. Yet this transformation in the protests was perceived by leading members of *Mustameroun* as a sign of the ‘political maturing’ of the movement that needed to move to a second phase where protesters demands in the streets are carried into the political arena of decision making. For these activists, the alliance with the Sadrists since 2016 and the resulting victory in the 2018 elections of the *Sa’iroun* list is one of the main successes of the movement of 2015. However, while this political process is still unfolding and the impact of this electoral victory is still contested, the movement could not achieve any major tangible reform related to the initial demands of 2015. In fact, al-Sadr’s intervention in 2016 reshaped the movement and transformed the demands, while the initial protesters from *Mustameroun* made important concessions to accommodate their new allies. Since then, the underlying structural causes of the uprising have not been addressed, and the leadership of the movement has become involved in a political process of negotiations with the government over electoral and political issues that were not made a priority by protesters at the onset of the movement. This can probably explain both the explosion of a new mass mobilization in summer of 2018, and the inability of the Sadrists or their allies from *Mustameroun* (mainly the ICP) to take over the 2018 movement or to lead the protests as in 2015.

⁹⁸ A Baghdad-based coordination committee formed of independent leftist activists.

⁹⁹ It seems that this expression was originally used by Muqtada al-Sadr’s father (Mohamad Sadiq al-Sadr) who was assassinated by Saddam Hussein in 1997. See: <http://www.alnoor.se/article.asp?id=297510>.

CONCLUSION

The contemporary history of Iraq holds in its folds important stories of social struggles and resistance from below, beyond the much advertized and often-discussed meta-narratives of sectarianism and violence. The post-2003 years have been crucial for the formation of a vibrant civil society with the burgeoning of leftist, feminist, and progressive groups, in addition to the development of an important labor movement. While these groups and their activism have not been the main focus of most analyses of Iraq, understanding the social dynamics of Iraqi society requires a closer look at social movements and contentious politics from below.

This report has provided a historical background (Chapter 1) and an overview of Iraq's social, political, and economic structures post-2003 (Chapter 2), in addition to a mapping of the main progressive actors in Iraq today (Chapter 3). Four main groups were surveyed as important actors in the social struggles taking place in Iraq since 2003: (1) the various leftist and communist parties and organizations, (2) the women's movement and its wide range of activists' groups and organizations, (3) the labor movement and its workers' unions and federations, and (4) the social movement organizations that emerged during the three waves of mass protests in 2011, 2015, and 2018. This mapping included a brief historical background of each of those movements, in addition to an explanation of their main aims, strengths, and challenges. The report then delves into two of these movements in greater depth based on field research and interviews: the labor movement (Chapter 4) and the mass protests of 2015 (Chapter 5). These two case studies were chosen given their importance in Iraq today, and given the scarcity of research that focuses on them.

The Iraqi labor movement post-2003 tells a fascinating story of the centrality of workers, the fake 'democracy' brought in by the West, and the complexities of organizing a labor movement in times of chaos and instability. Following the invasion of Iraq and the fall of Saddam Hussein in 2003, the US (through the CPA) started its de-Ba'athification plan by working on a new Iraqi constitution. The only laws that survived from the Ba'ath regime and remained untouched in the 'new Iraq' are labor laws and laws related to the right to unionize. This is surely no minor detail, given the importance of containing the working classes for the imperialist project to succeed. The US administration has used all sorts of repression (legal, political, and violence) to contain and curtail the labor movement that was developing in Iraq in the early days following the fall of the Ba'ath regime. Despite the heavy repression faced by the labor unions in Iraq, the workers' movement still managed to play a crucial role, especially in the oil rich south where international companies had started to invade the fields in order

to extract oil. The first couple of years following 2003 witnessed the rise of a strong and stubborn labor movement that posed some serious challenges to US forces and to their 'democratization' campaign. However, by the time Maliki came to power and the Iraqi government started to use the laws (introduced by the Ba'athists, but adopted by the US) against unionists and coerce or repress activist workers, the labor movement started to face several challenges and it started to become more and more fragmented. This fragmentation was mainly due to a conflict over power among unionists who were either co-opted by the state or driven by an interest to create a leadership position for themselves in order gain representation in local, regional, or international platforms. While international organizations have sometimes played an important role in supporting the labor movement in Iraq, their effects on the movement in general have also sometimes been negative and have contributed to the divisions within the workers' federations. Similarly, several international organizations have also played an important role in encouraging the federations in Iraq to focus their activism on the legal aspect and to prioritize the amendment of labor laws. While legal activism can be crucial in advancing the workers' interests, the heavy focus on law amendments is quite surprising in the context of Iraq where militia rule is still very present and the judicial system is highly dysfunctional. As discussed in Chapter 4, these developments—in addition to several other factors related to the structures of the Iraqi labor market or the social and political context—have shaped the labor movement in Iraq since 2003.

Equally important and fascinating is the story of the mass movements that have developed in Iraq since 2003, but have witnessed three main waves of mobilization in 2011, 2015, and 2018. While these protests are often depicted as spontaneous and unorganized, their networks heavily rely on social media and their organization has taken the form of coordination committees. Despite the growing trend of proclaiming their 'apolitical' nature, these protests are clearly political at their core but take different shapes and forms that might seem spontaneous, chaotic, or 'apolitical'. The slogans in the streets of the various Iraqi cities were mainly linked to socio-economic demands and anti-sectarian politics. While the various groups participating in the protests are not necessarily established political parties, some parties have participated under the umbrella of coordination committees. For example, in 2015 the *Mustameroun* coordination committee was comprised of the Iraqi Communist Party in addition to several individual activists or smaller groups of progressives. They were later joined, in 2016, by the Sadrist, who also used the coordination committee as an organizational

framework and an umbrella for the protests. Thus, although the initial explosion of the protests in the streets was spontaneous and unorganized, the ability to sustain the movement over several months was only possible through the various organizational frameworks adopted by political organizations and individual activists alike. Another interesting aspect of these mobilizations is that they managed to break the cycles of violence and sectarianism by taking to the streets under banners that unify the people and their interests: bread, jobs, electricity, water, etc. As explained in Chapter 5, although the movements have evolved and morphed over the years—having a sectarian overtone at one moment and a regional focus at others—the recurrence of these explosive mass mobilizations emerging from the south (the city of Basra) during the summer heat and their rapid spread to other parts of the country is a clear indicator of the centrality of socio-economic demands that go beyond identity politics. This probably explains the heavy repression used by the state (and its militias) against protesters and activists; and the attempts by many sectarian political parties or leaders to co-opt the movement and

ride the tide. However, the latest wave of mobilizations in 2018 have seen a clear rejection of all political parties, including those that were involved in the 2015 protests and that transformed street mobilizations into electoral politics by turning their alliance within the *Mustameroun* coordination committee into an electoral alliance under the *Sa'iroun* campaign, which ran in the 2018 parliamentary elections and won a majority of seats. While the impact of this alliance and the importance of its electoral victory are still widely debated and contested in activists' circles in Iraq, it seems clear that for a large section of the Iraqi population, institutional and electoral politics are not considered the best 'democratic' channels of representation when street politics and mass movements are used to express their anger and discontent.

The recurrent and explosive mass mobilizations from below in Iraq will probably continue to take place and radicalize people so long as the structural reasons that provoke them are not seriously addressed. It is through the continuous struggles of progressive forces that a better future for Iraq and its people can be imagined and fought for.

APPENDIX

Appendix 1: Iraq's 18 Governorates



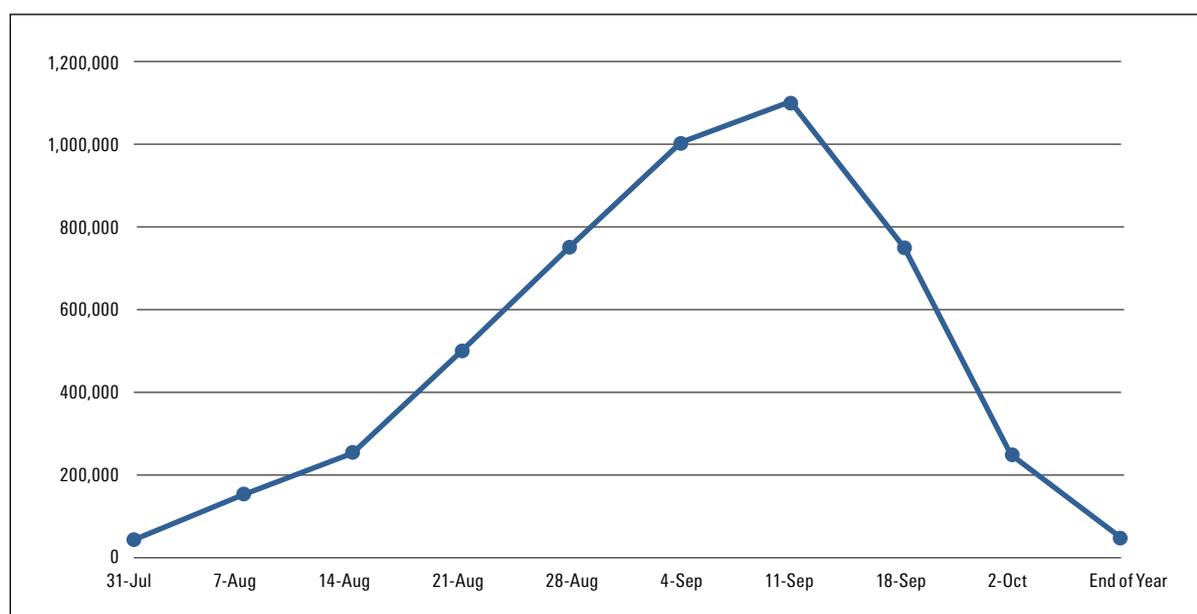
Source: https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Iraqi_Governorates.svg.

Appendix 2: Budgeted Public Employment

	2018	2017	2016	2015	2013	2012	2011
Total	2885716	2885834	2905226	3027069	2907776	2750322	2662608
Ministry of Interior	587011	594991	595000	669798	661914	639485	632760
Ministry of Defence	288242	292327	305000	362331	322297	306614	306475
Ministry of Higher Education	116160	116356	117609	105864	102832	99142	97439
Ministry of Oil	2216	2125	2125	2120	1793	1327	1156
Kurdistan Region	682021	682021	682021	679939	677528	662444	650849

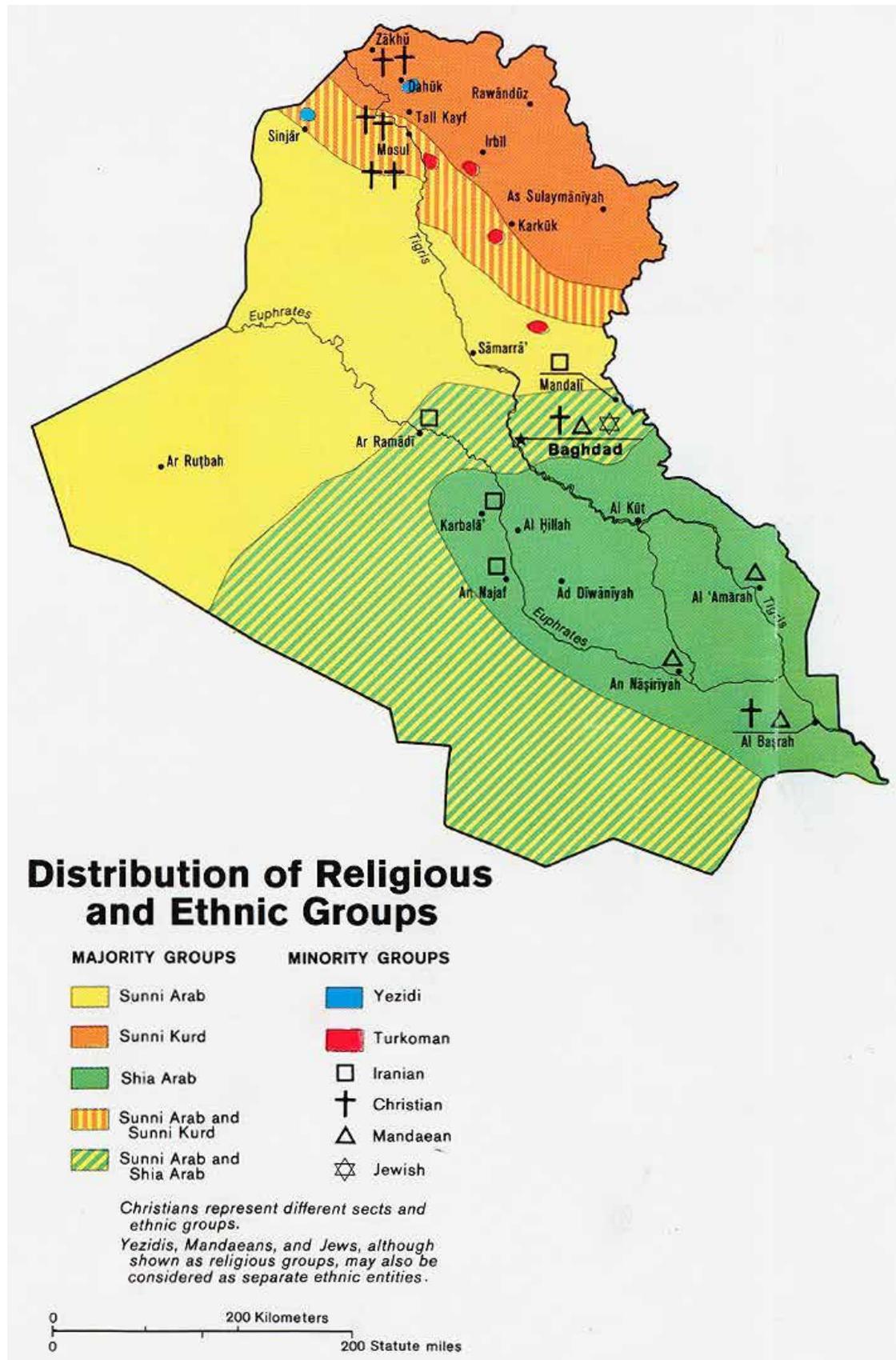
Source: Ali Al-Mawlawi, LSE, <http://blogs.lse.ac.uk/mec/2018/07/31/analysing-growth-trends-in-public-sector-employment-in-iraq/> (accessed 20 September 2018).

Appendix 3: Size of Protests in Baghdad in 2015



Source: Abdel Jabbar & Abdel Hussain, 2017, p.30.

Appendix 4: Distribution of Religious and Ethnic Groups



Source: University of Texas Library, <https://legacy.lib.utexas.edu/maps/iraq.html>.

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