

Democracy in the Margins: The Case of Iraq as an External Critique of Liberal Democracy

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Thanks to my parents, who brought me to this world and raised me in the dire conditions of embargos, wars, genocide, and displacement. Throughout it all, they have never flinched in believing in my abilities, aspirations, and dreams, allowing me to chart my own path—both intellectually and professionally—with a freedom that cannot be matched. If it were not for them, I would not have made it this far, and thus, I would not be writing a master's thesis at an American R1 university. Special thanks to my uncle, Judge Qasim Awsman, under whom I learned to write my first texts and edit my first documents. He has been a role model and a supporting pillar for me throughout this process, constantly sending me ideas and texts from Iraqi Kurdistan.

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ABSTRACT

Liberal democracy, as an ambiguous concept, has been both praised and celebrated as the "End of History" (Fukuyama, 1992) and critiqued for its internal contradictions. In the West, there have been rich traditions of internal critiques, focusing on the inability of liberal-democratic political systems to reduce or alleviate persistent social inequalities, including racial, class, and gender inequalities, the challenge of creating and sustaining spheres for public deliberation, elite domination, and its incompatibility with capitalism and disenfranchisement.

This thesis extends such efforts to critique the challenges of the system by answering calls to bring perspectives external to the Western world into conversation. It specifically focuses on the Iraqi historical case, as a society that had a bittersweet experience with imposed liberal democracy. It attempts to answer the ways the case of post-2003 Iraq offers an external critique of liberal democracy that complements or contradicts existing internal critiques in Western social theory.

To achieve such objectives, the thesis provides a typology of internal critiques, focusing on three specific traditions that are complementary to one another and comparatively compatible with the Iraqi case. These traditions include the elite, the public sphere, and the social justice perspectives. After constructing the typology, the thesis employs historical methods to both trace the fundamental developments in post-2003 Iraq and compare how Iraqi scholarly perspectives contradict or complement Western internal critiques.

The thesis illustrates that while Iraqi scholars agree with Western critiques in terms of problems with elite domination, public sphere deficits, and inequality, they also argue that a monopoly on violence, constructing a shared national identity and public discourse, and

countering regressive tribal and ethno-religious tendencies are necessary for a functioning governance system.

Key Words: Liberal Democracy, Internal Critiques, Comparative Historical Sociology, Post-2003 Iraq, Elites, Public Deliberation, Inequality

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CHAPTER ONE: INTRODUCTION

Liberal democracy, as a modern political system, has been both praised and celebrated as the *End of History* (Fukuyama 1992) and critiqued for its internal contradictions. In Western social and political theory, there have long been rich traditions of internal critique. These critiques have often focused on the inability of liberal-democratic political systems to reduce or alleviate persistent social inequalities, including racial, class, and gender inequalities, the challenge of creating and sustaining spheres for public deliberation, elite domination, and its incompatibility with capitalism and disenfranchisement (Calhoun 1992; Fraser 1992:109; Wolin 1994, Domhoff 2013; Brown 2015).

In recent decades, there has been a growing recognition that experiences outside the Western context can provide equally valuable perspectives and critical engagement with liberal democracy and its limitations and challenges (Held 2006, x-xi). *The Transregional Center for Democratic Studies* at The New School for Social Research is an example of such an effort to bring together diverse global perspectives to understand the challenges facing democracies today.¹

Iraq, as a society that has had a bittersweet experience with *imposed liberal democracy* over the past two decades, presents an important case that has not received sufficient focus and deliberation in the context of critiquing liberal democracy. In recent years, as Iraq has overcome decades of civil wars, terrorism, and occupation, and entered a stage of relative stability and economic development, scholars have begun to engage more with the Iraqi case as a site of

¹ Transregional Center for Democratic Studies. "Mission." *The New School for Social Research*. Accessed June 4, 2025. <https://blogs.newschool.edu/tcds/about/tcds-home/>

epistemological and critical theoretical development. Scholars like Zahra Ali at Rutgers University, for instance, have begun to position Iraq as a space that could produce theoretically significant insights about liberal democracy, both internally and externally. Through their research initiative *Critical Studies of Iraq*, Ali and her collaborators, both in the West and Iraq, aim to take “Iraq as a framework to develop critical theory, epistemologies, and research agendas in the social sciences, and in women, gender, and feminist studies.”²

Contributing to such efforts, this thesis takes Iraq as an essential case for both challenging and contributing to critical theoretical engagements with liberal democracy as a political-economic category. It more explicitly asks the following research question:

In what ways does the case of post-2003 Iraq offer an external critique of liberal democracy that complements or contradicts existing internal critiques in Western social theory?

To limit the scope of the thesis and in the interest of cohesion, the project has attempted to categorize and systematically analyze the major types of internal critiques of modern liberal democracies that have been developed in the West. Attention has been given to the types that are both theoretically complementary to one another and comparatively compatible with the Iraqi case. Then, the thesis constructs a historical analysis of post-2003 Iraq's experience with liberal democracy as an imported and externally imposed system that ruptured its pre-existing social and political orders. Following that, the thesis explores how Iraqi scholarly engagement with the

² Rutgers University–Newark. 2025. “Critical Studies of Iraq.” *School of Arts and Sciences–Newark*. Accessed June 3, 2025. <https://sasn.rutgers.edu/critical-studies-iraq>.

transformation and conditions of their society challenges or exceeds the boundaries of existing internal critiques in Western academia, particularly in American political sociology.

By attempting to address the above question, the thesis aims to produce sociologically significant results that can be considered relevant for two primary reasons. First, it bridges the gap between Western critiques and Middle Eastern experiences, particularly answering the calls to “center” Iraqi social scientists and activists’ knowledge production.³ Secondly, it contributes to *comparative political sociology* by illuminating how Western political systems function and are perceived when implanted in a postcolonial, post-occupation, and non-Western society.

Comparative political sociology, in this context, is not intended to replicate the frameworks of *comparative politics* in political science but rather to identify a blind spot in how sociology has approached global political transformations, thereby highlighting a gap in sociology's engagement with macro-political transformations across societies. Most political scientists remain within institutional logic, focusing on models, measurements, and generalizability. In political science, liberal democracy is often treated as a normative baseline rather than a historically contingent formation.

In contrast, adopting a sociological perspective, the thesis views it as an imposed structure with profound contradictions when situated within postcolonial and non-Western contexts. The argument that Iraq possesses epistemological agency and that its experience reveals the fault lines within the liberal democratic ideal itself challenges dominant paradigms in political science. Sociology, on the other hand, is better equipped to take on these questions,

³ Rutgers University–Newark

especially given its emphasis on structural complexity, historical specificity, and reflexive critique.

1.1. Organization of the Thesis

Chapter Two provides a concise typology of internal critiques of liberal democracy in the West, based on elite theories, democratic deliberation perspectives, and social justice and feminist perspectives. A clear methodological and theoretical rationality is provided for why these specific theoretical frameworks and perspectives are essential for comparison with the Iraqi case and its perspectives. The essential shared tenets between these three perspectives, along with their differences, are outlined, providing a specific set of concepts that can be operationalized for comparative analysis with the Iraqi case.

Chapter Three explains research methods, sources, and case selection. It outlines its use of the comparative historical method (CHA), explaining the types of historical sources and points of interest that will be examined. It additionally outlines the major Iraqi scholarly perspectives that will be analyzed in Chapter Five. It also explains the case selection, highlighting the uniqueness and relevance of the Iraqi case.

Chapter Four constructs a historical narrative of the key developments in the post-2003 Iraqi political-economic order, with a particular focus on the first seventeen years, outlining the specifically significant developments, rather than providing a detailed analysis of each event. It specifically focuses on four essential developments that have been characteristic of post-2003 Iraq: 1) The external imposition of the liberal democratic system. 2) the formation of what could arguably be considered oligarchic structures due to elite bargains and ethno-sectarian power-sharing (muhasasa). 3) the struggle to develop public discourse and civil society under

occupation, violence, and fragmentation. 4) the layered exclusion of women, minorities, and marginalized communities.

Chapter Five is another essential analytical segment of the thesis, as it brings the Iraqi scholarly reaction and engagement with the three key developments discussed in Chapter Four. It also compares how the dominant Iraqi social scientists and commentators have reacted to these developments.

The Chapter Six, which is the concluding chapter, provides a summary of the key insights developed throughout the thesis, as well as the kinds of implications they have for our understanding of democracy and democratic theory. It specifies how Iraqi scholarly perspectives align with and extend the Western critiques discussed in Chapter Two. It proposes the potential for generalization and extension of this research efforts to other historical experiences with liberal democracy.

CHAPTER TWO: THE CRISES OF POWER, CONSENSUS, AND INEQUALITY: A LITERATURE REVIEW OF INTERNAL CRITIQUES

While there are numerous types of internal critiques of liberal democracy, this thesis focuses on only three of these types, primarily due to concerns over feasibility and relevance to the Iraqi case. These types include critiques that address elite domination, deliberative democracy, and public sphere deficits, as well as concerns related to social justice (e.g., feminist and intersectional critiques). This choice is not meant to argue that other types, including normative internalist, postmodern, and post-liberal perspectives, are irrelevant to this study. Instead, the exclusion is based on the fact that the chosen types are both more complementary with one another in terms of their structuralist approach to analyzing the different crises within liberal democratic societies, as well as comparatively compatible with the Iraqi case. In the following sub-section, I first aim to provide an analytical rationale for the theoretical choices, including those based on factors related to scope and complementarity, relevance to the Iraqi context, and theoretical and comparative value.

2.1. Analytical Rationale: Why These Theories?

As mentioned earlier in this section, the theoretical choices and limitations of the thesis are not based on arbitrary preferences and biases. Instead, they are grounded in a specific analytical and practical rationale. The first dimension is concerned with feasibility and focus, as limiting theoretical engagement to only three perspectives prevent the analysis from becoming diffuse and generic. Each of the three types has a rich but manageable literature, which can be operationalized through historical comparison with Iraqi sources and scholarship. Thus, this theoretical clarity is meant to support methodological rigor and time feasibility.

The second dimension is concerned with theoretical scope and complementarity, as the three theoretical types provide a comprehensive critique of liberal democracy from three structurally distinct vantage points/levels of analysis. Elite theories offer a macro-structural dimension by focusing on power concentration and oligarchic tendencies. The public sphere perspective offers a critique of the institutional and communicative dimensions by examining the quality of deliberation, participation, and legitimacy. Finally, the social justice and intersectional perspectives provide a social and cultural dimension by revealing how liberal democracy reproduces inequalities based on gender, class, sect, and ethnicity. While each addresses a specific blind spot, together they explain who rules, how consensus and legitimacy are (or maybe are not) built, and who is being left out and marginalized by the system. **Table 1**, as shown in the following page, clarifies the complementarity and comparison between these theoretical types.

The third dimension is concerned with relevance to the Iraqi case, as each type of critique can be compatible with a specific dimension of the post-2003 Iraqi socio-political environment. As it will be expanded upon in the later section, post-2003 Iraq has been shaped by the following dimensions, and others: 1) external engineering and imposition of liberal-democratic institutions. 2) the formation of what could be oligarchic structures due to elite bargains and ethno-sectarian power-sharing (muhasasa). 3) the struggle to develop public discourse and civil society under occupation, violence, and fragmentation. 4) the layered exclusion of women, minorities, and marginalized communities. Thus, the first type of critique can be used to compare how entrenched elites and external elites shaped institutions serve narrow interests. The second can be compared to the fragility of deliberate legitimacy, and the third to how democracy was compromised by pre-existing and imported social inequalities. As internationally recognized theoretical frameworks for critically examining liberal democracy, applying these types

comparatively to the Iraqi intellectual critiques has the potential to contribute with theoretical and comparative value, by highlighting universal patterns (e.g., elite capture, erosion of deliberation) and showing unique Iraqi dynamics (e.g., sectarian fragmentation, postcolonial imposition).

Table 1. This analytical table provides a comparative summary of the main types of internal critique discussed in the chapter.

Elite Theories	Material institutions	Empirical-structural analysis	Structural oligarchy behind a democratic façade	Limited reform (Excluding Mills and Domhoff)
Public Sphere Theory	Discursive practices	Critical theory	Colonization of communicative action	Democratization of discourse
Intersectional/Feminist	Intersecting identities	Standpoint epistemology	Systemic exclusion and reproduction of oppression	Transformative equality

2.2. Elite Domination

The tension and contradiction between the promise of popular sovereignty and power concentration, which persist in most modern Western societies that claim to be liberal democracies, has been a central concern of analysis in political sociology. Elite theorists, concerned with the question of power concentration, domination, oligarchic tendencies, and the rationalization and legitimization of a powerful minority's control, are fundamental to the analysis of this contradiction. While differing in their explanations of causation and distinct in their normative values, most elite theorists challenge the conception of popular sovereignty and the pluralistic conception of power propagated by modern Western societies. This tradition of theorists includes a range of scholars, all the way from Max Weber, Vilfredo Pareto, Robert

Michels, and Gaetano Mosca to C. Wright Mills and William Domhoff (Weber 1946; Pareto 1991; Michels 1915; Mosca, 1939; Mills, 1956; Domhoff, 2014), culminating in a wide range of ideological, theoretical, and political stances.

2.2.1. Max Weber: The Classical Foundation of Elite Theory

The classical sociologist Max Weber provides one of the first sociological analyses of the elitist nature of modern national societies, particularly in the context of modern Western liberal capitalist societies. Weber defines the very concept of the modern state as "a compulsory association which organizes domination" and successfully "monopolizes the legitimate use of physical force as a means of domination within a territory" (Weber 1991, 6). Thus, he argues that the very societies that claim to be liberal democratic are embedded in state structures that are motivated by monopolizing material means of violence and, more specifically, force, as well as producing organized domination of the population within its "territory."

To produce this order, Weber contends that the modern state eliminates or absorbs all the independent centers of power in the territory it dominates. This process complements the economic order of modern societies, characterized by capitalist enterprises that dominate and absorb all the smaller units of economic activity present in premodern or early modern societies. While the early efforts of domination are often led by influential leaders (e.g., a prince), over time, legal rational authority and complex state bureaucracies must be established to produce *sustained domination* (6-10). He defines this *bureaucracy* as a hierarchically organized, rule-bound administrative system staffed by experts (30). It is with the development of this bureaucracy and its hierarchical structures that early potentialities of elite domination began, as those who can dominate the pinnacle of the bureaucracy can now also use the machinery of the

state to sustain their domination, which practically does not face any powerful resistance, as it has dominated all the material means of *force*.

The development of the bureaucratic, monopolistic, and legal-rational state also creates opportunities for various political actors, including the emergence of professional politicians in modern societies. The rise of the state as the monopolistic holder of force leads to the emergence of various types of political personalities that aim to either shape or benefit from the system (111–128). Two types of political actors emerge, including those who live *for politics* and those who live *off politics* (111–128). The first category comprises individuals who engage in politics primarily out of passion and personal motivation. The second engages in politics as a vocation, in other words, as a professional vocation under economic conditions of capitalist modernity. Since everyone needs a source of income, and political activity requires time and dedication, economically independent and affluent individuals are more likely to become the first type of politician. Thus, while Weber does not entirely emphasize this, there is a class dynamic to the constitution of the state. However, the existence of the second category reveals that a variety of political and economic elites can coexist, which later class and status-based elite theorists like Mills focus on (Mills 1956)

Specifically, about modern parliamentary and electoral democracies, Weber pays additional attention to the leadership of political parties. He argues that large political parties, such as the Democratic or Republican parties in the US, are powerhouses and political organizations controlled by a group of political elites (30-40). These party elites are not necessarily motivated by ideological or moral convictions, but rather by the desire to maximize power and consolidate their control. Weber contends that sometimes skillful and charismatic

leaders can rise from the bottom. However, if they threaten the power of party elites, they are very likely to be eliminated before they have the chance to achieve actual power (30-40).

While Weber did not speak in purely sociological or psychological terms of inevitability or class-based critique, he laid the groundwork for both right-leaning elitist perspectives and left-leaning critical engagement with oligarchy to emerge. Two significant traditions of elite theory emerged on the two sides of the Atlantic, which can be defined as the following: 1) The Italian-Elitist Critique. 2) The American-Leftist Critique. The following subsections reviews those two theoretical tendencies and traditions.

2.2.2. Pareto, Michels, and Mosca: The Italian-Elitist Critique of Liberal Democracy

Italian elite theorists Vilfredo Pareto, Gaetano Mosca, and Robert Michels produced penetrating critiques of liberal democracy in the late 19th and early 20th century. Instead of critiquing liberal democracy from an external vantage point, these right-leaning intellectuals critiqued democracy on its own terms and promoted ideals. The positionality of the thinkers, stemming from the liberal tradition (for Pareto and Mosca) and disillusioned socialism, had a profound impact on their views and conclusions (Barbieri 2024: 1134). They systematically criticized the emerging Italian parliamentary institutions and the very principle of popular sovereignty, arguing that "there is always a minority that governs a majority" (1135).

While they all agreed on the critique stated above, each developed distinctive sociological concepts to explain why liberal democracy fails on its own terms and suggested different remedies to the system. To begin with, Pareto believed that the democratic ideals of equality and popular sovereignty were "derivations," that were meant to mask the truth that elites have (and will) always govern a ruled-over mass (Pareto 1991). Unlike Weber, Pareto deviated

from structural explanations and focused on psychological traits (1991). For example, he argued that elites possess intellectual "instincts of combination," such as innovation and cunning, which he defined as first-class residues (1991). On the contrary, the masses were characterized by passive and traditionalist traits, which he termed "second-class residues" (1991). Put differently, he believed that the temperaments and abilities of the elites were the basis for their domination.

While Pareto criticized the liberal values for masking such a dismal reality of elite domination, he is not outright against liberal democracy. Pareto initially supported the earlier development of fascism in Italy but later reversed his stance, calling for more reformist approaches (Barbieri 2024: 1134-1140). While he was elitist in his observations, he was deeply concerned with what kinds of elites dominated society. He believed that competence, rather than power, should define the elite-mass dichotomy, which was potentially informed by his earlier economic observations, such as *Pareto Distribution* models. Of course, it could be argued that even competence in modern societies is defined by power, as those who control social institutions also define what is considered a valuable trait, behavior, action, and product.

Like Pareto, Mosca argued that the masses of the people governed no modern national society. Instead, he argued that the ruling elites, or as he specifically defined them as the "political class" (*classe dirigente*), would always prevail (Mosca 1939). More importantly, he directly challenges the concept of popular sovereignty, considering it a *political formula* (1939). In his view, a *political formula* was a set of principles or myths that any ruling minority would use to provide intellectual and moral justification for its rule. In a liberal democracy, this myth is often presented as *liberté, égalité, fraternité* (translation: liberty, equality, fraternity) or the principle of popular sovereignty.

Mosca believed that the elite rule not because of their psychology, but rather due to their organizational capacity, in contrast to the disorganized and fragmented masses. He contended that the political class is more organized and politically savvy in comparison to the masses (1939). A more specific element that needs to be mentioned is that he theorized the existence of both non-governing elites (influential figures in society, such as economic elites) and governing elites (those with direct political power) within every society.⁴ More importantly, it must be acknowledged that Mosca promoted such conceptions of power not to support the elites, but to produce clarity on how to deal with the dismal nature of modern human society in a productive and realistic manner. He rejected fascism in Italy and later came to terms with liberal democracy, as he believed that representative democracy was the most viable option against prevailing alternatives (Barbieri 2024: 1134-1140).

Similar to Mosca, Robert Michels focused on the institutional and organizational factors to explain why elites and oligarchs prevail in society. In his book *Political Parties: A Sociological Study of the Oligarchical Tendencies of Modern Democracy*, Michels argued that, even in democracies, the technical and tactical necessities lead organizations to become oligarchic. Whether it be a large political party or a labor union, once a political organization grows, the need to bureaucratize produces hierarchy and power structures, which ultimately lead to oligarchy (Michels 1915). Michels also asserts that once a political party expands, it must dilute its political project to accommodate such expansion (1915). In the context of democratic societies, therefore, the very imperative to become a majority party diminishes its ability and willingness to address its earlier intensions and agendas. His theory is important for

⁴ The point that elites exist outside the political realm of society is compatible with the American Leftist perspective that will be discussed later.

understanding how the very progressive movements, which claim to be against power hierarchies, can be co-opted in the service of power. Unlike Pareto and Mosca, Michels' dismal view of power, grounded in sociological inevitability, led him to fully support fascism.

While the Austrian American political economist Joseph A. Schumpeter can be categorized among the elite theorists above, additional attention must be given to the productivity and dynamism of his elite theory. For Schumpeter, existing democratic systems are not subverted by elite-mass dichotomy, but somewhat shaped by the dynamic competition between different political elites to produce popular volition (Schumpeter 250-255). In other words, while Schumpeter is critical of the way the "Classical Doctrine of Democracy" conceals these power dynamics, he also acknowledges the efficiency—and perhaps the productivity—of elite competition and what he refers to as the democratic method under certain conditions (271). Pareto shared similar views; however, his theory was more extreme in its perception of the elite-mass dichotomy.

2.2.3. Mills and Domhoff: The American-Leftist Critique of Oligarchy

Contemporary American left-leaning sociologists, like Mills and Domhoff, focus on how networks of elites control the major institutions of society, rendering the pluralistic conception of power in modern liberal societies ineffective and perhaps making it a myth. While Mills focuses on the military, political, and economic institutions, Domhoff is more interested in the economic institutions and elites who have dominated the rest (Domhoff 2013, 128; Mills 1956). They investigate the interlocking elite networks that connect the most powerful actors in the system, allowing this elites to stablish a larger footprint in political decision-making.

Nonetheless, both perspectives assume that, despite the existence of democratic procedures on the surface, liberal democracies are constantly being subverted and undermined by the interests of a small number of actors. Whether it is the elites or corporations, from their perspectives, they have real power in political decision-making, regardless of the electoral outcomes of democratic methods.

Unlike Italian elitist perspectives, this branch of elite theorists believe that class conflict in society, rather than sociological inevitability, is what produces the elite-mass dichotomy. From their point of view, contingent historical material and political transformations placed the elites at the top of the social institution first, who are currently utilizing the same institutions to reproduce their power. Domhoff, in particular, focused on how informal social networks (e.g., universities, think tanks, and social clubs) produce the social cohesion necessary to unite the elites against the mass of American society (Domhoff 2013).

Other critics, such as Noam Chomsky and Edward S. Herman, who focus on the mass media in modern societies as a means of elite domination, contribute to our understanding of how these elites manufacture consent among the dominated masses. In their book *Manufacturing Consent: The Political Economy of the Mass Media*, the two scholars argue that in liberal democratic societies such as the United States, the media is not a neutral informer or a democratic watchdog as often conceptualized as the *Fourth Estate* (Chomsky and Herman 2002). Instead, it functions as a propaganda machine that advances the interests of the social elites. Instead of the covert mechanisms present in authoritarian regimes, the propaganda model conceptualized by Chomsky manufactures consent through the mass media industry, which reproduces dominant ideologies and suppresses and silences dissent (2002). This concept is, in principle, similar to Mosca's concept of *political formula*.

2.3. Deliberative Democracy and Public Sphere Deficits

Based on Jürgen Habermas's concept of the public sphere and his theory of communicative action, liberal democracy is an inclusive space for public deliberation. What makes democracy more productive and inclusive is its ability to allow members and segments of the public to deliberate with one another regarding social problems and issues of social importance, thereby reaching a rational and socially beneficial understanding through *communicative action* (Calhoun 1992; Habermas 1984). More specifically, Habermas's classical model of the public sphere envisions a space separated from capitalist markets and the modern state, where "private individuals [can come] together as a public" to discuss the collective and common interests of their society (Habermas, 1996: 306). Based on this perspective, democratic legitimacy can only be derived from public deliberation, as citizens are capable of freely exchanging arguments and validating or rejecting norms "by the force of the better" argument rather than pure material or ideological power (Habermas 1991: 176). In this sense, there are two central elements to a functioning deliberative liberal democracy: first, people have the space to convene and deliberate on common issues freely. The second pertains to the fact that members of society are rational beings who would submit to the argument of a fellow citizen once they perceive that the argument of the *other* is more convincing than that which they have for the promotion of the public good.

However, Habermas and other theorists who apply the concept of deliberative democracy contend that capitalist societies distort communication and, as a result, prevent genuine democratic will-formation. According to his view, the public sphere has become dominated by interest groups, corporate media, and state spin, which, as a result, turns the public sphere into a pseudo-public arena (Habermas 2022: 146). He argued that as soon as the bourgeois public

sphere expanded beyond the propertied men (i.e. property-owning elites—capitalists), socioeconomic inequality could not be put aside and became a subject of public debate, contestation, and contention. More importantly, the debate "was no longer a matter of rational-critical analysis," but rather a continuing negotiation between different groups, with conflicting interests (i.e. material interests), who bypassed the function of public reasoning (Habermas 1989: 127). As a result, he concluded that what can be observed in modern Western liberal democracies is an "impoverished pseudo-public sphere" that is constantly manipulated by elites through various efforts (e.g. public relations), a point that resonates with Chomsky and colleagues' concept of manufactured consent (Habermas 1991). In this context, the role of the public sphere gets reduced to the enthusiastic public approval and praise of "decisions which have already been made" (Habermas 1989: 176, 236). Thus, the public sphere, claimed to be an open forum for rational, critical, and constructive debate, becomes "colonized" by power, where political and economic elites can dictate policy behind closed doors of the establishment, while the *pseudo-public sphere* provides a simulacrum of debate and public deliberation.

Theorists like Nancy Fraser take the concept to a more critical level while keeping it within the boundaries of internal critique. She critiques the classical liberal public sphere, not by rejecting its ideals but by challenging its assumptions. Fraser critiques the classical public sphere's assumption that social equality exists in modern societies (Fraser 1992, 109). She calls for the concept of "participatory parity" as a condition for a genuinely democratic society to exist (Fraser 1997). This concept would mean that all the structural barriers that produce marginalization in the representative democracies of late capitalist societies must be addressed.

Those critical perspectives on the public sphere are more concerned with the liberal democratic paradox of "redistribution" vs "recognition." Prominent critiques (e.g., Fraser and,

later, Axel Honneth) argue that liberal democracies tend to ignore social inequalities as a matter of personal fate (i.e., personal failure or success) rather than a collective decision or responsibility (i.e., a political issue) (Fraser 1990; Fraser and Axel 2003). The normative structure of the liberal democracies is rooted in bourgeois values, which tend to “privatize” social, political, and economic stratification (1990). This conclusion leads Fraser to argue that eliminating socioeconomic inequalities is central to a functioning public sphere (2003). Put differently, the existence of these inequalities negates the presence of a genuine democracy.

By segregating redistribution (material justice) from recognition (cultural justice), liberal democracies become “complicit” with the ongoing marginalization and exclusion (2003). Economic conflicts, interests, and inequalities do not get channeled into the public sphere, but rather into lobbying and private deals—a point that the American Leftist Critiques of Elite (e.g., Domhoff) also emphasized. Thus, without true democratization, the liberal public sphere justifies inequalities through providing formal inclusions while obscuring the structural inequalities by segregating them as private matters (1990). For instance, welfare states historically confined racial minorities and women’s struggles to the private sphere, which obscured their marginalization in education and wages. Another example is how much of the election debates are often focused on cultural justice and recognition, while ignoring the enormous economic disparities that exist in modern societies.

A similar, yet opposing, strand of internal critiques is radical democracy, also known as “agonistic democracy,” which includes thinkers such as Mark Wenman and Chantal Mouffe. They disagree with the deliberative perspective’s assumption that consensus is the primary purpose of democratic societies. In *The Return of the Political*, Mouffe showcases that what the Western “triumphalists” like Fukuyama – whom later qualified and even retracted his earlier

assessment – claimed to be the universal victory of liberal democracy was followed by the explosion of "particularism" based on religion, ethnicity, and nationalism, following the ideological conflicts that arose after the end of the Cold War (Mouffe 1993, 42). Thus, she suggests that liberal democracy depoliticizes legitimate social conflict by pressuring consensus. In *Agonistic Democracy: Constituent Power in the Era of Globalization*, Wenman pushes a similar argument by contending that political contestation and conflict, rather than consensus, could be a positive force for social and political progress (Wenman 2013), thus reaffirming a central tenet of conflict theory as put forth, e.g., by Ralf Dahrendorf.

Additionally, they argue that consensus-driven models of democracy inherently silence dissent. They borrow the concept of hegemony from Anthoni Gramsci, arguing that the kinds of debates promoted by thinkers like Habermas can become a vehicle for reproducing the dominant ideology, particularly once counter-voices (i.e., counter-hegemonic forces) are marginalized (1999). Mouffe, for example, argued that public discourse is inherently ideological, and always moving within a particular hegemonic framework (1999: 756) This means that, under current conditions of modern societies, some interests (the hegemonic ones) will always shape policies more than others (the marginalized ones). In practice, therefore, democratic legitimacy stems from the continual contestation of hegemonic interests rather than a permanent closure, meaning that the heart of democracy rests in accepting conflict as democratic and rivals as legitimate.

2.4. Social Justice, Feminist, and Intersectional Critiques

Western feminist and intersectional critiques of liberal democracy focus on how gender, race, and class are treated within liberal-democratic institutions. Based on these perspectives, the classical theory's construction of the "neutral" citizen as an equalized mass is a mirage disconnected from the reality of inequality and stratification present in modern Western societies.

Historically, feminists and other social justice-motivated movements and intellectuals have struggled to restructure, or more accurately, rework democracy from within, rather than attempting to dismantle or delegitimize it. Their objective remains upholding liberal societies in accordance with their claimed values by demanding that the ideals of equality and representation be genuinely applied to all people, rather than a category of the population, which, they argue, has historically consisted of typically white, male, property owners. Below subsections elaborate on several dimensions based on which these perspectives construct their critiques.

2.4.1. The Public/Private Divide and Gender

Feminists, particularly, trace a blind spot in liberal democracies as systems inherently embedded in patriarchal structures, which is the construction of the private-public sphere. They argue that traditional political theory represented the public sphere as masculine and the private (e.g., home, childcare, and reproduction) as feminine, effectively sidelining women from political representation and excluding their work (e.g., care labor) from politics (Gould 1983). Constraining equal citizenship and civil rights to the public sphere alone meant that gender domination and exploitation remained intact in the private realm, where many of the women's rights were constrained. Carol C. Gould, for instance, argues that the separation between the private and the public spheres undermines democratic values (Gould 1983). Gould critiques the way many of women's rights and concerns, such as domestic work, household responsibilities, and reproductive labor, are relegated to the private sphere, preventing them from advancing women's rights as legitimate in the democratic process (1983). In practice, this means that women might be given abstract and formal political rights (e.g., voting rights) while remaining dominated and unequal in the private sphere at home (e.g., domestic abuse, unequal parental power, financial dependency).

Feminist theorists, such as Susan Okin and Carole Pateman, have extended their critique to argue that the values on which liberal societies are based are in themselves patriarchal and hegemonically masculine (Okin 1979). Okin, in a symbolic response to the classical phrase by Thomas Jefferson, argued that the very liberal political values of individualism, rationality, and abstraction were "created by, for, and about men", making the inclusion of women in the system meaningless without transforming the patriarchal values in which it is predicated (Okin 1998: 118).

Similarly, Fraser focuses on what is or is not accepted as legitimate discourse in the liberal public sphere. In her book, *Unruly Practices: Power, Discourse, and Gender in Contemporary Social Theory*, Fraser goes beyond Habermas's conception of the public sphere and integrates Michel Foucault's critiques of the *liberal normative framework* and how it excludes and marginalizes other legitimate debates and issues, including those of women, racial and ethnic minorities, and lower classes (Fraser 1989). In other words, it is not only the separation of the public and private spheres that is the problem, but the very liberal normative framework, which is undermined by patriarchal, classist, and racial power dynamics.

To combat this deficiency, feminist scholars have constantly argued that the "privatized" inequalities in liberal democratic societies are deeply political. This strand of theory, particularly the work of care ethics theorists, asserts that characteristics traditionally associated with women, such as relationality, responsibility, and empathy, should be leveraged to reshape public imagination and values, thereby determining what constitutes a true democratic society (Okin 1998: 119). Such society would be grounded in interdependence among citizens rather than individualistic competition. The imposition of these feminine values implies that women would not need to assimilate their behavior and values to the abstract and atomistic forms of agency that

patriarchal masculinity imposes. This imposition would also bring forward practical policy implications. For instance, liberal democracies would address privatized inequalities by pushing for policies that emphasize inter-dependency, such as public childcare, paid family leave, and universal healthcare.

2.4.2. Structural Exclusion and the Intersectional Lens:

The contradictory nature of liberal democracies is that while they claim to guarantee equal civil and political rights, their critics (including feminists and intersectional critics) argue that those formal equalities can coexist and even reproduce systemic asymmetries of power. In *Inclusion and Democracy*, the eminent feminist critic Iris Young famously argued that injustices are not a product of mere wrong decisions or policies, but rather a product of the very flawed structure of modern democracies. She argued that the marginalized face "five faces of oppression," which are exploitation, marginalization, powerlessness, cultural imperialism, and violence (Young 2014: 13-22). A liberal process, she argues, overlooks these dynamics (2014: 4). For instance, the rich and the poor are given the same vote, but the former lacks the resources, time, and a sense of belonging and worth, while the latter possesses and dominates all of them.

Intersectional perspectives, including influential scholars such as Kimberlé Crenshaw, extend the prior discussion by explaining how multiple social categories (i.e., structures of oppression) intersect and overlap. For instance, Crenshaw critiqued both the earlier feminist and civil rights legal frameworks, which tended to treat race as being separate from gender (Crenshaw 1989). As the feminist movements and reforms focused on white women and the civil rights focused on Black men's rights, the black women—who are simultaneously oppressed based on both identities—got ignored and excluded from the reform (Crenshaw 1989). Liberal democratic institutions, laws, and frameworks, based on this perspective, suffer from what could

be understood as a "single axis" bias. For instance, laws against criminal injustices are targeted at Black men, while laws against gender-based work abuse assume white women. Those who are at the intersection of both identities, i.e., Black women, will face a unique harm and discrimination that neither law can recognize.

Intersectional scholars have researched how the intersection of different forms of oppression produces unique experiences, and how these experiences are concealed in liberal democracies across different societies. Timothy Black and Sky Keyes's "Voices from the Margins: Low-Income Fatherhood in the Era of Neoliberalism," and Rebecca Helman and colleagues' "Young People's Reproductions of the 'Father as Provider' Discourse: Intersections of Race, Class, Culture, and Gender within a Liberal Democracy" contend with such structural contradictions. The second article analyzes how the legal rights provided by liberal democracy in South Africa overshadow the entrenched racial, gendered, and class-based inequalities inherited from apartheid and global capitalism, which pushes responsibilities onto low-income fathers who are structurally constrained (Black and Keyes 2021). The first article offers a similar critique within the US context, incorporating the impact of neoliberalism into the analysis (Helman et al 2016).

Based on this perspective, minorities and marginalized communities must not only be included in the political conversations, but the very questions posed by the system should also be transformed in response to their presence. Looking back at Nancy Fraser's *recognition* and *distribution* concepts, a genuinely inclusive democracy would require both. Recognition implies that people should be respected and recognized culturally and politically in terms of voice and visibility, but structural material inequalities should also be addressed too—and that is

redistribution. Liberal democracies focus on the first (e.g., procedural equality, cultural tolerance) while ignoring the latter (systemic disadvantages).

From the public sphere to state structures, this perspective holds that liberal democracies often conceal, sustain, and perpetuate existing hierarchies in modern societies. Political parties and other deliberative bodies can become an extension of the power of elites and dominant groups. Young, for instance, has argued that what have been branded as neutral bodies (e.g., media, parliament) can become vehicles for expanding implicit norms and structures of behavior and speech that reproduce the power asymmetries discussed earlier (Young 1989).

Nonetheless, it is essential to reiterate that this type of internal critique is more focused on promoting inclusion within the liberal democratic framework rather than dismantling it. In other words, it resonates with Antonio Gramsci's critique of civil society and hegemony in the 20th century, in that liberal values claim to apply universally but exclude the marginalized (Buttigieg 1995). The goal here is not to dismantle liberal democracy or question its value, but to identify who is being excluded and, thereby, to advocate for greater inclusiveness in the democratic discourse and process.

CHAPTER THREE: METHODOLOGICAL APPROACH

The thesis will primarily employ the method of comparative historical analysis (CHA) as developed by a range of social sciences (at the forefront of which is sociology and comparative politics), with utilization of meta-theoretical orientations resemblant to that approached by the CHA's major accumulative projects on the origins of democracy and authoritarianism (e.g., work by Barrington Moore, Jr. and Guillermo O'Donnell), as well as the single-case (Small-N more broadly) approach which fits the objectives of this thesis the most (Mahoney and Rueschemeyer 2003). By primarily utilizing James Mahony and Dietrich Rueschemeyer's *Comparative Historical Analysis in Social Sciences*, the following paragraphs and sub-sections will attempt to briefly justify why the CHA is the most fitted method for this thesis and elaborate on the specific ways it integrates CHA into its historical analysis of post-2003 Iraq.

As stated above, I shall first attempt to justify why CHA best fits the project at hand, and in turn, why this project contributes to the accumulative efforts of this subfield of social science. Firstly, CHA allows for the interaction between theory and history which is central to the premise of this thesis (Mahoney and Rueschemeyer 2003: 21-24). What distinguishes CHA from narrative history is that theory is utilized to capture the specific conditions, processes, developments, or simply social forces that produce specific historical outcomes in certain societies compared to others (Mahoney and Rueschemeyer 2003: xvii, 21-24). In that light, this thesis is not producing a general narrative history of post-2003 Iraq but rather investigates specific dynamics that characterized the impositions of liberal democracy in the country. The critiques established by the typology of theoretical perspectives reviewed in the preceding chapter will be used to capture the specific developments in post-2003, that is the systematic elite capture of power, the deficiency and exclusivity of public spheres, and the structural exclusiveness and

discriminatory nature of the system. In turn, the historical analysis of Iraq and the development of Iraqi perspectives will serve as an evaluation of these internal critiques. It is this interaction between theory and history that contributes to CHA.

Secondly, CHA scholars (Barrington Moore Jr. particularly) contended that not only the way a historical sequence or process unfolds determines its outcomes, but also where that sequence or process is placed in history (Mahoney 2003: 152). In other words, the fact that a liberal democratic system was established in Iraq in the aftermath of the 2003 war and occupation implies fundamental implications on the outcomes of the system. If a form of liberal democracy was established in a different historical period (as it was the case in monarchical Iraq), the outcomes might have differed. More importantly, other CHA Scholars (e.g., Immanuel Wallerstein) have contended that the position of a society within the World System has implications on the development of its political economy (Chase-Dunn and Hall 1993). By framing the argument of this thesis as concerned with the imposition of liberal democracy in post-2003, the aim is to express awareness and sensitivity to the centrality of temporal placing and geographical positionality within world historic changes.

Thirdly, it is somewhat self-explanatory that CHA implies comparative social analysis across societies but does not necessarily require a large number of cases (or what methodologists like to call big-N) or multiple cases for a study to be justified. As a matter fact, CHA scholars, such as Dietrich Rueschemeyer, have argued that a single case can yield strong theoretical gains (Rueschemeyer 2003: 307-310). He argued that social science classics, such as Roberto Michels's *Political Parties: A Sociological Study of the Oligarchical Tendencies of Modern Democracy*, Seymour Martin Lipset and colleagues' *Union Democracy: The Internal Politics of the International Typographical Union*, and E. P. Thompson's *The Making of the English*

Working Class, indicate that the study of a single case can yield enormous theoretical gains that can be transferable to other cases as well as fundamentally reshape our theoretical understanding of the social world (Rueschemeyer 2003: 308-310). Under the same light, the topic of this thesis, while concerned with Iraq, attempts to illustrate what the Iraqi case provides us in terms of theoretical and historical analysis that has the potential to contribute to our larger theoretical understanding of liberal democracy. By doing so, it can develop certain critiques, hypotheses, or explanations that can be examined in societies with a similar scope of conditions.⁵

Finally, while CHA is generally concerned with causality, such causality can be derived from a plurality of theoretical vantage points (Mahoney and Rueschemeyer 2003: 7-10). It is this category that causes the thesis to somewhat deviate from established conventions of the CHA. The thesis does not directly answer the typical question formulation of “under what condition x leads to y?” associated with this sub-discipline. Nonetheless, it does not avoid the realm of causality completely, as it does illustrate how the inherent problems characteristic of modern democracies (as outlined by internal critiques in the previous chapter) can produce contradictory and destructive outcomes when imposed under the condition of post-war societies. Additionally, it aims to illustrate how the initial institutional and policy configuration in the post-2003 Iraqi state formation shaped the later outcomes.

3.1. Research Design

There is a range of approaches a scholar can follow within the CHA tradition/subfield, including within-case process tracing, cross-case comparison, macro-causal/large-N historical analysis, configurational analysis, and counterfactual/thought experiment analysis (Mahoney and

⁵ In principle, this thesis will serve as a foundation to be expanded to a comparative historical study of similar historical cases by the author’s future projects.

Rueschemeyer 2003). This thesis primarily employs within-case process tracing, combined with configurational analysis, to reconstruct the sequence of political developments in Iraq after 2003, identifying the mechanisms and conjunctures that shaped the imposed political order. The research is not intended to establish a universal causal law but to generate theoretical placing of Iraq's post-2003 historical trajectory in dialogue with three strands of democratic internal critiques identified in the preceding chapter: elite theory, deliberative democracy, and intersectional approaches. Thus, the purpose here is explicitly more exploration than causality. The purpose is not to adjudicate with certainty between elite, deliberative, or intersectional critiques, but to examine how Iraq's democratic trajectory resonates with, challenges, or extends these traditions.

3.1.1. Within-Case Process Tracing

Design logic:

Iraq is analyzed as a single case of externally imposed democratization. Process tracing is employed to uncover causal sequences, critical junctures, and mechanisms within the post-2003 order. This method is particularly suited to analyzing how external interventions interacted with internal elite configurations and social cleavages in contingent and path-dependent ways.

Steps:

1. Chronological reconstruction of Iraq's political and social trajectory (2003–2020), including regime collapse, constitutional drafting, elections, sectarian civil wars, stabilization, and protest movements.
2. Identification of critical junctures (e.g., 2005 constitution, 2006 sectarian war, 2010 deadlock, 2019 uprising) where alternative paths were possible.

3. Tracing mechanisms connecting external imposition, elite domination, deliberative failures, and social inequalities.
4. When necessary and appropriate, weighing rival explanations using available evidence (e.g., Was sectarianism a product of institutional design, or primarily of pre-existing social cleavages?).

Evidence base:

- Primary sources (Coalition Provisional Authority orders, constitutional texts, electoral laws, party programs, official speeches, UN/NGO reports). Since the research is unable to be present physically in Iraq, the primary sources utilized in these are mainly acquired from online platforms (e.g. archives and official websites).
- Secondary scholarly works on Iraq's political, social, and economic developments.

Conjunctural approach:

Outcomes are understood as the result of conjunctural causation (i.e., the interplay of multiple factors (external intervention, elite patronage, sectarian fragmentation, neoliberal reforms, gendered exclusions) rather than linear causality.

3.2. Iraqi Perspectives and Scholarly Sources:

In parallel with CHA, the thesis aims to establish a comparative analysis between the way Iraqi scholars critiqued the post-2003 Iraqi political system and the typology of Western internal critiques established earlier. Below is a list of relevant scholarly sources and perspectives that will be potentially included. To be included in the list, the scholar must belong to one of the following categories: 1) Essential intellectual authority in the political sociology of modern Iraqi

society. 2) Comparatively compatible with the typology of internal critiques established earlier.

3) Directly critiques the political system of post-2003 Iraq. Not all scholars will be utilized equally, and the more contemporary ones that directly deal with the democratization process and democratic system will be prioritized. While most of those scholars have available sources in English, if I happen to utilize any Arabic text, I will provide a thorough translation as a native.

The First Category: Foundational and Classical Authorities on Iraqi Society

- Ali Al-Wardi: Recognized as one of the most influential sociologists of modern Iraq and the founder of Iraqi sociology, Al-Wardi's analyses of Iraqi social structures, sectarian dynamics, and the tension between Bedouin and civic values provide a critical background for interpreting the fragility of democratic institutions. His work offers a *longue durée* perspective indispensable for sitting contemporary critiques.
- Faleh A. Jabar: As a prominent political sociologist and leading authority on Iraqi state formation, sectarianism, and the rise of hybrid political orders, Jabar's scholarship directly interrogates the underlying sociological and ideological currents that shaped the post-2003 order. His analysis of Shi'a political mobilization and the fragmentation of public authority are particularly relevant to understanding elite capture and the limitations of the public sphere.

The Second Category: Scholars Compatible with Internal Critiques

- Saad Salloum: An advocate for religious and ethnic pluralism, Salloum's work examines how minority communities have navigated the emergent political system and the erosion of inclusive citizenship, contributing an intersectional dimension that complements feminist and intersectional critiques.

- Massaab Al-Aloosy: His analyses of Iraqi foreign policy and internal governance highlight the contradictions inherent in externally imposed democratization projects and the agency of local actors in shaping outcomes, making his work compatible with elite theory and critiques of liberal hegemony.
- Zahra Ali: Through critical assessments of gender politics, civil society, and women's activism, Zahra Ali's scholarship interrogates the social and structural exclusions reproduced under the post-2003 order. Her work foregrounds feminist and intersectional critiques of the limits of liberal democracy in Iraq.
- Fanar Haddad: As a prominent voice on sectarian politics and identity, Haddad's work situates the post-2003 order within broader debates on nationalism, exclusion, and the instrumentalization of communal identities, aligning with intersectional and public sphere critiques.

The Third Category: Direct Critiques of Liberal Democracy in Post-2003 Iraq

- Ali A. Allawi: Drawing on his experience in government and deep historical knowledge, Allawi offers a critical narrative of the failures and unintended consequences of Iraq's reconstruction, problematizing the ideal of a liberal democratic transformation.
- David Ghanim: His scholarship provides a detailed assessment of state fragmentation, the entrenchment of sectarian patronage networks, and the persistence of authoritarian practices under democratic veneers, resonating strongly with elite theory and critiques of democratic hollowing.
- Zaid Al-Ali: An authority on Iraq's constitutional process, Al-Ali offers important critiques of how legal and institutional frameworks were manipulated to entrench power

among narrow elites, undermining participatory legitimacy and accountability, core concerns in both elite and public sphere critiques.

3.3. Case Selection and the Scope of Conditions: The Specific Case of Iraq

It should be clarified that this study does not aim to develop a general theory of democratic transition. Quite the contrary, my study suggests that the outcomes are specific and contingent on the specific spatiotemporal context they exist within. The “democracy” that was promoted by Americans in Iraq, in its logic and implementation, was radically distinct from that which was put into place in the post-War Germany and Japan, or the African societies today through development programs and pressures. The specificity of the dynamics that characterize the Iraqi national society are also unique in comparison to elsewhere. This acknowledgement of the contingency is essential here, as it both clarifies the uniqueness of my study and how social phenomena, and their outcomes change across spatiotemporal dimensions.

3.3.1. What Is Iraq?

Most studies on Iraq and its political transition and reality neglect a very important question and take it for granted: What is Iraq? Is it a people, a territory, a geography, a culture, a state, a social formation, or a national society? Does it have deep-rooted historical and civilizational foundations or is it purely a product of Western *colonialism* and the *World System* it is embedded in? To answer these questions, the thesis specifies the definition and distinction to the following: Iraq is a national society that emerged because of the formation of the Iraqi state and cotangent upon the expansion of modernity, outcomes of World War I, and the subsequent British colonial rule and mandate. Here, a *national society* is meant to signify a historically constructed, institutionally sustained social system that integrates:

1. State Power – Political governance and legal order (Weber, Tilly)
2. Collective Identity – Shared culture, language, and history (Anderson, Gramsci)
3. Institutional Stability – Economic, legal, and social frameworks (Luhmann, Giddens)

There are different interpretations of Iraq's origins and national history. Those who ruled the central state in Baghdad often linked the modern national society to the history of the geography it was embedded in (Tripp 2007:1–7). Often, this meant connecting the history of Iraq all the way back to the Mesopotamian civilization and ancient Near Eastern origins. This allowed the modern state to distinguish itself from its Arab and Muslim surroundings. Nonetheless, the Arab nationalist and Islamist currents often tried to mix that identity and history with the larger pan-Arab and pan-Islamic contexts 2007:1–7).

However, objectively speaking, there cannot be any discussion of an Iraqi modern national society prior to the early 20th century. In 1918, the Ottoman Empire lost World War I. The Empire was dissolved and divided into new states. Based on the Sykes-Picot Agreement, the British took control of the provinces of Baghdad, Basra, and Mosul. In 1920, they received the mandate over the Mandatory Iraq as designated by the *League of Nations*. In 1921, they installed King Faisal I, a Hashemite prince. Iraq began to be governed by a constitutional monarchy, which had certain elements of the democratic methods and institutions (2007:76–77). At this point, a distinctively Iraqi politics began, as the different groups and individuals began their quest to capture the keys of power and dominate the echelons of the central state in Baghdad (2007:4). The emergence of the new national society also meant that the people, who inhabited the geography of current Iraq had to grapple with the new state structures and national identity

that were being imposed on them (2007:1). Since this geography was diverse and included different interests, cultures, identities, and forms of organization, Iraq as an emergent property was always in a crisis of governance.

As the constitutional monarchy began to face serious challenges throughout its geography, it began to develop a militarized state structure to both impose the system as well as modernize the society. However, the very militarized state institutions it built came back to haunt it, as the elite officers began to challenge the civilian forms of governance and *civil society*. In other words, the militarization of the Iraqi society and state, that would later lead to Saddam Husain's rule and Ba'ath party, were indeed a weakness of the state and a sign of the erosion of its legitimacy. Thus, what Saddam Husain and the Ba'ath regime represented later on was a state ruled by a minority of Sunni Arab elites and sustained through constant overt state violence and internal and external wars. It was a fragile state in its own way, and it would have probably collapsed, even without the American invasion. Nonetheless, the U.S. invasion accelerated the erosion and the collapse of the first Iraqi national society.

Therefore, it is false to assume that what was changed in 2003 was just the transformation of the Iraqi regime, it was instead the formation of a new state. This is what makes the Iraqi case of democratic impositions distinct. It was revolutionary in nature, as it dismantled the previous state institutions, completely ended its monopoly on violence, brought the massive Shia electoral power into the center of politics, constituted a federalized government, and distributed power between a much larger number of elites from different ethnic and religious groups. In that sense, the Iraqi politics of today is distinctively complex and multi-faceted in comparison to much of the region.

However, for this new national society and its order to emerge, Iraq went through several civil wars, wars on terror, and an expansion of the state security and administrative structures. Nonetheless, and unlike other similar cases like Afghanistan, the Iraqi state was able to defend its system and suppressing other alternatives, such as an Islamic State. Iraq was able to sustain its democratic framework at an institutional level, as much as it is being continuously influenced by elite power, sectarian divisions, and economic exploitation by a small minority of elites and their patronages. As the post-2003 Iraq national society is an emerging property that is still in its process of formation, the study of its system is challenging, but also worth-while, as there is a large amount of data and interest available in relation to this topic.

3.3.2. Why Iraq?

Iraq is a critical case of democracy imposition, where democratization was pursued with maximum ideological and military force but resulted in widespread violence, sectarian fragmentation, and elite competition. Unlike Germany or Japan, where democratization followed military occupation but retained bureaucratic structures, Iraq's state was entirely dismantled before democratic mechanisms were introduced, creating a power vacuum that allowed for multiple power centers to emerge, fostering instability and prolonged conflict. The absence of strong institutional frameworks and the rapid introduction of electoral mechanisms enabled factional politics to dominate, further deepening divisions and entrenching violence as a political tool.

However, at the same time, the system did not completely collapse or disintegrate, as it has been the case in many African countries, or more similarly, Afghanistan. The Civilian government has been able to impose a civil government structure over time. The integrity of the state and its democratic functionaries are also functional, as Iraq has elected more than 5

presidents, 7 prime ministers, and 6 speakers of parliament in elections that have been considered at least relatively free and fair by the United Nations and other international observers (Freedom House 2025; European Parliament EOM 2021; Al Jazeera 2010). Thus, the Iraqi case provides a unique situation, where democratic imposition has produced contradictory outcomes that cannot be generally considered fully negative or positive, but rather transformative.

The second reason making Iraq an excellent case selection is its representation of a specific logic of liberal democracy that developed in the Western societies in the Cold War societies. Thus, understanding and elaborating on the Iraqi case, can explain the larger transformation in the system over the last few decades and can open the door to question the presuppositions that govern our understanding of major democratic societies – such as the United States– too. In his “How to Tell That the Chain Saw Is Coming for America,” the prominent American commentator Thomas L. Friedman has recently argued that the current wave attacks on the U.S. government and institutions \is similar in logic to what was imposed in post-2003 Iraq (Friedman 2025). In other words, the contradictory policies and outcomes of post-2003 Iraq are still relevant to understanding the current crises of democracy many modern national societies are facing.

CHAPTER FOUR: POST-2003 IRAQ AS AN IMPOSED LIBERAL DEMOCRATIC SYSTEM:

4.1. Introduction to Tracing Processes of Imposition:

This chapter constructs a historical analysis of Iraq's experience with imposed liberal democracy between 2003 and 2020, with particular attention to elite capture of power, the undermining of the public sphere, and how the new order reproduced the old forms of exclusion and produced new ones at a social level, including along the gender and other intersectional lines. As explained in the previous chapter, the thesis employs a process tracing approach to connect key decisions (e.g., the disbanding of the Ba'ath state, constitutional design, and electoral laws) to later outcomes. Additionally, it situates this tracing within conjunctural analysis by connecting the Iraqi experience to broader regional and historical contexts (e.g., post-September 11 US foreign policy and Iraq's particular sectarian histories). The historical construction below traces the period of Iraqi history between 2003 and 2020 (what the thesis has thus far referred to as post-2003 Iraq), which spans from the invasion and subsequent occupation by the United States to the more recent protest waves in 2019 ("October Uprising" – ثورة التشرين). The historical period from 2020 to the moment of writing this thesis has been excluded, due to its distinctiveness, the lack clarity on its study, and the yet unfolding nature of it. Nonetheless, periodically, the chapter might recall certain events from the "present" if that aids the construction of the past's sequences. The following subsections highlight three core phenomena, as outlined below.

Firstly, the elite captured power through what would later be considered *Muahasasa* (محاسسة), an Arabic word that indicates dividing shares of power. In attempting to develop a

competitive democratic system, the post-invasion state-building process produced a narrow, sectarian-based governing coalition that would later utilize the democratic electoral system as a political formula to legitimize and reproduce its power. As the British expert of Iraq Toby Dodge argues, “[the] principal vision that dominated Iraq’s political field after 2003, the Muhasasa Ta’ifiya or sectarian apportionment system, was largely developed in exile in the early 1990s and brought back by the US-aligned formerly exiled politicians after the Ba’athist regime had been removed” (Dodge 2019). The pre-War elites (who were predominantly Sunni Arabs in identity and Ba'athist in ideological orientation) were replaced by Shia and Kurdish elites (and some Sunnis later on) and organizations of power (i.e. political parties and militias) who structured the post-War Iraqi institutions (armed forces, bureaucracy, oil sector, etc.) as patrimonial structures to entrench their power and increase the loyalty of their networks (Mako 2019). These elites have also been deeply connected to external regional and global powers, which protect their interests during moments of crisis in return for providing spheres of influence to these powers, transforming Iraq from its arguably world-historic position as semi-peripheral to a completely peripheral status (Dodge 2006, Alribeawi 2022).

The second phenomenon is the erosion of the public sphere, as earlier efforts by Iraqis to develop a free and inclusive national public sphere were undermined by internal (elite and power organizations) and external (domination by great powers) interests that sought to divide and censor the population. Although the collapse and fall of Saddam Hussein and his brutally repressive regime briefly reopened a free space for media and what could be argued as 'civic' debate, powerful interests soon controlled the debate and discourse through funded media and the closure of dissent. For instance, in his article "Read All about It: The Free Press, Public Sphere, and Democracy in Iraq," the Australian expert Benjamin Isakhan documented the efforts

of several foreign powers (e.g., the US, Iran, and Saudi Arabia) to "manipulate" and "fund" the Iraqi media outlets that would further their geopolitical and economic interests (Benjamin 2006). At the same time, authorities in both Baghdad and Erbil used closures and propaganda to "control and silence" the Iraqi public (2006). He contends that such control was never total, and the Iraqi public sphere remains resistant to complete control (2006). Nonetheless, the Iraqi national public sphere that could have flourished was instead co-opted by sectarian, family, and oligarchic political, and external interference.

The third phenomenon is the exclusionary nature of the post-2003 Iraqi political order, which systematically marginalized key political groups through the 2005 constitution drafting and political restructuring, which institutionalized exclusion as argued by Mako (2019). The political exclusionary dynamics were accompanied by the exacerbation of socio-economic inequalities through the neoliberal "shock therapy" imposed by the Coalition Provisional Authority (CPA) and the large, corrupt patron-client structures that emerged within the new order (Dodge 2019: 40-45; Whyte 2007; Looney 2004). Under the foreign supervision, the predominantly Shiite and Kurdish elites "deliberately marginalized minorities" throughout the process, including the previously dominant Suni population but also historically oppressed and marginalized ethno-religious groups (e.g., Assyrian Christians, Yazidis, Turkmens). While the Sunnis have gradually regained some of their influence through the threat of terrorism, insurrection, accumulated capital, and regional support (Jaboori 2013; Al-Hashimi 2023; Al-Hashimi 2020; Faris 2024), the historically marginalized groups remain almost wholly excluded from political decision-making power. Gender equality, while propagated through formal commitments (e.g., the 25% women parliamentary Quota), has been co-existing and undermined by deeply entrenched patriarchal tendencies and constraints, as several reports have indicated

that Iraqi women face "gender discrimination, lack of institutional and financial support, [and] weak politics" that have limited their practical influence (Mohammed 2023; Ali 2024; Alkhudary 2020). An intersectional lens is necessary to capture this exclusionary reality at its fullest extent, as a lower-class Yazidi woman might be theorized as the most oppressed section of the Iraqi society, as all these exclusionary dimensions interact (Sommers 2020: 526-528; Grieco 2022/2023). This combined oppression became clear when the security situation collapsed in 2014 and both authorities in Baghdad and Erbil left more than 6,500 Yazidi women become sex slaves at the hand of the Islamic State in Iraq and Syria (ISIL).

Together, these phenomena showcase that the Iraqi "liberal democracy, designed by both external occupation powers and local elite, became a formula for elite bargaining and exclusion rather than an open and egalitarian system. The sections below construct an interpretive sequence of events from 2003 onward, periodized based on their substantial contributions to the birth of the new order, as embedded in the three core phenomena outlined above.

4.2. 2003-2005: Disbanding the Old State and the Birth of The New Order

Following the invasion of Iraq by the US in March 2003, Saddam Hussein and the Ba'ath regime were toppled (Council on Foreign Relations n.d.). However, what followed was beyond just a regime change, as the policies that followed radically transformed the foundations of power distribution in Iraqi society in a manner that only a violent social revolution could have made possible, in what some scholars have also diagnosed as a "fundamental institutional-societal rift" (Sommer-Houdeville 2017:11; Wang and Guo 2025). The Iraqi first republican state apparatus, which was by that point dominated mainly by Ba'athism and Ba'athists, was disbanded entirely, and the former Sunni-dominated elites were removed from power (Ghanim 2011,2011,21-55; Al-Rahim 2023). The CPA implemented far-reaching changes, particularly

through the de-Ba'athification process (اجتثاث البعث), which disbanded the Iraqi army and fired many of the upper bureaucracy's power holders (Flibbert 2023: 147). This policy essentially ended the Iraqi state as it existed prior to the change (if we take Max Weber's definition of the state, discussed in Chapter 2, at face value).

This vacuum was soon filled by both systemic (e.g., rising politicians and political parties) and reactionary anti-systemic forces (e.g., Al-Qaida, the Islamic State of Iraq–ISI, and Shia Militias) (Hiltermann 2007; Chandrasekaran 2003; MacAskill and Burkeman 2003). Exiled Shia politicians, many of whom had been prosecuted by the Saddam regime, and the Kurdish nationalist leaders (e.g., Barzani and Talabani patriarchs) particularly played the leading role in the structuring of the new system. In terms of political organization, seven major parties, mostly motivated by religious and ethnic identities, came to dominate the post-2003 Iraqi politics, including the Kurdistan Democratic Party, the Patriotic Union of Kurdistan, the Iraqi National Council, the Iraqi National Accord, the Supreme Council for Islamic Revolution in Iraq, the Dawa Islamic Party, and the Iraqi Islamic Party (Dodge 2006; Plumer 2004; PBS NewsHour 2005).

This sudden transformation and shift in power led many observers to argue that the historically marginalized Shia community became the center of power and politics in post-2003, partly due to its demographic weight and its leading role in shaping the constitutional process (Haddad 2016; Luizard 2022; Haddad et al. 2023; Faris 2024). Kurdish parties in the north, on the other hand, developed regions of power monopoly, known as the Yellow Zone (ناوچهی زرد), dominated by the Barzani family and the Kurdistan Democratic Party, and the Green Zone (ناوچهی سبز), dominated by the Talabani family and the Kurdistan Patriotic Union (IISS 2023; Gilbert 2025; Rubin 2025). **Figure 1** clearly illustrates how this geographical division was

constituted. While those regions were established before 2003 as a result of the no-fly zone imposed by the United States and the internal community, they became consolidated and institutionalized in the form of the Kurdistan Regional Government (KRG).

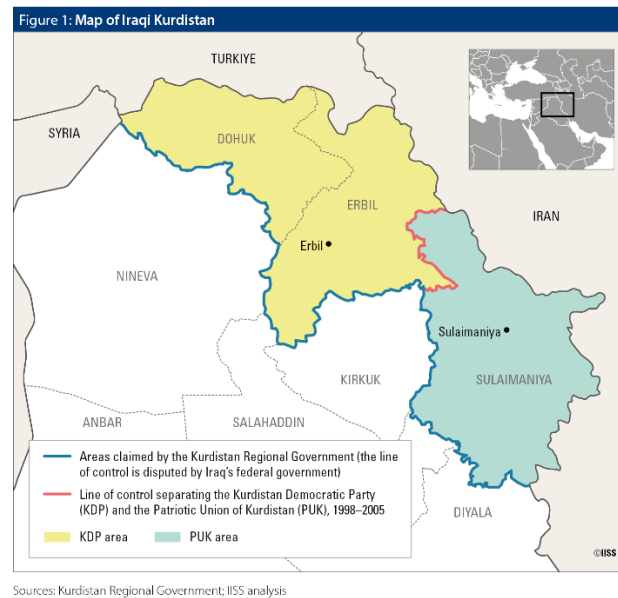


Figure 1. Depicts areas administered by the Kurdistan Regional Government (KRG) and territories claimed by both the KRG and Iraq's federal government. The map also marks the internal line of control separating zones administered by the Kurdistan Democratic Party

The leadership of these two communities were the primary actors engaged in drafting a national constitution and restructuring the new order, but the benefits were not necessarily beneficial to the whole population. While this early American intervention rewrote the Iraqi political settlement and effectively ended the Sunni elites' hegemony over the system and institutionalized ethno-sectarian divisions, it did not necessarily empower the Shia and Kurdish populations as a whole either, as subsequent data by the Center for International and Strategic Studies (CSIS) on Iraqi demographics have indicated that the Shia population (historically a stronghold of leftist politics in modern Iraq) remains the most “unhappy” part of the Iraqi society (Dagher and Kaltenthaler 2021). The fact that Shia Islamic Parties dominated the scene and

Kurdish parties gained influence did not necessarily mean that the entire population reaped the benefits of the victory.

Within a few months of occupation, due to the political and military pressures facing the Americans on the battlefield and from the international community, an Iraqi interim government was established (United Nations Security Council 2004; United Nations 2004; Government of Iraq 2004). This interim government included Shia, Kurdish, and a nominal Sunni representation (Alaaldin 2018; Ghanim 2011, 21-55). It included a set of elites, including defected ex-Ba'athists such as Ayad Allawi, Kurdish political leaders like Jalal Talabani, Shia Islamist politicians like Ibrahim al-Jaafari, and Sunni leaders of Muslim Brotherhood–related actors, such as Mahmoud al-Mashhadani of the Islamic Council of Iraq (Dawish 2009, 240-250). This variety of political elites soon drafted a constitution and accelerated the process of a referendum. In October 2005, the referendum was carried out, in which the Sunnis mostly boycotted due to both their resentment towards the new order and the high opportunity cost for their elites to endorse it due to the rise of more radical alternatives (i.e., Jihadist groups) (Trip 2010, 286-287; Achcar 2005). Shia and Kurdish elites (handpicked by CPA), on the other hand, dominated the process, institutionalizing and cementing the ethno-sectarian power-sharing structure defined as *Muhasasa* earlier. For example, the constitution guaranteed a federal region to the Kurds in the north (which became a powerhouse for KDP and PUK that produced an increasingly more authoritarian grasp of the Kurdistan territories) and parliamentary seats by ethnic quotas. While promoting it as a solution for inclusivity, it effectively rendered national-level politics based on class resentments ineffective and made subnational identities and sectarian rhetoric more profitable politically, which explains why the more funded nationalist secular leaders, like Allawi, lost the subsequent elections to the more religious-oriented Shia parties (Dawish 2009,

245-250; Dodge 2019). This arrangement produced a consociational bargain dominated by Kurdish, Shia, and Sunni elite classes, which, while benefiting from the divisive ethno-sectarian rhetoric, remains integrated until today (Dodge 2019; Al-Aloosy 2024).

Amid these turbulent politics and bargaining processes, the Iraqi national public sphere initially experienced a burst of openness, and dialogue widened. Following the lifting of the Ba'ath regime's political censorship, a rapid proliferation of newspapers, satellite channels, and radio stations emerged (Al-Rawi 2012; CIMA 2011; Haddad 2024). The number of media available in Iraq prior to 2003 was restricted to a few Ba'ath party-controlled newspapers, a few radios, and a national television network. By the end of 2004, in contrast, there were more than 200 newspapers and 90 television and radio stations operating in different Mesopotamian languages, pushing contesting perspectives in what was called a "media boom" by experts and media (Reuters 2009). At the moment, observers of Iraqi politics were indeed optimistic about the re-emergence of an open Iraqi public sphere, as some argued that Iraq's multiple media outlets fulfilled their function as a the *Fourth Estate* and another argued that the media "was central to the re-emergence of an Iraqi public sphere which openly debated and discussed" the country's development under post-war conditions (Isakhan 2006).

Additionally, in the immediate postwar years, Iraq witnessed a cautious revival of what was conceptualized and explained as "civil society" organizations as labor unions and grassroots organizations re-emerged from decades of authoritarian suppression, reshaping themselves into new institutional and advocacy forms (Abbas 2021; Al-Jaberi 2015; Alshamary 2022). Those organizations appear to be aware of their role in the process of democratization. For instance, the Sinjar-based Yazidi organization, The Sinjar Beneficent Association, which was founded in the

immediate aftermath of the war, framed its mission statement as the following (Sinjar Charity Association 2003):

تأسست جمعية سنجار الخيرية في 2003/6/20 وذلك بعد سقوط النظام السابق وإفساح المجال أمام مؤسسات المجتمع المدني لأخذ دورها في بناء العراق الديمقراطي ... ولحاجة مدينة شنگال الملحة لخدمات المجتمع المدني كونها عانت من الفقر و الحرمان و الظلم و الإهمال لعقود طويلة ... فقامت مجموعة خيرة من أبناء المنطقة وبجهود ذاتية بتشكيل هيكل الجمعية من لجان وهيئات ... وفي بداية الأمر اعتمدت الجمعية في عملها على اشتراكات المنتسبين وتبرعات بعض الخيرين من أبناء منطقة شنگال . لمواصلة عملها الخيرة لخدمة أبناء منطقة شنگال ونطمح في تقديم الكثير للمنطقة بعون الله وجهود الخيرين من أبناء المجتمع .

Translation: The Sinjar Beneficent Association was established on June 20, 2003, following the fall of the previous regime, paving the way for civil society institutions to take on their role in building a democratic Iraq. The city of Shingal had an urgent need for civil society services, having suffered poverty, deprivation, injustice, and neglect for many long decades. A group of benevolent local sons stepped forward, on their own initiative, to establish the association's structure through committees and bodies. Initially, the association's activities were funded by membership dues and donations from generous individuals in the Shingal area. To continue its charitable work serving the people of the Shingal area, we aspire — with God's help and the efforts of good people from the community — to offer much more to the region.

Additionally, the Iraqis engaged in both January and October 2005 elections in large numbers despite the security threats and the conditions of occupation in the first national democratic elections in generations (United Nations 2005, Rubin 2005, IFES 2015). These developments suggested two important things: First, there was a genuine 'civic' opening. Second, blaming the dismal outcomes on the Iraqis not being civilized enough for democracy is denied here.

However, at a systemic and structural level, the seeds of constraints were planted from the beginning. Even in the early stages of 2005, both the coalition authorities and the rising Iraqi elites and power organizations, i.e., power interests, aimed to shape the narratives. The US and allied forces attempted to control and maintain influence over the newly established Iraqi Media Network (IMN / شبكة الإعلام العراقي), which was the state media (Pincus 2003; Katulis 2004: 6-7). The privatization of media also allowed ethno-sectarian parties to establish their own platforms, which were either funded by external actors, the state's resources stolen later, or influential

economic elites with political intentions (e.g., *Al-Sharqiya* by Saad Al-Bazzaz) (Al-Marashi 2007: 25). The electoral laws were another dimension that initially produced democratic euphoria but proved to be more power-oriented later on (Kuoti and al-Hamoud 2025; The Washington Institute 2025). While competitive in nature, the closed-list system meant that the party elites (leaders) had great control over who got the seats. In other words, the electoral system functioned more like a political formula through which party elites utilized procedural mechanisms to maintain their power. Meanwhile, the constitution introduced a mandatory 25% quota for women's representation in the parliament, a liberalizing policy that was "imposed" against the will of the conservatives (International Human Rights Law Institute 2006). However, even this seemingly progressive policy became a political tool that was often strategized and controlled by the predominantly male party elites (Ali 2024; New York Times 2009).

The first stage of post-2003 Iraqi politics (2003-2005) witnessed dramatic changes: the old elites were removed, new ones were entrenched in the emerging state, and democratic institutions (in the form of a political formula) were instituted. The following sections will demonstrate that these early decisions — de-Ba'athification, constitutional design, media control, and election rules — created path dependencies, entrenching an ethno-sectarian elite class and establishing a governance framework that would shape subsequent developments.

4.3. 2005-2014: War, Sectarianism, and the Iron Law of Muhasasa

This period of post-2003 Iraqi history is perhaps the most significant, as it witnessed the maturation and consolidation of the new order in the face of numerous challenges. Most American thinkers have been more concerned with the prior period, as the United States more closely controlled it; however, this second stage is where distinctly Iraqi politics began to develop. Following the 2005 election, Iraq entered a period of consolidation under what became

known as the Muhasasa system, which is a confessional arrangement that allocates offices along Shia, Sunni, and Kurdish political blocs. While multi-party elections were held (e.g., provincial elections in 2009 and parliamentary elections in 2010), the entrenched Muhasasa ensured that competition remained confined to the intra-group level, preventing nationwide democratic or grievance-based coalitions (Dodge 2019; Al-Marashi 2025; Al-Rashid and Mansour 2025). A few Shia parties (mostly connected to militarized militias or religious clerics, stemming their power primarily from traditional and charismatic forms of legitimacy) managed to dominate the significant Iraqi Shia votes (which made up more than 60% of the country's population). They established governments and ruled from Baghdad. The Kurdish parties were given rule over an autonomous region and often remained powerful in Baghdad as well (Kelly 2010; Wilson Center 2020; Gunter 2013). The Sunnis, who were either fractured, boycotted, or impacted by insurgency in their regions, initially remained ineffective (Kuoti 2016; Qaddour 2022). The other ethno-religious minorities were effectively excluded from power. Most analysts agree that this period structured the Iraqi elites along a sectarian line, which led to the development of pervasive patronage networks (Al-Shadeedi and van Veen 2020: 40). This entrenchment also widened the cleavages in Iraq, leading to a civil war between 2006 and 2008, which, interestingly, ended in bargaining deals between the same elites that had fueled it (Misztal, Danforth, and Michek 2019; Dodge 2018).

Power was quickly concentrated in the hands of a few elites. The elections became a power struggle among the various political factions within the system (e.g., Iyad Allawi's coalition in 2005, Nuri Al-Maliki's Dawa Party from 2006 to 2010, and Haider Al-Abadi's coalition from 2014 onwards) (Mansour and Jabar 2017; Pollack 2010; Hasan 2019). The 2006-2008 Civil War further exacerbated this elite dynamic, as the state apparatus itself became

controlled by powerful groups, organizations, and elites (European Parliament, Directorate-General for External Policies 2018). The security forces, for instance, were initially developed to be more technocratic and nationalist institutions. Now, they became effectively partitioned, as the Shia elites controlled them, while the Kurdish parties controlled their own Peshmarge in the north. Oil revenues and government contracts were awarded to loyal groups and communities in order to further to entrench the ruling coalition's power and patronage (Al-Qarawee 2014; Mehdi 2019).

Elections, on the other hand, became the reshuffling of a subset of elites who held power. Elections often allowed some turnover. For instance, Maliki's Dawa party lost the 2014 elections. However, even when this set of elites lost the elections, they were given roles and powers in the new government by the new set of elites led by Haider al-Abadi (Hasan 2019; Fantappie 2023). While also reflective of Schumpeter's competitive elite democracy discussed in the second chapter, this scene became more compatible with Mosca's political formula concept, as elites actively used the electoral system to appear competitive and legitimate, while entrenching their collective power vis-à-vis the rest of the population. Analysts of this period also argued that the elections during this period acted more as a reshuffling rather than as a substantive change in the ruling elites (Hasan 2019; Dodge 2019). Thus, while formal democratic institutions existed on the surface, the 'informal' rules behind the scenes ensured that the narrow sets of ethno-sectarian elites maintained their domination.

Change and reform within the system remained limited, if not non-existent. The cross-sectarian and ethnic coalitions remained limited. The populist Shia cleric Muqtada al-Sadr tried to challenge the existing dynamics by collaborating with secular and Sunni parties. However, both external power interests and internal elites suppressed such efforts (Rubin and Majidyar

2014; 14). The Sunnis remained marginalized politically due to their deliberate exclusion, their distrust of their elites, and their resort to anti-systemic violence. Other ethno-religious minorities, like Yazidis and Christians, were facing active acts of extermination by the Sunni Jihadist groups (Nadia's Initiative 2021 Putzolu and Zengarini 202). At the same time, the elites in both Baghdad and Erbil did not seem willing or able to act effectively to protect these vulnerable communities, instead focusing on securing their centers of power. The Kurdish regions, which witnessed more capitalist development, was soon captured by family patronages. The previously emancipatory and revolutionary Kurdish political parties began to serve the specific interests of the familial dynasties, party bureaucrats, and the newly emerging Kurdish economic tycoons (Hassanpour 1994; Barış Kurt 2014; Najm 2024; Rodgers 2024).

Thus, it would be fair to say that during this period, the claimed promise of liberal democracy was dimming in the eyes of Iraqis. The Iraqi government under Maliki (from 2006 to 2014) became particularly prone to violence and authoritarianism (Al-Qarawee 2014). The reactionary Sunni-associated violence and terrorism made activism and civil engagement very risky and mostly foreign funded in much of the country. By the end of this period, the Iraqi public sphere had become bifurcated, if not multi-furcated (Al-Mljawi 2008). Completely distinct media and platforms, often controlled by intra-group elites, dominated each community. For instance, Sunnis were more likely to watch al-Sharqiya, Shias were more likely to watch Furat TV, and the Kurds were more likely to watch Kurdistan TV or Kudrsat, which effectively meant that national-level debate became much harder. With elite capture, conflict, and bifurcation, Iraq's liberal democracy morphed into what could be called a dominant-coalition regime. Power was for the elites, elections were a legitimizing formula, and the state became a machinery of power interests.

4.3.1. Declining Freedoms and the Erosion of the Public Sphere

As already mentioned earlier in the chapter, the mid-2000s offered an openness in the public sphere (in a Habermasian sense) that could check power through debate and provide a communicative structure for Iraqi national society. The 2005 election campaigns, for instance, indicated that despite repressive attempts at censorship, the media provided a rich array of debate and discourse on key politics and policy of early post-2003 Iraq (IPU 2005; Oliver 2005). Grassroots organizations and activism were emerging, too.

However, by the end of the decade, the once-promising public sphere was in decline. Internal polarization caused by sectarian elites' competition dissuaded open critique and increased hate speech. For instance, the rise of social media, during this period, was leveraged by political and militant groups to propagate hate speech, polarizing public discourse and silencing dissent (Shea and al-Hassani 2021). More importantly, external regional and global powers, such as the US and Iran, began to fund specific media outlets in Iraq to support the parties that represent their interests and achieved the policy outcomes they believed would serve their goals. As mentioned earlier, Isakhan has reported this infiltration and manipulation, with particular focus on the US (Isakhan 2006). This specific problem raises many questions that Western internal critiques have not adequately addressed, including whether a society can have a public sphere without complete national sovereignty. Is a society's public sphere connected to its national security and ability to defend itself against foreign interventions? However, this question becomes more complicated when the reports indicate that the Iraqi central government and the Kurdistan Regional Government (KRG) conducted similar efforts (2006). These efforts to shape the Iraqi public sphere, nonetheless, should be seen as attempts to manufacture consent,

while preventing democratic journalism and debate from emerging (as explained by Chomsky and colleagues earlier).

Those who aimed to challenge the order would often be abducted or killed. For example, Sardasht Osman, an independent journalist who criticized one of the ruling parties, was abducted and killed in Erbil in 2010 (Committee to Protect Journalists 2010). The independent opposition channel Nalia Radio and Television (NRT) was also burned in Sulaymaniyah during this same period (Mahoney 2014). The more polarizing and party- or individual-controlled media, such as Rudaw, Al-Faiha'a, and al-Sharqiya, remained more dominant. Social media could have produced change in such a pattern, it soon became another tool of hate speech and polarization, as both skyrocketed in Iraq during that period.

While most protests were sudden and short-lived, some forms of collective action and organized social movements began to emerge during this period. There were trade union strikes, secular student movements, large teacher protests in Kurdistan, and mass demonstrations in Sunni areas, which Iraq had not witnessed in decades (Al Jazeera 2013; Human Rights Watch 2014).

However, they were quickly and swiftly suppressed by the government, co-opted by elites, or exploited by terrorist organizations (like the Islamic State) (Ottaway 2014). It was only later, in 2019, that a social movement emerged based on collective nationalist rhetoric and economic grievances, effectively challenging the ruling elites (see the final section of this chapter). We will see that even those were effectively suppressed by the state and infiltrated by foreign and internal interests. It is still important to mention that some democratic debate has survived and remain comparatively stronger than before 2003; yet, it is far from achieving the autonomy that a liberal democracy often claims.

4.3.2. Exclusion, Marginalization, and Intersectionality

The central contradiction of the liberal democracy imposed is that while its rules promised equality and pluralism, its practices entrenched exclusion and domination along multiple axes of social division and stratification. In terms of political power, large segments of the population were excluded, as majorities were defined along ethno-sectarian lines. The Sunni population, which had dominated Iraqi politics for centuries, was suddenly sidelined and removed from the power equations, mainly dominated by the two major victims of the previous order—namely the Kurds and Shias. The Sunnis, left with the material tools for physical violence from the old regime, began an insurgency against the new state and its external partners, leading to the rise of the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS) later. In other words, while most of the insurgency in post-2003 Iraq can be explained in terms of global terrorism and other similar paradigms, it is also essential to explain its social origins. For instance, the government's suppression of the 2012-2013 protests in Sunni regions, demanding more sectarian power, opened space for the radical Jihadists (Human Rights Watch. 2014; Ottaway 2014).

While much of the research on the exclusionary politics in post-2003 Iraq has focused on Sunnis, that should not make the reader conflate such focus with the group being the most oppressed or marginalized. The fact that they are constantly included in these debates on marginalization means they have more recognition than those who are not. This is without mentioning that Sunnis gained more power during that period and used their violent capabilities to target the Yazidi and Christian minorities in their regions, like Mosul. For instance, in August 2007, the Yazidis faced the second-largest attack ever conducted by Al-Qaeda and Sunni insurgencies following the September 11 attacks. Additionally, the Sunni population remains the

wealthiest and is most supported by Gulf monarchies and other wealthy Sunni states in the region (Tait 2007).

When it comes to marginalization, the most disempowered and excluded were the indigenous ethno-religious communities of Mesopotamia (e.g., the Yazidis, Mandeans, and Assyrian Christians). They were promised representation through a parliamentary quota system, which guaranteed Christians 5 seats and each of the Yazidis, Shabaks, Mandeans, and Feyli Kurds a seat. However, these minorities were not given any power, and their seats were used as a tool for political dominance by the large parties to break electoral stand-offs (Alaca and Aydogan 2022). For instance, the constitutional agreements that divided the Yazidi territories into "disputed territories" between the Kurds and Arabs, based on Article 140, was enacted without any deliberations from the community itself. This policy put their territory at a constant state of conflict and crisis, making them vulnerable when ISIS attacked in 2014 (Human Rights Watch 2009; Shamiran. 2021). Additionally, the majoritarian parties have recently passed a law that allows the majority groups to vote for the quota seats too, meaning a Kurdish or Shia party can encourage a portion of its supporters to vote for the Yazidi or Christian seats regardless of their ethnic and religious affiliation. This law allows the big parties to control the quota seats by supporting their clients among the minorities, making the seats effectively meaningless in terms of representation.

Gender is another dimension of the exclusionary nature of the imposed order. While the US-backed transition brought into life a groundbreaking gender quota (25% of the parliament) and protected specific status laws, the power of women is much less than the promised representation. During this period, women faced extreme levels of prosecution and violence as there were numerous high-profile killings and torture, while Human Rights Watch reported mass

abuses against women in Iraq's criminal justice system (Refugee Documentation Centre 2010; Minority Rights 2011; Human Rights Watch 2014). Even the Quota, while imposed against the will of the reactionary conservative blocks, was modified and manipulated by the majoritarian Shia Islamist groups after they dominated the government and parliament. Compared to their representation in the parliament (nearly 29%), they occupy very few ministerial and senior posts, a discrepancy that highlights the limits of formal inclusion (Al-Rahim 2019). Many of these women members of parliament (Shia once in particular) voted against women's civil liberties in the later election cycles, as the women from the religious parties often prioritize their religious affiliation over women rights.

Another element of the exclusionary nature of this system is its connection to class inequality, which has been largely overlooked in much of the literature. A recent study by the CSIS has indicated that the Iraqi middle class has decreased from more than 60% of the population to an estimated 30%, representing a decline to less than half of its original percentage (Dagher 2020). The upper class decreased to 10% in 2020 from more than 16% in 2007, while the lower class increased from 23% in 2007 to more than 60% in 2020 (2020). In other words, the system has caused more people to become poorer, and an increasingly smaller number of people are rich. Much of this wealth transfer occurred through mass political violence, as the invasion war and the subsequent civil wars destroyed the infrastructures and livelihoods of the populations equally. However, the reconstruction efforts effectively benefited a narrow class of exploitative winners (Dagher, 2020). This massive restructuring of class might also be a result of the neoliberal policies imposed earlier by the CPA and continued by subsequent Iraqi ruling elites.

4.4. 2014-2020: Crises, Contestation, Protests, and the Constraints of Reform:

Between 2014 and 2020, several new conjunctions tested the post-2003 imposed order and its resilience. The rise of ISIS and the fall of the second-largest city in the country, Mosul, in June 2014, shocked the system. In response, Prime Minister Maliki, who had begun to consolidate power over the previous decade, was replaced by Haider al-Abadi, a UK-educated engineer with a more technocratic outlook on governance (Harding 2014; Lund 2018)). He promised to include both the Kurds and Sunnis in his government, and he was more successful than Maliki in doing so (Harding 2014). Additionally, both al-Abadi's orientation and the state of war allowed technocratic reforms to emerge during his governance (Younis 2016). However, the underlying dynamics of politics remained the same, as the shadow militias connected to politicians were later institutionalized into state structures through the Popular Mobilization Forces (PMF), once ISIS was defeated, further entrenching elite domination over the state and coercive means in society (Herbert 2018:10–11; Dodge 2019). The economy remained oil-dependent, and the resources remained unequally accessible to the different elements of Iraqi society.

However, both the increase of discontent among the Iraqi masses and the consolidation of state power against ISIS opened the space for waves of mass protests in the urban centers throughout the country. This period witnessed the rise of grievance-based social movements and politics that transcended the ethno-sectarian politics that dominated Iraqi society for more than a decade. Beginning in 2015 and intensifying after 2018, intense local grassroots protests erupted in Baghdad and other major southern cities, protesting joblessness, corruption, poor public services, and foreign intervention in national politics. The prominent Iraqi sociologist Faleh A.

Jabar described these protests “as a shift from identity politics to issue politics” (Boduszynski 2016; Faleh 2018: 9).

This mass discontent that resulted in invasions of the Green Zone in 2016 (as seen in **Figure 2**), the securitized area of Baghdad where government institutions and foreign representations are located, also had a profound impact on the 2018 elections (Arango 2016; (Tawfeeq, Orjoux, and Alkhshali 2016). In the 2018 parliamentary elections, widespread discontent in the south led to the victory of Muqtada al-Sadr's populist and nationalist political coalition (Paul and Alkhshali 2018; BBC 2021). However, after dragging the government formation process for months, the elites in Baghdad were able to bring Sadr and his opponents, such as Maliki, into the same cabinet. This moment was a critical juncture at which the political system could have transformed. However, the elite structure was able to absorb the populist wave in, yet another *muhasasa* bargain.



Figure 2. Protesters storm Iraq’s parliament in Baghdad’s Green Zone, July 2022, setting up a sit-in to oppose the nomination of a new prime minister by rival political blocs. Source: Reuters

In October 2019, this mass discontent led to widespread anger, which has been named the October Uprising (ثورة التشرين), when mass demonstrations erupted in Baghdad, Nasiriya, Basra,

and other major cities around the country (International Crisis Group 2021). These protests seemed to be more organized and articulate in their demands. Their demands were more systemic in nature, as they demanded the dismantlement of the sectarian rule, corruption, and foreign meddling in Iraqi domestic affairs. They called for *Mawatana* (equal citizenship) instead of *Muhasasa* (the sectarian power-sharing), clearly challenging the power configuration of post-2003 Iraq as shown in the **Figure 3** below (Alkhudary 2023).



Figure 3. Anti-government protesters pack Baghdad’s iconic “Turkish Restaurant” building during the October (Tishreen) 2019 demonstrations, hanging banners honoring slain protesters and demanding the fall of Iraq’s sectarian system. The bottom banner says, “No homeland, no work, until the fall of the regime.” (Photo credit: Thaier al-Sudani / Reuters, “Anti-government protesters pack Baghdad’s Turkish Restaurant building,” 2 November 2019)

Additionally, they were broad in their cross-sectarian and cross-gender participation. The women's presence was particularly noticeable as the first of its kind in post-2003 Iraq (Hammadi 2021). They eventually forced the resignation of Adil Abdul-Mahdi’s government and pressured

the elites for systematic electoral reforms but also brought about a major shift in political awareness. This is not to mention that these were the first protests that directly and explicitly challenged the legitimacy of the imposed order.

Nonetheless, the October Uprising also showed the resilience and adaptability of the order imposed. The government changed hands from Abdul-Mahdi to the more reformist Mustafa al-Kathimi; however, the elites sustained their power and began targeting the protesters, both through the state's repressive mechanisms and the shadow state of militias. Following that, they stalled the elections and delayed them twice until 2021, perhaps to regain control of the streets.

By 2020, it became clear that the liberal democratic institutions developed from 2003 onward had not produced an egalitarian or accountable state. Instead, the monopoly and sharing of power by the elites persisted while a facade of democracy remained in the form of periodic elections, formal rights, and apparent political competition. Through a process-tracing approach, the chapter demonstrates that earlier choices (e.g., sectarian power sharing, disbanding the army) have produced the kinds of outcomes Iraq faces today. At every critical juncture, there were opportunities for democratic opening and reform; however, they were undercut by the deeply entrenched elites' interest in sustaining their domination. Even the October Uprising, which innovatively brought women, youth, and activists from across the country was undermined by elite interests and external pressures. This reality makes post-2003 Iraq yet another historical example in which the formal trappings of democracy were overlaid onto a very contradictory, illiberal reality – especially at the level of material interests and conflicts.

CHAPTER FIVE: COMPARATIVE SYNTHESIS OF IRAQI SCHOLARS

5.1. Intellectual Conditions of Critique in Post-2003 Iraq

There have been several waves of Iraqi scholarly engagement with democracy, examining its practicality and feasibility within Iraqi society and state. These engagements have often been under conditions of social instability, state formation, and external domination. Henceforth, their critique is distinguishable from that of their Western counterparts (as explained in Chapter Two) in that they do not take the very existence of liberal democracy for granted. Unlike their Western counterparts, the Iraqi scholars were not born into societies dominated by liberal democracy and liberalism alongside capitalist modernity. Instead, they were born into societies shaped by imposed modernity, arbitrary borders drawn by colonial powers, and constant social and state crises, which sought to establish coherent and legitimate governance. Thus, the Iraqis often view liberal democracy as an emergent, incomplete, and potentially total system.

Nonetheless, like their Western counterparts, the Iraqi scholars do not reject liberal democracy as a political system. Instead, they criticize the sociological, political, and moral indictment of its corrupted application, as well as the limitations of its application as an ideological construct in contexts that lack the necessary foundations. From classical Iraqi scholars like Ali Al-Wardi to modern thinkers like Zaid Al-Ali, they all believed in the potential for a democratic Iraqi society. The founder of Iraqi sociology, Al-Wardi, even viewed electoral democracy, if socially constituted and enforced, as the only viable solution to the diverse and conflictual Iraqi social fabric (Ameen al-Najjar 2014). He even argued that the democratic electoral process of today resembles the political revolutions of the past, stating (Al-Wardi 2007):

إن نظام التصويت الذي تقوم عليه الديمقراطية الحديثة ليس هو في معناه الاجتماعي إلا ثورة مقنعة.. والانتخاب هو في الواقع ثورة هادئة.. حيث يذهب الناس اليوم إلى صناديق الانتخابات، كما كان أسلافهم يذهبون إلى ساحات الثورة، فيخلعون حكامهم ويستبدلون بهم حكماً آخرين.

Translation: the electoral system, which modern democracies are based on, in its social meaning, is nothing less than a masked revolution. An election, in reality, is a calm revolution. Today, people go voting for ballots just like their ancestors went to the revolutionary squares, as they removed their leaders and instituted others.

Al-Wardi, who wrote in 60s to 90s, saw this democratic process as an alternative to the vicious cycles of violence, tribalism, and frequent coups d'états that characterized the Iraq of his era, an intellectual view that often caused him to be targeted by the authorities. Later Iraqi thinkers, in post-2003, who will be discussed in the following subsections, shared a similar view to Al-Wardi. For instance, in his book *Dysfunctional Democracy*, David Ghanim, despite his dismal view of the outcomes of the democratic project in Iraq, argued that his critique of its inherent crises is in the interest of the belief in the potentiality of a prosperous democratic Iraq (Ghanim 2011: x-xi). Adeed Dawisha (عديد دويشا), in his book, *Iraq: A Political History from Independence to Occupation*, argued that the leadership of Iraq has always aspired to establish some sort of democratic legitimacy, and despite the ineffective nature of those constant efforts, the efforts have been meaningful (Dawisha 2009, 3).

However, the Iraqi scholars, almost universally, critique the conditions under which democracy has been imposed as well as the destructive outcomes of the liberal democratic system if not embedded in proper social and state institutions. They also argue that if democracy is viewed as a political rather than a social system, it could reproduce the inherent social cleavages and inequalities present in societies. Both in line with internal critiques in the West and with particular distinctions, the Iraqi scholars critique a set of internal contradictions and crises in the Iraqi experience with democratic transition. To maintain the analysis's organization and analytical soundness, the following sections present a thematic categorization of Iraqi critiques

of liberal democracy in their society. This categorization is based on their response to the set of developments characteristic of post-2003 Iraq, as identified in the previous chapter. To reiterate, these developments include the following: 1) external engineering and the imposition of liberal-democratic institutions. 2) the formation of what could arguably be considered oligarchic structures due to elite bargains and ethno-sectarian power-sharing (muhasasa—محاصصة). the struggle to develop public discourse and civil society under occupation, violence, and fragmentation. 4) the layered exclusion of women, minorities, and marginalized communities.

5.2. External Engineering and the Illusion of Democratic Sovereignty

Perhaps the most significant critique of liberal democracy in the Iraqi context concerns its external engineering, where the democratic project itself becomes an alienated implant that comes into conflict with the Iraqi social fabric and conditions. The Iraqi society suffered from contradictions of modernity, in particular that which came along with colonial expansion, even prior to the 2003 invasion and subsequent imposition of liberal democracy. Al-Wardi, for instance, argued, faced the imposition of a rapid process of modernization and social change that was alien to its pre-existing and pre-modern social organization. He states (Al-Wardi 2005):

[العراق منذ ولاية مدحت باشا على العراق عام 1869 دخل مرحلة الحداثة، لكن بوتيرة بطيئة جداً. ومنذ الحرب العالمية الأولى عام 1914]، فإن الوتيرة تسارعت بشكل مهول، وهذا من شأنه أن يجعل التحديث غير متكافئ، تتطور أشياء دون أشياء أخرى، أي أن التحديث والتطور لا يجري على جميع مفاصل المجتمع مهما اتسعت دائرته واشتدت وتيرته

Translating: Under the rule of Midhat Basha in 1869, Iraq entered a phase of modernization, albeit at a very slow pace. Since World War I, the pace of change has accelerated dramatically, resulting in modernity becoming uneven, with certain aspects developing while others remain stagnant. Thus, modernization does not cover every part of society, no matter how widespread or rapid it becomes.

While he did not fully refer to it as such, by World War I, he meant the colonialism by the British and the establishment of the Iraqi state. Al-Wardi argued that this rapid, uneven modernization produced a bipolar Iraqi personality, which was manifest by "civil" and

"nomadic" tendencies. This bipolarity of Iraqi personality caused distrust and hostility among the Iraqis against the modern state and its monopoly over society, regardless of whether its governance system is democratic or authoritarian (Al-Wardi 2005).

While Al-Wardi contended that a democracy would be potentially more effective in curing this dichotomy in Iraqi society, he stressed that democracy should be viewed at a social and not just a political level and should evolve internally (Al-Wardi 2005). In other words, a democratic society would require a mass and rapid development of civil political culture, modern knowledge systems, and control of tribalism for democracy to be effective.

Al-Wardi's analysis, while predating the post-2003 period and more concerned with the constitutional monarchy in early Iraq and authoritarianism later, presents a foundational conflict that was reminiscent of the democratic imposition in post-2003 Iraq. In his book, *The Struggle for Iraq's Future: How Corruption Incompetence and Sectarianism Undermined Democracy*, Iraqi lawyer and active participant in post-2003 Iraqi constitution drafting, Zaid Al-Ali argued that, aside from the Kurdish political parties and the Sadr Movement (التيار الصدري), the majority of post-2003 Iraqi political class and elites were diasporic actors, detached from the reality of their society as a whole (Al-Ali 2014, 41). Having grown up outside of Iraq, and mainly in the West, the pioneers of the new "democratic" system lacked both the competence to rule and organic social solidarity behind their politics (2014, 42). Thus, the new elites had to manufacture identity-based politics to both conceal their alienation from Iraqi society and assert their dominance over it (2014, 42-50). Here, the so-called democratic process served as a *political formula*, as coined by Mosca and explained earlier in the thesis, in which an imported class of elites used complicated election cycles, political platforms, media, state resources, and perceived competition to mask their alienated domination over the Iraqi people. This phenomenon is also

reminiscent of the competitive-elite democracy discussed by Schumpeter, in which elites can manufacture conflicts and awaken social cleavages when their interests are served.

Nonetheless, while both perspectives are reminiscent, and will be discussed further in the following section, what Al-Ali discussed is also an external imposition of these elites. Most of the elites in pre-2003 were at least grown out of centuries of Ottoman rule and decades of British colonialism. The new elites, on the other hand, were a group of diasporic men imported from outside with little to no political experience in the Iraqi context (35-45). To add to that, they were coupled with a class of hardline neo-conservative bureaucrats from Washington, as many American professionals refused to get engaged in the post-2003 Iraq after the weapons of mass destruction claims were debunked and the atrocities of the Iraq War started surfacing up. Al-Ali argues that these neo-conservatives were more concerned with ideological purity than accommodating the specific conditions of Iraqi society (40-45). As a result, an “occupation state” got established as a technocratic illusion with no roots in Iraqi political culture (81-91). This combination resulted in the increasing conflict between the Iraqi state and society, which was already present in modern Iraq, as explained through Al-Wardi, which opened the space for capitalization on the divisions and cleavages of an already fractured Iraqi society.

The former Iraqi finance minister and author Ali Allawi provided a critical analysis of the racial and cultural implications of the post-2003 political order on Iraqi society. A prominent Iraqi diasporic figure and former advisor to the World Bank, Allawi was actively involved in the immediate aftermath of the post-2003 political restructuring in Iraq. After the failure of the secular/liberal political currents and his disenchantment with the new order, he removed himself from political life and moved to the United States to dedicate himself to the dissecting of the “New Iraq”. While much of his analysis remains bureaucratic and institutional, he also produced

some profound socio-historical observations. In his book, *The Occupation of Iraq: Winning the War, Losing the Peace*, Al-Allawi argued that the very cultural perceptions that led to the war and the subsequent political reconstruction were shaped by false cultural views and understandings (Al-Allawi 2007: 6-8). He argued that the neo-conservative logic was shaped by Bernard Lewis's historical theories of the Middle East and the "Islamic World", contending that Muslims suffer from a psychological dissonance with modernity stemming from their humiliation at the hands of their historical enemy—the West. This view was, of course, accompanied by other essentializing views about the region, including the conflict between the Shia and Sunnis (9-11). Thus, this cultural logic, which could relate to what Edward Said called "orientalism," shaped the way democracy was perceived and imposed in the context of Iraq, essentializing and awakening identities and differences that were not as solid as conceived (Said 1978).

Another significant figure in this regard is the Iraqi critical security studies scholar Massaab Al-Aloosy, who has focused on how the very dynamics of democratic institutions and structures, if imposed externally, can have a detrimental impact. In his article "Navigating narrow interests: the elite's role in consociational politics with a rentier economy, the case of Iraq after 2003," Al-Aloosy argued that the very framework of "consociational politics" is what caused the rise of divisions in the Iraqi society (Al-Aloosy 2024). The political economy of Iraq, which is heavily dependent on oil and natural resources, is crucial here. Al-Aloosy contended that a rentier economy renders economic and class politics more ambiguous, leading political elites to seek sub-identity politics to create divisions and mobilize support for their parties (2024). Here, Al-Aloosy holds a similar view of politics to Schumpeter on competitive-elite democracy, as he contends that elites will create competition based on politically insignificant social differences to expand their power and sustain their domination. Therefore, the mass sectarian conflicts in post-

2003 Iraq were not inherited but operationalized by an imposed political system that demanded competition and difference.

5.3. Oligarchic Structures and the Muhasasa System (محاصصة):

The second essential characteristic of the post-2003 Iraqi political system has been the Muhasasa system” (محاصصة). Stemming from its Arabic origins, Muhasasa refers to the act of dividing or distributing shares among individuals. Meant to foster inclusion and consensus, the system divides the government's political posts among different elements of society, each receiving its share of power based on its share of the state's demographic. If the Shias comprise 60% of Iraqi society, then they should hold proportional political power and representation in proportion to their demographic size, whether in terms of quality or quantity of power. While this can essentially be presented as a means of generating popular representation in diverse societies, Iraqi scholars seem skeptical of such representation, as they view Muhasasa to be related to the crisis and contradiction inherent in the current political system and power.

As explained in the previous section, Al-Ali focused on the social and political background of the elites to explain the divisions that have been created in the current political system. In his book chapter "On the Origins of Iraq's New Political Elites," Al-Ali illustrates that the Iraqi elites were characterized by specific characteristics that distinguish them from the rest of the Iraqi social fabric, which includes the following: 1) They are diasporic and were disconnected for decades from a society that was isolated from the external world. 2) Lack of competence, as well-off Iraqi diaspora members were not willing to come back, and internally competent bureaucrats were ousted through the De-Ba'athification (اجتثاث البعث) process. 3) They mostly lacked organic support in Iraq; thus, it had to be manufactured. This background made them defensive, ineffective, and corrupt, leading them to adopt sectarian positions in order to

mobilize the public against one another and sustain their undeserved position. Thus, they focused on sharp political rhetoric, sectarianism, and fear (Al-Ali 2014, 41-51). This produced divisions in the early stages of the process, rendered any class-based or rational politics impossible, and Muhasasa inevitable.

David Ghanim, on the other hand, focused on how sectarianism and victimization serve as a mechanism for patronage, rather than representation, as the façade of pluralism masks elite capture. In his book chapter "The politics of Victimization" from *Dysfunctional Democracy*, Ghanim argued that the Kurdish and Shia elites, who presided over the Kurdish and Shia populations, used the victimization of their ethno-sectarian groups by Saddam Husain to both legitimize their domination over the political system and capture the will of their population. To Ghanim, the political elites were able to monetize the mass suffering of their community in the past as a form of political capital in the competition for electoral victories, as well as through political violence (Ghanim 2011, 21-55). This politics of victimization was helpful in both victimizing the other groups in the Iraqi society, mainly the Sunnis and minorities, as well as, distracting the Kurdish and Shia populations from the intra-group exploitation and exclusion. While some of Ghanim's analysis seems to be oversimplistic, such as putting the historically powerful Sunnis in the same classification as Yazidis and Christians, as well as accusing the Shia of some of the atrocities committed by the Sunni-dominated jihadist groups, it points out an essential characteristic of the post-2003 Iraqi system: the ability of the elites to carry the logics of victimization from the authoritarian past into the democratic present (Ghanim 2011, 21-55).. The Barzani family in the north, for instance, established what could be considered a political family dynasty, justified by the electoral victories of the Kurdistan Democratic Party (KDP), which is enforced by its patronage structures and security monopolization.

As explained in the prior section, Massaab Al-Aloosy outlined how "consociational politics" with a rentier economy can become a suitable system for political elites to legitimize and sustain their domination over society. Unlike Al-Ali, Al-Aloosy argued that the Iraqi elites are not irrational or even incompetent when it serves their interests. Instead, he contends that despite all the challenges and crises to their power, the Iraqi elites have been effective in sustaining their power and domination by consolidating power collectively, while representing themselves as divided (2024). The Iraqi elite, he contends, are united in two essential aspects: sustaining the post-2003 political order and maintaining their domination over the rest of the population (2024). What appears to be disagreements in the political arena is not more than a "political formula," as Mosca would call it, to legitimize their existence. It is also a mechanism to divide the population against one another, so they do not realize the class dynamics, as Domhoff might have called it. For example, before every election, ethnocentric rhetoric rises; however, the same politicians who have pushed for conflict agree over power sharing and sustaining the status quo.

While the thinkers above focused on the characteristics and nature of the political elites, other authors have concentrated on the specific societal conditions and historical developments that necessitated the rise of the political elites in the Iraqi political system. Adeed Dawisha, for instance, has focused on the failure of Americans in Iraq as a cause for the political rise of elites. He argues that the Americans had initially planned for a long-term occupation of Iraq, as was the case in Japan and Germany (Dawisha 2009, 244-250). However, the failure of the Bush Administration to maintain control militarily in post-war Iraq and the lack of legitimacy at home pushed the administration to surrender sovereignty to the Iraqis before the system was institutionally mature enough. This problem led to the overreliance on Iraqi political elites

through the establishment of *the Iraqi Governing Council (IGC- مجلس الحكم العراقي)* (2009, 262-263). The Iraqi elites', in return, utilized the unelected IGC to establish the first stages of the *Muhasasa System*, which set a path dependency for later political developments in Iraqi society. In other words, the elites' capture, at least in the way it is constituted today, was not a result of a systemic determination, but a historical contingency.

Finally, the more classical thinker, who follows Ali Al-Wardi's path, explains the *Muhasasa* and elite capture based on dynamics that were present in the Iraqi society prior to the systemic change. Dominant Iraqi political sociologists, such as Faleh A. Jabar, have focused on how pre-existing sectarian divides were crystallized through elite bargains and *Muhasasa*. This stems from the notion that Iraqi society already had existing sharp divisions, which the post-2003 elitist democracy allowed to solidify (Jabar 2003). Ali Al-Wardi himself might have argued that the patronage structure today is a result of the tribal tendencies which have always been characteristic of the modern Iraqi politics (Al-Wardi 2005). The tribal nature of parties like the KDP, which is more resemblant to a tribal confederacy, as mentioned earlier, is an illustration of such dynamics.

5.4. Public Sphere Under Occupation, Violence, and Fragmentation

Both the continuation of and the damage to the pre-existing Iraqi public sphere are two of the most important aspects in understanding the post-2003 Iraq. The united Iraqi national discourse almost completely collapsed, and ethnocentric rhetoric and sectarian victimization took over. While violent and oppressive in the past, some Iraqi thinkers, such as the Iraqi political commentator and activist Saad Salloum, go far enough to argue that the post-2003 public sphere is more divided, less communicative, and more exclusionary than the preceding Iraqi political systems (2015).

Iraqi political sociologist Fanner Al-Hadad has argued that sectarian identity has replaced civic discourse, making public space a site of fragmentation and polarization. He argued that sectarian political identity is more than just a primordial political identity; it is a hyper-politicized tool caused by the dynamics of the post-2003 political system. He argued that a democratic system without the institution of a liberal democratic public sphere can lead to increased discrimination and violence, as it becomes more fragmented (Haddad 2020). Additionally, Al-Hadad argued that the imposition of the democratic process does not necessarily equate to democratization. Democratization requires a dominant civil discourse that excludes and suppresses hyper-politicization of sectarian identity politics (Haddad 2020). In other words, democracy only becomes possible when a specific civil discourse dominates society, and its 'regressive' alternatives are suppressed.

As discussed earlier, in his book *Iraq*, Dawisha pushes a similar critique, but with more historical contextualization. He argues that the Iraqi political class has consistently struggled to establish a shared national identity and discourse, through which the Iraqi population can communicate and negotiate (2011:5-10). However, the decentralization of discourse and communication parameters made this challenge even more severe. He argues that, while repressive, the former regime sustained a centralized and nationalistic discourse that, in one way or another, fostered a shared public sphere (2011). However, the post-2003 fragmented national public sphere along ethno-sectarian lines. He interestingly connects this fragmentation to the collapse of the concept of state monopoly on the use of physical force, which was put forward by earlier elite theories as threatening of democracy. Based on his perspective, the centralization of violence by the state is not contradictory to democratic governance, but rather essential, as the

spread of violence hinders the growth of civil society and compromises individual safety, which in turn is detrimental to the public sphere of society.

Ghanim, on the other hand, focused on the kind of public discourse, instead of its absence, that influences democratic politics. He argued that the kind of political discourse that dominates politics, if institutionalized incorrectly, can be detrimental to democratic processes and success. He argued that Iraqi political discourse suffers from a *politics of victimization*, where different groups aim to capitalize on their historical suffering rather than share a concern for national needs and common issues (Ghanim 2011, 21-55). This leads to further societal fragmentation, constant instability, and hostility towards one another, rather than deliberation and understanding.

Other argue that the crisis of the public sphere was at the core of the establishment of the new system itself. As Al-Ali described in his experience as an active participant in the drafting of the first constitution, public deliberation was almost absent (Al-Ali 2014). Even if developed under some periods of authoritarianism, the pre-2003 Iraqi constitution was a product of more than 75 years of evolution. However, he illustrates that the drafting of the post-war constitution was shaped by technical legalism and political interests rather than substantive public deliberation (2014). This resulted in the establishment of a constitution that is based on technical legalism and power competition rather than participatory democratic legitimacy. The Article 140 is a clear illustration of this crisis in the Iraqi, which state (Constitution of the Republic of Iraq 2005, Article 140):

المادة 140

أولاً – تتولى السلطة التنفيذية اتخاذ الخطوات اللازمة لاستكمال تنفيذ متطلبات الفقرة (أ) من المادة (58) من قانون إدارة الدولة للمرحلة الانتقالية.

ثانياً – تمتد المسؤولية الملقاة على السلطة التنفيذية المنصوص عليها في المادة (58) من قانون إدارة الدولة للمرحلة الانتقالية إلى السلطة التنفيذية المنتخبة وفق هذا الدستور، بشرط أن تُتجزأ تماماً (التطبيع والتعداد السكاني والاستفتاء بشأن كركوك وغيرها من المناطق المتنازع عليها؛ لتحديد إرادة السكان)، وذلك خلال موعد لا يتجاوز 31 كانون الأول 2007.

Translation: *Article 140—First: The executive authority shall undertake the necessary steps to complete the implementation of the requirements of all subparagraphs of Article 58 of the Transitional Administrative Law. Second: The responsibility placed upon the executive branch of the Iraqi Transitional Government stipulated in Article 58 of the Transitional Administrative Law shall extend and continue to the executive authority elected in accordance with this Constitution, provided that it accomplishes completely (normalization and census and concludes with a referendum in Kirkuk and other disputed territories to determine the will of their citizens), by a date not to exceed the 31st of December 200*

While the Article is well-masked in the language of technical legalism, it essentially solidified a conflict between the Kurdish region and the Central Government into the constitution. Entire regions, and the minority regions in particular, were categorized as “disputed territories” which solidified their political condition as problematic. The article has led to constant disputes and conflict in these areas, as well as a crisis of governance. For instance, the Yazidi city of Sinjar has remained without legitimate governance for more than 10 years, as the two governments are unable to agree over a mayor.

Finally, prominent Iraqi thinkers have focused on the exclusionary nature of post-2003 representative democracy and argue that the only path towards a democratic society is an inclusive public discourse and national identity. In his book *Unity in Diversity*, Saloum states that the 2003 political transition in Iraq, followed by the Arab Spring, was accompanied by divisive and often violent particularism and sectarianism, which ruptured the pre-existing political configuration that, at the very least, protected the considerable ethnic and religious diversity of Middle Eastern societies. Thus, he argued, that without establishing an inclusive discourse that identifies what Iraq is as a whole, the future of diversity and democracy is dismal. He more specifically stated (2003:15):

يُؤسّس الانتقال إلى الديمقراطية المستقرّة في العراق ودول المنطقة على الاعتراف بأهمية التعدّدية، والتفكير في معاني وإيجابيات التنوع الثقافي، من أجل خلق دولة تعترف بحقوق مكوّناتها، وحقّ مختلف الثقافات في الحفاظ على هويّتها وتراثها، وتمييزها عن ثقافة الأغلبية، باعتبارها حقوقيّاً محميّة على صعيد الاتفاقيات الدولية والداستير الوطنية.

Translation: The transition to a stable democracy in Iraq and the wider region must be grounded in recognizing the importance of pluralism and in critically reflecting on the meanings and supposed benefits of cultural diversity. It requires building a state that genuinely acknowledges the rights of its social components and affirms the right of different cultures to preserve their identity and heritage, distinguishing them from the majority culture as rights protected under both international agreements and national constitutions.

Here, Salloum adopts a similar perspective to Fraser, as explained in Chapter Two, in that liberal democracy is not productive and can even be oppressive if not built upon an inclusive and pluralistic public sphere. Additionally, Salloum emphasized the importance of including the perspectives and voices of minorities as an essential element to enriching and strengthening a democratic society.

5.5. Layered Exclusion of Women, Minorities, and the Marginalized:

The final thematic development that has been characteristic of post-2003 Iraq is the layered exclusion of women and minorities. As Chapter Four illustrated, there is a surge in inequality at every level of Iraqi society. The middle class has sharply declined, women's rights that were advanced over the twentieth century are under a constant threat, minorities—like Yazidis and Christians—have faced genocides and massacres. These were in large part due to the mass violence and destruction that faced the Iraqi society—including terrorism and radicalism—that did not necessarily have anything to do with the kind of political regime that was imposed in the post-2003 Iraqi society.

However, there are specific dynamics in the new political order that have contributed to the rise of inequality. For example, both David Ghanim and Adeed Dawisha agreed that the rise of the majority Shia, through the electoral system, has significantly led to the rise of anti-women policies (Dawisha 2009, 243-250; Ghanim 2011, 33-45). The Shia clergy have always been critical of and against the imposed reforms on family dynamics and women's rights. When the

major Shia parties were capable of mobilizing through mass political campaigns that were characterized by sectarian identity, they were also able to reverse many of the progressive achievements. The regressive policies have included the revocation of the civil marriage laws, which were a hallmark of the progressiveness of the Iraqi legal system. This, without mentioning, the current legal and political battles by the Shia political majority to allow for female teenagers to be forced into marriage at the age of nine years old.

Another aspect of the regressive turn towards inequality has been the co-optation of women and minorities to legitimize their oppression. Ghanim has, for example, critiqued how the system has provided women with a quota representation of 30% in parliament; however, most of these women are controlled by party leaders who force them to be vocal advocates of anti-women policies in parliament (2011, 33-37). For instance, two of the most regressive reforms in terms of women's rights, which include decreasing the legal marriage age and removing restrictions on Polygamy, have been pushed mainly by Shia Islamist female politicians.

Additionally, the fragmented nature of power in the democratic project has made it harder for women activist to conceptualize their oppressors and the responsible political entities to target. The Iraqi feminist sociologist stated that women activists constantly repeat the following phrase in their interviews: كبل جان عدنا صدام واحد. اليوم صار عدنا صدام بكل راس شارع—before we had one Saddam, today we have a Saddam at the top of each street (Ali 2019). This phenomenon not only reveals that the competitive and fragmented nature of the post-2003 power configuration has produced a larger number of committing actors, but also a reproduction of the authoritarian and patriarchal political personality of the pre-2003 era.

Finally, to reiterate what was already explained in the previous section, a significant aspect of the post-2023 Iraqi political system pertains to the structure of the public sphere. Both

Salloum and Ghanim agreed that the kinds of sectarian discourse that characterize today's electoral system are dangerous to the existence of minorities (Ghanim 2011, 41-45; Salloum 2015) . The intense ethno-sectarian competition between the Sunnis, Shia, and Kurds, as well as the framing of Iraqi political discourse around it, effectively removes minorities such as Yazidis from the political arena.

CHAPTER SIX: DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

6.1. Discussion of Key Findings:

The historical analysis conducted in this thesis revealed that three critical processes undermined the post-2003 Iraqi democratic experiment. First, the elites captured the institutions of the state and society through an ethno-sectarian "power-sharing system" known as *muhasasa*. The system allowed a small coalition of party bosses, dynastic tribal families, religious clerics, and militia commanders to monopolize power and resources, while utilizing democratic politics and institutions (e.g., elections, constitution) as political formulas to legitimize their rule over the rest of the Iraqi population. Secondly, while the public sphere witnessed a burst in the immediate aftermath of the regime change (including an initial increase in free press and civic engagement), it was soon stifled by violence, censorship, special interest-propaganda, and external interventions, which prevented the emergence of a genuinely inclusive national dialogue and sphere of political engagement. Thirdly, the structural inequalities and forms of exclusion persisted or worsened with the emergence of the new system, as the previously dominant Sunni Arabs were sidelined (who, in turn, resorted to reactionary violent politics). The smaller minorities (e.g. Assyrian Christians, Yazidis, and Turkmen) saw little meaningful power representation, while witnessing a genocide in the Yazidi case, and what could be argued to be an ethnic cleansing in the Christian case (population decline from 3 million to less than half a million). Women witnessed formal political inclusion (through a 25% quota in the parliament); however, they continued to suffer from entrenched patriarchal exclusion and faced regressive policies at the hands of majoritarian parties later on (such as rolling back on women's civil rights and discriminatory marriage laws). In combination, these dynamics meant that the post-2003 Iraqi polity fell far short of the claimed liberal democratic ideal.

6.1.1. Resonances with Western Internal Critiques:

The Iraqi case's social and political outcomes resonate and extend the Western critiques of liberal democracy. Table 2, a comparative analytical table, synthesizes chapters 2, 4, and 5 to show how they compare to one another. The elite theorist's warning that even with seemingly democratic elections, power often concentrates in the hands of the few is clearly reminiscent of the Iraqi case's sectarian oligarchic outcomes. Public sphere scholars (e.g., Jürgen Habermas) lament the fact that a reason-based public sphere often declines due to colonization by special interests, as was present in the Iraqi case, as illustrated in both chapters four and five. Feminist and other social justice-concerned theorists (e.g., Iris Marion Young, Nancy Fraser, Kimberlé Crenshaw) argue that formal democratic equality often leaves deep social hierarchies intact. This corresponds to Iraq's new order and its apparent failure to uplift marginalized groups, with women and ethno-religious minorities excluded mainly from decision-making and material political power. Throughout these three dimensions, the Iraqi case validated, albeit in a complex manner, the Western critiques of liberal democracy.

Table 2. The analytical table below summarizes key thematic comparisons between Western internal critiques, the post-2003 Iraqi historical experience Iraqi scholarly perspectives.

Theme	Western Theoretical Critiques (Chapter 2)	Post-2003 Iraqi Experience (Chapter 4)	Iraqi Scholarly & Political Responses (Chapter 5)
External Imposition & Sovereignty	Rarely addressed in classic liberal-democratic critiques, which assume sovereign nation-states. Internal Western critiques did not focus on imposed democracy.	Democracy was externally imposed by the 2003 U.S.-led invasion, with sovereignty initially vested in the Coalition Provisional Authority. Even after formal sovereignty returned, Iraq's politics remained heavily shaped by foreign powers.	Iraqi analysts emphasize loss of sovereignty as a fundamental flaw. Many argue that because the post-2003 order was designed abroad, it never gained genuine domestic legitimacy. True democracy requires complete sovereignty.

Table 2. Continued.

Elite Domination	Elite theory (Weber, Michels, Mosca, Mills) argues that liberal democracy is prone to rule by a small elite. Democratic institutions often mask oligarchic power structures.	A new elite class—sectarian party leaders, exiled opposition figures, and militia commanders—seized power after 2003 through the muhasasa system.	Iraqi scholars describe the post-2003 system as a de facto oligarchy. Analysts like Zaid al-Ali demonstrate how elites have manipulated law and institutions to entrench their power.
Public Sphere & Deliberation	Deliberative democracy theory stresses the need for a free, inclusive public sphere for rational debate.	Iraq's public sphere was fragmented after the 2003 invasion. Media freedom expanded briefly, then devolved into partisan outlets fueling sectarian narratives.	Iraqi commentators lament the collapse of an inclusive public sphere.
Social Exclusion & Marginalization	Western critics argue that formal equality masks deep exclusion; racial, class, and ethnic minorities remain underrepresented and disempowered.	Post-2003 Iraq marginalized minorities, and the poor. Corruption and inequality deepened class divisions and fueled insurgencies.	Iraqi discourse emphasizes reconciliation and equity. Scholars urge power-sharing reforms and equitable resource distribution.
Gender Justice	Feminist critiques contend that liberal democracy fails to dismantle patriarchy; formal rights do not translate into real equality.	Despite a 25% quota for women, governance remained male-dominated. Sectarian conservatism and insecurity limit women's mobility and influence.	Iraqi feminist scholars, such as Zahra Ali, highlight tokenism and backlash. They advocate for stronger legal protection, leadership roles, and confronting cultural patriarchy.
Intersectionality	Intersectional theory (Crenshaw) shows how gender, race, and class overlap to create compounded oppression. Liberal democracy often treats citizens as a homogeneous bloc.	Multiple axes of oppression overlapped in Iraq. For example, poor Yazidi or rural women faced compounded exclusion across ethnic, class, and gender lines.	Iraqi analysts increasingly adopt intersectional frames, linking sectarianism, patriarchy, and class. They call for holistic reforms that address all forms of discrimination together.

6.1.2. Key Distinctions with Western Internal Critiques:

While the Iraqi case corresponds with Western critiques in keyways, it also departed from the Western context in important ways. Firstly, while Iraqi scholars critique externally imposed democracy, the Western critiques focus on internal contradictions within self-evolved systems. In other words, while Western critiques assume stable, modern, and sovereign societies, the Iraqi case, in contrast, illustrates liberal democracy under conditions of occupation and civil conflict, which exacerbate the contradictions of the system (e.g., elite domination and the erosion of the public sphere). Thus, Iraqi analysts often emphasize the importance of security and state sovereignty (a legitimate monopoly on violence) and the establishment of a unifying national identity as prerequisites for a workable democracy.

Secondly, while both perspectives agree on the role of elites in undermining democratic ideals, they differ in the causality of elite capture. While the Western critiques mainly focused on economic class and institutional positioning, the Iraqi case indicates that sectarianism, religion, and ethnicity provide the bases for elite domination. Thirdly, while both Western and Iraqi perspectives highlight the manipulation and colonization of the public sphere by elites, they differ in terms of causation. Iraqi scholars emphasize sectarian fragmentation, external interference, and the collapse of a united national dialogue, whereas Western critiques focus on capitalist distortion and class conflict. Fourth, in terms of exclusion and inequality, both perspectives critique systemic exclusions but frame them differently. The Iraqi perspective empathizes sectarian, religious, and gender problems, while class, race, and gender seem to be the main matrices of domination in Western contexts.

Table 3. The following comparative analysis narrows down the comparison to the specific distinctions between the Western internal critiques and the Iraqi historical experience with liberal democracy.

Themes	Iraqi Scholarly Experience Perspectives	Western Internal Critiques
Elite Domination	- Focus on muhasasa as a mechanism for elite entrenchment and exclusion of broader society, emphasis on external imposition of elites by foreign powers, especially post-2003 U.S. intervention, critique of patrimonial structures that prioritize loyalty over meritocracy, and external actors (e.g., U.S., Iran) are seen as complicit in enabling elite capture.	- Elite theories critique the inherent oligarchic tendencies in liberal democracies, emphasis on how elites dominate through institutional hierarchies and organizational control, Mills and Domhoff highlight the role of interlocking elite networks in subverting democratic ideals, and focus on class-based domination rather than sectarian or ethnic divisions.
Public Sphere Deficits	Post-2003 Iraq saw the erosion of a unified public sphere due to sectarian fragmentation and external interferences, Media was co-opted by sectarian elites and foreign powers, civic engagement is suppressed by violence, censorship, and a lack of institutional support, and Resistance movements highlight grassroots attempts to reclaim the public sphere.	Habermas critiques the "colonization" of the public sphere by corporate and state interests, Fraser emphasizes structural inequalities that undermine participatory parity in liberal democracies, Chomsky's "manufacturing consent" theory highlights how the media serves elite interests while suppressing dissent.
Exclusionary Dynamics	Post-2003 governance marginalized Sunnis, women, and minorities through constitutional design and political restructuring, neoliberal "shock therapy" exacerbated socio-economic inequalities, intersectional exclusions particularly affected groups like Yazidis and lower-class women, gender quotas (e.g., 25% parliamentary seats for women) failed to address entrenched patriarchal norms.	Feminist critiques emphasize the exclusionary nature of liberal democracies due to patriarchal structures, intersectional critiques highlight how race, gender, and class intersect to perpetuate systemic inequalities, redistribution vs. recognition paradox: liberal democracies often prioritize cultural justice over material justice (Fraser).

Table 3. Continued.

Imposed Democracy vs. Organic Development	Iraqi scholars critique the imposition of liberal democracy as an external project disconnected from local realities and U.S.-led democratization dismantled existing institutions without creating viable alternatives, leading to instability.	Western critiques focus on internal contradictions within liberal democracies rather than imposed systems, highlight the tension between ideals of popular sovereignty and elite domination.
Historical Contextualization	Iraqi scholars situate post-2003 developments within broader regional dynamics (e.g., sectarian histories, postcolonial legacies), historical antecedents like Ba'athist repression shaped post-2003 governance structures, rotest movements are framed as part of a more protracted struggle for self-determination.	Western critiques often focus on structural issues within established democracies without accounting for colonial or postcolonial contexts, focus on universal patterns (e.g., elite capture) rather than unique regional dynamics.

6.2. Implications for Democratic Theory and Iraq:

The primary implication of this thesis is that democratic theory should become a more global project, capable of integrating perspectives that are both globally oriented and context specific. The thesis indicates that the systems of liberal democracy, often assumed to be universally applicable and context-independent, can falter and produce contradictions when implanted in vastly different socio-historical and geopolitical contexts. By decentering Western-centric perspectives, which often assume state stability, national sovereignty, and other social perspectives defined by classic theories of liberal democracy, experiences like those in Iraq can broaden our perspective. The Iraqi case particularly showcases that foreign interventions, weak state institutions, and historical societal conflicts can influence democratic outcomes. Additionally, without collective national identities, social cohesion, economic justice, and safety and security, formal electoral institutions can produce illiberal and repressive outcomes.

In terms of its Implications for Iraq's democratic future, several priorities emerge for building a more inclusive democracy in Iraq: (1) Break the elite cartel; (2) Rebuild the public sphere; (3) Integrate marginalized groups; (4) Advance social and gender justice; (5) Assert sovereignty and state monopoly on violence.

6.3. Future Orientations and Conclusions:

Looking forward, this case opens several pathways for future research efforts. Firstly, the research can be extended to include other societies that live in a similar cultural, geographical, and civilizational context today, that is, post-Civil War Lebanon, post-Assad's Syria, and post-2002 Afghanistan. Such comparative extension can be directed towards dynamics, rather than cultural and geographic contexts. For instance, an analysis of the impacts of elite, public sphere erosion, and socio-economic exclusion on the outcomes of democratization in post-war, imposed liberal democracies could be conducted between Iraq, Germany, and Japan, identifying why the latter two witnessed stable socio-political orders, while the first faced violence and chaos. Secondly, this thesis primarily depended on historical and theoretical analysis. If the opportunity is available, the research can be expanded by integrating fieldwork observations and interviews to clearly illustrate how the system functions and how the Iraqis respond to it. This latter effort is significant in capturing the post-2020 period, during which Iraq has entered a more stable phase, as state consolidation is more substantial, and the impact of movements (e.g., the Tishreen uprising) has unfolded over the last five years.

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VITA

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