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Book Review

### Iraq: Power, Institutions, and Identities

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#### Book Information

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This book, published by Routledge Press in 2023 and authored by Andrew J. Flibbert, examines Iraqi politics from different dimensions. It starts with three key concepts that shape Iraqi politics: power, institutions and identities. Then, the book explains early Iraqi nation-building attempts after the First World War. At that time, Iraq was a state under British mandate and even though it formally gained its independence in 1932, it was not able to take decisions without the influence of Britain. Britain-installed King Faisal I realized the lack of Iraqi identity and put efforts to unite Iraqis as “one nation”. However, because of his weakly empowered monarchy, he had very limited success in terms of the creation of state institutions and a national sense of community. After Faisal I, King Ghazi, who ruled Iraq between 1933-1939, had the same fate as his father regarding his failure to create state institutions and an Iraqi identity. Later, Faisal II replaced King Ghazi at the age of three. However, he had little influence in Iraqi politics because of his age. His government was heavily influenced by the eight-time Prime Minister Nuri al-Sa’id. Just like his predecessor, he had almost no success in terms of creating an Iraqi identity and democratic state institutions. However, attempts of these leaders paved the way to build an Iraqi identity in the future, as in modern Iraq, Iraqi identity is an important bond in the society (Yıldız, 2020).

The second chapter analyses key events between 1958-1968. After the 1948 Arab-Israeli War and Nasser’s rise to power in 1954, nationalist ideas emerged in the Arab world. The monarch was overthrown in Iraq in 1958 and a very unstable reign of governments were witnessed between 1958-1968. Leaders in this period, Abd al-Karim Qasim and Arif brothers were constantly threatened by rival groups and they carried out autocratic measures to remain in power. The Ba’athist coup of

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1968 installed a more durable regime relatively, firstly under Ahmed Hassan al-Bakr (1968-1979) and later under Saddam Hussein (1979-2003). This chapter underlines the unstable character of Iraqi politics and weak institutionalism which pushed its leaders to be more autocratic. Therefore, the author analyzes the root problems of Iraqi politics, which have been affecting Iraq even today.

The third chapter analyses the period between 1988-2022. The chapter covers various milestones in Iraqi history in that period: the 1990 Kuwait intervention, the 1991 Gulf War, political and economic isolation after the Gulf War, allegations of chemical weapons production, the 2003 Iraqi War, the post-war period, democracy attempts, Arab Spring and its effects in Iraq, DAESH insurgency and Iraq's response against terrorism. The chapter begins with the Kuwait intervention, caused by the dispute about oil fields between the two countries. The result of the war was unexpected for Iraq, which did not expect a coalition campaign against its forces. Iraqi forces were defeated and Saddam's regime had to face international sanctions because of its weapons of mass destruction. Following Kuwait's intervention, neoconservatives in the USA began pressuring policymakers to take action against Iraq. Finally, the Bush administration decided to intervene in Iraq by falsely trying to justify their action as an operation against al-Qaeda and to destroy Iraq's mass destruction weapons. The insurgency period of the war lasted for many years and the power vacuum caused by the occupation was filled by terrorist organizations such as PKK, DAESH, Al-Qaeda, which claimed the lives of thousands of innocent people especially since the Arab Spring (Hamasaed & Nada, 2020).

The fourth chapter is focused on Iraq's foreign relations. Iraq's foreign relations had been dominated by Britain especially since the Monarch was overthrown. After that, relations with Iran and Kuwait played a key role in Iraq's foreign relations. Then, especially after Iran and Kuwait wars, Iraq was politically isolated; yet, Saddam's firm control of the state prevented him from being overthrown until the USA occupation in 2003.

The fifth chapter is devoted to the political economy of Iraq. The chapter focuses on issues such as Iraq's economy, income sources, demography, population growth, and gender inequality. An interesting fact about the Iraqi economy is that while it has almost 8% of all the proven oil reserves in the world, this huge number of assets also indirectly brought unusual costs to the country (U.S. Energy Information Administration, 2024). For example, during the 1970s, Iraq's oil revenues saw massive increases because of the global oil crisis that drove up the oil prices, but absurdly, Iraq went from having 35 billion dollars of hard currency and gold reserves to 80 billion dollars of debt at the same period (Kamran, 1990); because of the Iraq-Iran war between 1980 and 1988, along with factors like corruption, nepotism, inefficiency and patronage system.

In this book review, key assumptions of the author are also analysed. “Middle-state” is a term used by the author to describe Iraq. It is not a weak state by any means, but it is not a major power at the same time. When its relative power increased especially during the 20th century for various reasons like oil prices, oil field discoveries, weakening of its neighbors; policymakers felt the need to excessively use that power aggressively. This brings us to another key finding of the author: the effects of weak institutionalism. According to the author, when analysing Iraq’s politics, it is unnecessary to put too much emphasis on the “names”; instead, weak institutionalism and poor nation-building efforts are the core reasons of Iraq’s deep-rooted problems. Therefore, a well-known concept, “self-fulfilling theory” can be put into consideration. As Iraq’s political story of the 20th is full of foreign involvements, assassinations, coups and military intervention in politics; each leader that took control of Iraq felt the need to “secure” himself and his government. That led to authoritarianism, assassinations, oppression against the opposition, and terrorizing civilians. Therefore, Iraq’s problems lie in its structural flaws; not solely the leaders themselves.

Another important point of the author is the “fluidity” of new political ideas in the Middle East; where most people have similar cultural and historical backgrounds. Because of that, a political movement that emerged in one state can easily spread to other states. For the author, this is another reason for conflicts in the Middle East. For example, after the 1948 Arab-Israeli War, Arab nationalism spread in the region; which encouraged coups against monarchies. After the Iran Islamic Revolution in 1979, Iran’s new policymakers called for an Islamic Revolution in Iraq and Saddam Hussain was afraid that what happened in Iran may spread to Iraq as well. That, among other reasons like Iran’s decades-long involvement with Iraqi Kurdish and Shi’i populations, the water problem and Iran’s loss of U.S. arms and political support; encouraged Saddam Hussain to attack Iran in 1980 (Renfrew, 1987). The war lasted until 1988 and caused more than one million casualties. Apart from interstate conflicts, terrorism can spread easily in the region for numerous reasons like unemployment, poverty, foreign involvement, extremism, power vacuums, failed states, foreign interventions. For example, while the 2003 Iraq occupation lasted only about six weeks, its aftermath and process of building a new government was bloody; which caused tens of thousands of deaths (Doherty & Kiley, 2023). The occupation was a failure not only in terms of casualties, but also in terms of what it left behind. After the war, PKK and DAESH made use of the power vacuum in Iraq; which helped them to recruit members and become important actors both in Iraq and Syria. Most recently, during the Arab Spring, terrorist organizations such as PKK, DAESH, Al-Qaeda sought for more power and territory. In 2016, Donald Trump bluntly called Obama to be the “founder of DAESH”, by “the way he got out of Iraq” (Hernandez, 2016).

As a conclusion, the aim of the book is to analyse the political history of Iraq structurally. Rather than the personal attitudes of the leaders, it is the structural reasons that shape the acts of the leaders. The author didn't aim to write a history book, but rather aimed to analyse his key assumptions to explain deep-rooted problems that lie in Iraqi politics. I believe that this is a thought-provoking book that encourages readers to brainstorm not only about Iraqi politics, but the politics of the Middle East as well; and it even helps to understand the autocratic states of the 21st century. Therefore, I recommend this book for those who study history of Iraq, Middle East politics and international relations that try to increase their perspective on the chronic problems of many autocratic states in the 21st century.