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How Oil and Demography Shape Post-Saddam Iraq

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On July 7th, 2018, barely two months after Iraq held parliamentary elections and as a new government was still being formed, large protests erupted in the southern city of Basra and continued for several days. Since at least 2015, such demonstrations—focused on the lack of public services, inadequate infrastructure, unemployment, and corruption—have become an annual summer ritual in Basra, where temperatures approach 120 degrees Fahrenheit and electricity is scarce. This year, however, protests spread to neighboring governates and took on political overtones, including the ransacking of government buildings and political parties' offices.¹ By the time the protests reached Baghdad on July 14th, the Iraqi government had disabled internet access in much of the country and blocked social media applications with messaging features. The following day, Prime Minister Haider al-Abadi—officially a caretaker leader since the May election—pledged \$2.93 billion (3.5 trillion Iraqi dinars) for immediate development projects in Basra Governate as well as 10,000 new oil industry jobs there, which would be distributed according to population density.² Local officials scrambled to outline requirements for the positions as more than 85,000 Basrawis filed makeshift applications in the following ten days.³ The Basra Statistics Office expects up to 500,000 Iraqis to apply for the 10,000 jobs.⁴

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Most analyses of these events have emphasized the specific political context of early 2018 Iraq to explain both the electoral results in May and the protests since July. Commentators see the defeat of ISIS and the improved security situation as providing breathing space for Iraqis to demand more from their officials, resulting in an indictment of the entire political class at the ballot box and, soon after, in the streets.⁵ Some see the protests as having been hijacked for political purposes by both regional and Iraqi actors jockeying for influence in the government-formation process.⁶ There is merit to these perspectives, but they tend to focus too much on proximate causes and underemphasize the impact of important structural issues.

This Brief argues that both Iraq's post-Ba'th political system and a majority of its people came of age during a decade of extraordinarily high oil prices, from 2005 to 2014, and this period of plenty left a legacy that shapes attitudes as well as possibilities for reform. Until the collapse of oil prices in late 2014, post-invasion Iraqi governments governed only in times of relative excess, with oil prices generally above \$100 a barrel. This was critical with respect to the nature of patronage networks as well as in shaping the expectations of the country's burgeoning youth population, 39% of whom were born after the U.S.-led invasion in 2003.

A majority of Iraq's population do not remember life under Saddam Hussein—only the period under elected Iraqi governments flush with oil wealth. Despite Abadi's and other politicians' repeated pledges to battle financial and administrative corruption, many of Iraq's problems are structural and likely to worsen because post-invasion programs and patronage are seen as entitlements. By focusing so much on the Iraqi state's delivery of services and political rights to Sunni, Shia, and Kurdish communities, we risk overlooking an increasingly salient divide between Iraqi youth and the country's older generations.

Prior to the Protests: The 2018 Elections

Many observers have noted that the parliamentary elections held on May 12th, Iraq's fifth since the overthrow of the Ba'th, came at a sensitive time in Iraq's political history. It was the first election held after the Iraqi government claimed victory in the war against ISIS and the first since Iraq's Kurds voted overwhelmingly in support of independence in a non-binding referendum. A total of 6,904 candidates vied for 329 seats.⁷ Several leaders and groups, overwhelmingly Shia, that had been part of the Popular Mobilization Forces (*al-Hashd al-Shaabi*) fighting alongside Iraqi security forces against ISIS contested the election and were widely seen as being supported by Iran.⁸ The election was also portrayed by some as a referendum on Abadi's leadership and an opportunity for former Prime Minister Nouri al-Maliki to perhaps return to power. Two outcomes of the election are particularly noteworthy: the "victory" of Muqtada al-Sadr's coalition and voters' apathy, evidenced in a stunningly low turnout.

Muqtada al-Sadr's Sairoun ("On the Move") coalition, which included part of the Communist Party of Iraq, did surprisingly well, winning the largest overall number of seats (54) and placing first or second in 10 of Iraq's 19 governates. Like the other large electoral lists, Sairoun campaigned on a reformist message, condemning corruption, demanding institutional reform, and opposing foreign intervention in Iraqi affairs. Almost all of the coalitions campaigned on nationalist and anti-sectarian platforms. But the relatively young (age 44) Sadr has consistently

positioned himself as speaking to Iraq’s marginalized and poorest—and as someone who both remained in Iraq under the Ba’th and who never held office after the invasion.

Combined with the third-place finish of Abadi’s al-Nasr (“Victory”) list, the results of the election were widely interpreted as a rebuke to Iraq’s political elites, the vast majority of whom were former exiles and from an older generation.⁹ Joost Hiltermann writes, “Sairoun’s victory marks the first time that Iraqi leaders who are not former exiles have won an election. We should not underestimate the importance of this precedent. Remember that ordinary Iraqis, who survived decades of dictatorship, always viewed the returning exiles with great suspicion after 2003, believing they were intent on grabbing power and Iraq’s resources. They were not wrong in the majority of cases. The former exiles established a kleptocracy that squandered oil income and plucked the country bare.”¹⁰ Indeed, almost 65% of the elected MPs will be new faces.¹¹

The second distinguishing feature of the elections was voter apathy. Despite excellent security throughout Iraq (not a single attack reportedly occurred), turnout was uncharacteristically low: Only 44.52% of registered voters voted.¹² As Table 1 shows, this contrasts sharply with Iraq’s previous four parliamentary elections: The previous low was 58.32% in January 2005, when large numbers of Sunni Arabs boycotted the election and security fears were acute.

Table 1: Voter Turnout in Iraqi Parliamentary Elections¹³

Date	Votes	Registered Voters	Turnout
January 30, 2005	8,550,571	14,662,639	58.32%
December 15, 2005	12,396,631	15,568,702	79.63%
March 7, 2010	11,526,412	19,000,000	60.67%
April 30, 2014	13,013,765	21,500,000	60.53%
May 12, 2018	10,840,998	24,350,850	44.52%

Various explanations have been offered for the low turnout.¹⁴ Some thought Sunni Arabs might not have participated for a variety of reasons, but turnout in Sunni Arab–majority governates was not significantly different from that in others. A vehicle ban in Baghdad likely suppressed turnout until it was lifted in the afternoon of election day in an attempt to encourage Iraqis to vote; Baghdad had the lowest turnout (33%) of any governate. There was a group of social media activists who advocated an electoral boycott, arguing that the government could be brought down and rebuilt, but it is unclear how influential their calls were.

The available governate-level electoral data show that turnout was low throughout the country. Turnout topped 50% in only four governates and was highest (53%) in Nineveh, recently liberated from ISIS;¹⁵ turnout in the southernmost provinces, where protests would erupt and spread two months later, was not lower than elsewhere. A smaller total number of Iraqis voted in 2018 than in any election since January 2005, even though 3 million Iraqis had turned 18 since the previous election, in 2014, and could vote for the first time. Voter apathy thus ran deep and wide.

Available evidence suggests that Iraqis under the age of 30 overwhelmingly, and perhaps disproportionately, stayed home on election day. Thus, the head of a polling station in the Baghdad neighborhood of Kathamiya told NPR, “Most of the people who came to vote are the elderly and women.”¹⁶ Compared with previous elections, there were few scenes of jubilation after voters cast ballots; displays of purple-inked fingers were few and far between.¹⁷ It seems as though a generation of Iraqis decided not to vote.

Oil and the Coming of Age of Iraq’s Political System

The post-Saddam Iraqi political system developed and evolved in a period of exceptionally high oil prices. When the U.S.-led coalition toppled the Ba’th regime in April 2003, the price of oil was \$36 a barrel (adjusted for inflation). By the time Ibrahim al-Jaafari came to power in April 2005 as Iraq’s first elected Prime Minister, the price had risen to \$50. Except for a brief period in 2009, the price would not be that low again until 2015. Rather, as shown in Figure 1, the price steadily

rose, passing \$100 in September 2007 and staying near or above that point until precipitously dropping in the second half of 2014 to \$50. This pattern is in sharp contrast with pre-2005 oil prices, when oil rarely rose above \$50. Iraq's crude oil production steadily increased, on an annual basis, from 1.8 million barrels per day in 2004 to 3.1 million in 2014.¹⁸

Figure 1: Oil prices over 30 years¹⁹
(period of elected Iraqi governments shaded)



Approximately 90–94% of Iraqi government income is based on oil revenue.²⁰ The effects of petroleum wealth appear to be conditional, particularly on the degree of state and fiscal capacity and on whether high-quality institutions existed *before* the exploitation of oil.²¹ Some oil-rich countries, most notably Norway (which discovered oil in 1969), do not suffer from a “resource curse” of poor governance, high levels of corruption, and dependence on oil revenues. There are other resource-rich, corrupt states in the world, but Iraq’s post-Ba’th political system is perhaps unique in that it was formed and evolved during a period of historically high oil prices and when state capacity and institutions were extremely weak. Networks of corruption and patronage became baked into and permeate almost every facet of the post-invasion system: After each election, political parties divvied up ministries and state institutions and distributed jobs and public sector contracts to supporters, cronies, and family. An informal power-sharing system known as *muhassasa* ensured that sectarian leaders could place supporters as advisors in every ministry. Stories of corruption in Iraq abound—and many, perhaps most, Iraqis believe they live in the most corrupt country on earth.²² Transparency International in 2014 ranked only five countries more corrupt, placing Iraq 170 out of 175 in their Corruption Perception Index.²³

Core public sector employment in Iraq rose dramatically from 2003 to 2015, from about 1 million to just over 3 million (or approximately 22% of all jobs in 2003 to 42% of all jobs in 2015). Consequently, the percentage of total government expenditures devoted to wages rose from 7% in 2004 to almost 40% by 2015. According to the Iraqi Ministry of Planning, the country’s labor force in 2013 was approximately 8.5 million. With 3.5 million permanent civilian employees, another 1 million employed on fixed-term contracts, and 1.5 million in the Defense and Interior ministries’ security forces, the Iraqi government employed 6 million people, or 71% of the labor force.²⁴ The 176 state-owned enterprises (SOEs) in Iraq employed 550,000 of those 6 million, 30–50% of whom the Iraqi government admits are estimated to represent excess labor.²⁵ An equivalent, if not higher, percentage of employees in ministries can be assumed to be unnecessary. The extremely high oil prices allowed Iraqi officials to get away with blatant corruption while still providing a modicum of services and privileged stipends. But that changed with the collapse of oil prices in late 2014.

World oil prices fell by 50% from mid-2014 to 2016, leading to severe budgetary and fiscal crises in Iraq. Iraq’s real GDP contracted by 2.4% in 2015, despite growth in oil production. The current account deficit widened, leading the government to spend \$13 billion—an alarming 19.6%—of its official foreign exchange reserves in 2015 (equivalent to 9.9

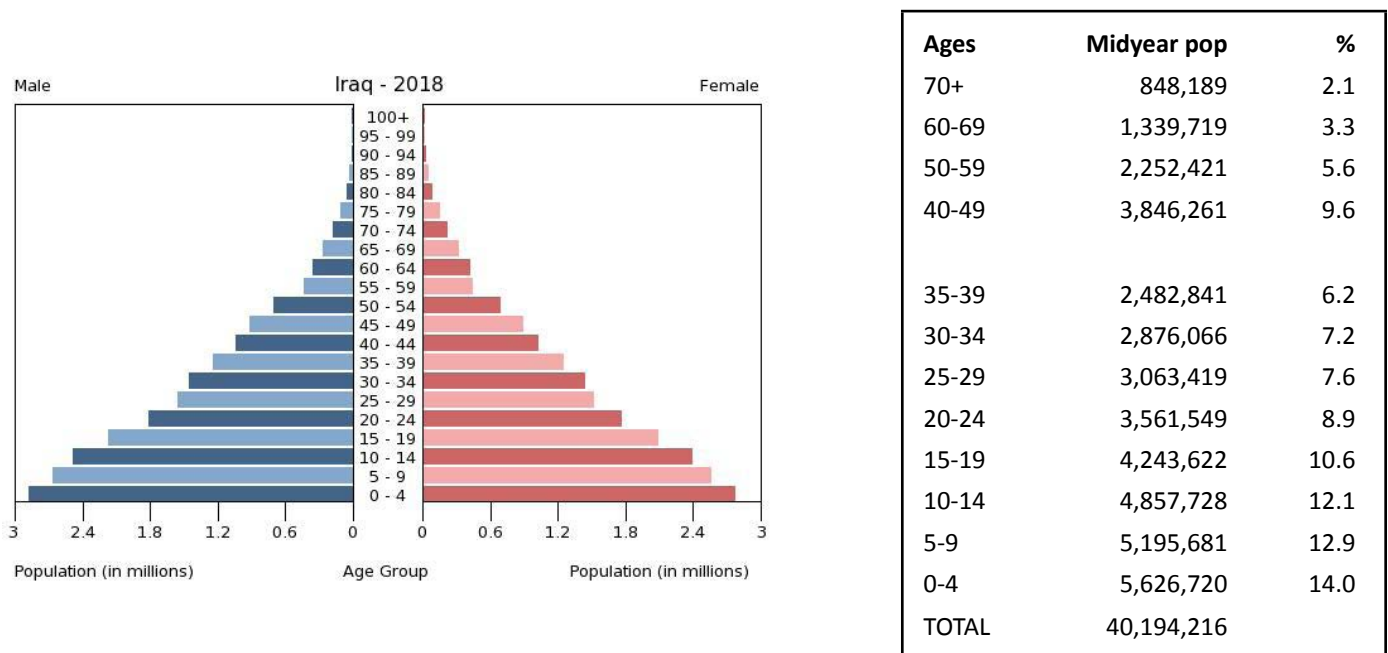
months of imports of goods and services) and another \$9 billion in 2016.²⁶ This resulted in Iraq’s gross reserves falling from \$77.8 billion in 2013 to \$45.2 billion at the end of 2016. The fiscal deficit increased to 14.3% of GDP, which the government financed by drawing down government deposits, issuing T-bills, and, eventually, resorting to loans by the IMF and World Bank. Total government debt ballooned from 32% of GDP (\$75 billion) in 2014 to 55% (\$98 billion) in 2015.²⁷

The Iraqi government appealed to the IMF and agreed to reduce its wage bill, pension payments, government expenditures on goods and services (for example, by attempting to increase electricity charges), direct transfers, and non-oil investment expenditures.²⁸ With the exception of a few sectors, public sector hiring froze, and the total number of public sector employees fell slightly, from 3.03 million in 2015 to 2.89 million in 2018.²⁹ Austerity continues to this day, and, barring continued high oil prices, Iraq has few fiscal options remaining. Iraq appealed for \$88 billion at a donors and investors conference in Kuwait in February 2018 for reconstruction related to the war with ISIS. It received pledges of \$30 billion.³⁰

The Youth Bulge and the Coming of Age of Iraq’s Population

Iraqis under 30 have borne the brunt of this austerity, particularly the post-2016 hiring freeze. As Figure 2 demonstrates, Iraq is undergoing a tremendous demographic shift. More than 39% of Iraq’s population was born after the U.S.-led invasion in 2003, fifteen years ago. If you include Iraqis who were 10 years old or younger in 2003, some 23,485,300—or 58.4% of Iraq’s population—either were born after Saddam Hussein was removed from power or were not old enough at the time to remember life under the Ba’th.

Figure 2: Estimated population pyramid and data for Iraq, mid-year 2018³¹



Iraq’s population was about 25 million in 2003; it is somewhere between 38 and 40 million today.³² The country’s population grows by 800,000 to 1,000,000 per year.³³ And young people are costly: They consume expensive services (education, housing, medical care) but produce little wealth. Studies have also found that such youth bulges make countries more susceptible to political violence—or, at least, beget a greater potential for political mobilization among the population.³⁴

Although other Arab societies have “youth bulges,” only Yemen and the Palestinian Territories have a similar percentage (40%) of their population under 14 years old.³⁵ But in Iraq, there are many reasons to believe that various events in recent decades have left lasting imprints on different generations. Studies of American politics show that political events in a person’s teenage and early adult years (centered around the age of 18) have a profound effect on one’s long-term partisan

preferences.³⁶ These are sometimes called *cohort effects* and can be understood as the consequences of being born at different times. Wars and sanctions have thus meant that different generations of Iraqis have had very different shared life experiences.

For Iraqis in their 50s today, the 1980–88 Iran-Iraq War was a formative experience. But few Iraqis under the age of 45 remember that war. For Iraqis in their 30s and 40s who remained in Iraq, the 1991–2003 sanctions period was the formative period in their political life. Iraqis who went into exile tend to emphasize the importance of the 1991 uprisings and subsequent regime crackdown. But for any Iraqi under the age of 30, the shared experience is that of post-Saddam Iraq and the oil-fueled expectations that went along with that time. Public sector employment and social welfare, supported by a decade of oil windfall, are seen as entitlements.

Because this most recent generation is so large as compared with previous ones, the attitudes of today's youth will have a profound impact on politics and trends in Iraq. The members of this generation have come or are coming to political and religious consciousness in an era radically different from their parents' and grandparents' eras, and we know very little about how they think about politics. Faleh Jabar notes that this generation has had little contact with any coherent secular ideology and came of age after the big populist ideologies of the late 20th century (including pan-Arabism and various leftist movements) had waned.³⁷ Their greatest ideological exposure has been to Islamist influences in sectarian forms, which Jabar sees them as rejecting. This generation has also had access to satellite television and the internet that previous generations in Iraq did not have during their formative years, including those who came of age during the 1991-2003 sanctions period. Iraq witnessed a quantum jump in such access in 2003, as technologies that were previously banned or unavailable because of sanctions suddenly became widespread. It is not clear how access to such information changes the structure of authority within families and across generations. This new generation is better educated and better connected to a wider world than their parents were. How will this cohort, which is maturing into adulthood, differ from the ones before it?

Only a few scholars have closely explored the attitudes of young people in Iraq. Eric Davis spoke with hundreds of Iraqi youth in dozens of focus groups in 2010–11, examining the formative factors that have shaped their identity. He found that they tend to reject sectarian identities, do not subscribe to politicized religion, and desire the personal freedoms and economic opportunity

that they believe Western youth enjoy. His research emphasizes their role both in building civil society and in perpetrating sectarian violence in post-2003 Iraq. But Davis's research largely was conducted before the dramatic downturn in oil prices in 2014 and the subsequent loss of economic opportunity.³⁸

More recently, during fieldwork in Iraq in 2018, Marsin Alshamary found that many Arab Iraqi youth expressed a form of strongman nostalgia “for a time that they did not live through but that they feel symbolized Iraqi national unity and strength.”³⁹ She argues that their disenchantment with the present fuels a romanticization of an authoritarian past. Alshamary's interviews, arguably in contrast to Davis's earlier focus groups, suggest that Iraqi youth today are willing to sacrifice freedom for economic opportunity and a job.

Publicly available surveys from Iraq reveal little about youth attitudes in the country, especially post-2014. In a late 2014 survey by the International Foundation for Electoral Systems (IFES), 60% of 18–34-year-olds said they were “very likely” and 24% said they were “somewhat likely” to vote in future elections.⁴⁰ These responses were similar to those from other age groups, but they obviously contrast sharply with what in fact transpired in the May 2018 elections. Youth attitudes regarding whether Iraq is a democracy were not different from those of Iraqis aged 35–54, but fewer youth reported being “very interested” in matters of politics than did other generations (26%, as compared with 34% of respondents 35 and older). It is fair to assume that many of this generation have come to see Iraq's post-invasion social welfare programs, fueled by the decade-long oil windfall, as entitlements. There has been an influx of young Iraqis, both male and female, into the labor force, but since the hiring freeze of 2016, the Iraqi public sector can no longer guarantee suitable jobs.

We do know that Iraqi youth have played a prominent role in the social protest movement that erupted in Basra in July 2015, continued sporadically, and foreshadowed the wave of protests that began in July 2018.⁴¹ Jabar and his colleagues conducted a survey of the protest movement and found that Iraqis under 30 accounted for 60% of it, which is roughly proportional to their share of the population.⁴² He sees the southern protest movement as distinct and different from the so-called 2011 Arab Spring protests in that it does not seek to overthrow and replace the old elites, but rather to radically reform the system.⁴³ The protestors in Iraq, both in 2015 and 2018, did not call for the downfall of the regime; their demands, couched in the language of anti-corruption and reform, focused on ending austerity measures (for example,

via renewed public sector hiring) and improving the provision of public services.

According to the Deputy Governor of Basra, Dhirgham al-Ajwadi, unemployment in the city is at least 30%.⁴⁴ The Iraqi government instituted a hiring freeze in 2016 in all sectors other than security, health, and education as part of an IMF-demanded effort to decrease expenditures. With 500,000 Iraqi youth entering the labor force each year, the youth unemployment rate is about 36%—much higher than the national unemployment rate of 16%.⁴⁵ Government jobs remain highly desirable, and are seen as jobs for life.⁴⁶ Protesters' demands call for a return of jobs and services that were common from 2005 to 2015, albeit with a less corrupt allocation. In effect, protesters want a more equitable share of an oil pie that is no longer available.

Conclusion

Prime Minister Abadi was able to pledge \$2.93 billion and 10,000 new jobs for Basra because, after steadily increasing over the previous year, the price of oil had risen to \$70 a barrel and Iraq's production had risen to 4.3 million barrels per day.⁴⁷ The \$88 billion budget passed in March 2018 by the Iraqi parliament was based on an oil price of \$46 and included an estimated deficit of \$10.6 billion.⁴⁸ Abadi's promised hires would be the first since the 2016 hiring freeze. But agreements between oil producers limit Iraq's oil production and if and when the price of oil declines to \$45, let alone to the \$35 price seen in 2016, Iraqi officials will run out of financing options. And there are global factors, including the U.S. "fracking" industry, that could keep the price of oil at or below \$55 for a decade or longer.

The competing interests in Iraq's budget are usually understood in sectarian terms: Shia lawmakers want additional spending in the south; Sunni Arab lawmakers prioritize reconstruction in areas damaged by ISIS; Kurds want a greater share designated for the semi-autonomous Kurdistan Regional Government. This Brief has highlighted reasons why the next fault line in Iraq will be not between Shia, Sunnis, and Kurds, but between generations. Almost all analysts of Iraq identify a gap between the population and what Fanar Haddad calls the "ever more distant, unresponsive, self-interested and thoroughly rotten political elites."⁴⁹ But this lens misses the specifically generational divide embedded in that gap.

The May 2018 election results and the July protests provide indicators of how these two sources of division might overlap in the future, including as the process

of forming a new government unfolds. Those "rotten" political elites are overwhelmingly from a generation of exiles, whose shared formative experience was in opposition to the Ba'th; Sadr and others who remained in Iraq, including the younger generation, might explicitly label the political elite "foreigners" and ally against them. We might see competing interests vis-à-vis Iraq's budget expressed in generational terms: Older generations want full funding of pensions and raises for mid-level public sector employees, while younger Iraqis want an end to hiring freezes and more entry-level public sector jobs. Finally, and most ominously, intergenerational divides could fuel a return to sectarian conflict, either through the recruitment potential for extremists of large numbers of underemployed youth or in a turn to a political system in which ethnic and sectarian identity becomes the prime determinant with respect to whom the state employs. Regardless of who leads Iraq's next government and what reforms are implemented in the short and medium run, the structural challenges caused by modest oil prices and demography will remain.

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- 42 Survey details are sparse: N=3,000; no reported margin of error; no reported sampling or interview procedure; conducted in September–December 2015 in Baghdad, Amara, Nassiriya, Najaf, Karbala, and Hilla. See Jabar, "The Iraqi Protest Movement."
- 43 Instead of the Arab Spring chant of "the people want the downfall of the regime" (*ash-shaab yurid isqat an-nizam*), a common chant in the July 2018 protests has been "the people want the downfall of the political parties" (*ash-shaab yurid isqat al-ahzab*). See, for example, Aref Mohammed, "Iraqi Protesters Call for Downfall of Politicians," *Reuters*, July 20, 2018.
- 44 Salaheddin, "Soaring Unemployment Fuels Protests in Southern Iraq."
- 45 Luca Bandiera et al., "Jobs in Iraq: a primer on job creation in the short-term," World Bank working paper, June 15, 2018, p. 1.
- 46 Jiyad, "The Employment Crisis in Iraq."
- 47 Rania El Gamal, Maha El Dahan, and Stanley Carvalho, "Iraq nears oil output capacity of 5 million bpd, committed to OPEC cuts," *Reuters*, January 13, 2018.
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