Introduction

I.1 A (Personal) Precursor

As a teenager, my world and everything that I had imagined for myself ended abruptly with the Iraqi invasion of Kuwait and the subsequent 1991 Gulf War. I come from a Palestinian family and grew up in Baghdad. The war uprooted me from the city that I considered my home. In 2003, it became clear that the world I knew was soon to disappear. A US invasion of Iraq seemed imminent, and I joined millions of people around the globe in protest against the looming war.

Iraq was invaded and occupied in the spring of 2003. Very soon after, I was invited to join a small group of researchers to travel around Iraq and prepare a report on Iraqi perceptions of transitional justice. Though I was skeptical about the exercise – how can one entertain transitional justice while under occupation? – I did not hesitate. Two factors especially informed my decision to join the group. Firstly, we were going to start our interviews around the country only weeks after the occupation began, and I knew this would be an opening: people would want to talk. This was, therefore, an opportunity to learn more about the place that had formed my younger self, and I would hear things out in the open, things I knew were only whispered in the not-so-distant past. Secondly, a very sentimental reason moved me to go: this was a chance to see Baghdad again and hopefully to start a new relationship with the city: a form of closure after a traumatic goodbye.

My trip for the International Centre for Transitional Justice in the summer of 2003 was a turning point for me as a person and for this book project. I heard and documented many testimonies: about life under the Ba'th, life under earlier eras of republican and monarchical regimes, and hopes and fears of life-to-come under the occupation. I saw the city again. I also visited more places than I ever did while living there: from Erbil in the Kurdish north to Najaf in the south. I spoke to people in those places and in Mosul, 'Amara, and the Arab

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Marshes. I had conversations with middle-class women professionals, housewives, farmers, former political prisoners, and former army officers, and I visited the offices of one of the most iconic political parties in the history of the Middle East, the Iraqi Communist Party.

Many of these conversations still live with me. One sparked a project that spans many years and evolved into multiple forms, culminating with this book: Describing the lawlessness in her neighborhood, one middle-aged woman told me that now "machine guns solve problems." Summarizing the situation, another Baghdadi woman, a retired civil servant, said, "Now there is no state!"[1]

I left Iraq at the end of that summer with a heavy heart. I feared that the home I had known would be unrecognizable soon. I was not alone. Iraqi, and particularly Baghdadi, writers have reflected on mourning a city which carried within its streets the spirit and traces of the pasts that formed it and its people – from the Ottoman through the monarchical, republican, and Ba'thist eras.[2] Post-2003 Baghdad was stripped of many material and non-material layers of those histories. It was changed by the invasion, the 2006 civil war, subsequent violent episodes through 2017, ruthless neoliberal policies, and a fragmented state, which is no longer able to maintain an orderly public space. In a moving elegy to Baghdad, Nabil Salih, a young Baghdadi writer and photographer, documented his walk through the city in 2020. He reflected on a scene of scavengers in downtown Baghdad, selling "everything from second-hand adapters to worn flip-flops and ancient radios. A scene befitting the reports of poverty pouring out of our computer screens, refuting a false image of stability and prosperity often propagated by the state and its rich media parrots. Soon there will be nothing of old Baghdad left to see or sell, I thought to myself."[3]

[1] Author interview, 28 July 2003, Baghdad.

[2] See, for instance, the opening chapters of Ghaith Abdul-Ahad's book, *A Stranger in Your Own City: Travels in the Middle East's Long War* (New York: Random House, 2023). Iraqi journalist Nabil Salih has written multiple pieces on this theme. See, for example: Nabil Salih, 'Tracing Unhealed Scars: A Look inside the Misery of Today's Iraq', *Culturico*, 26 October 2020, https://culturico.com/2020/10/26/tracing-unhealed-scars-a-look-inside-the-misery-of-todays-iraq/; Nabil Salih, 'Baghdad: A Solitary Walk through a Crime Scene', *Aljazeera*, 14 March 2021, https://aje.io/4emck.

[3] Nabil Salih, 'An Elegy to Baghdad', *Al Jazeera*, 3 October 2020, sec. Opinion, https://aje.io/a86c7u.

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My experience as a Palestinian who has been deeply touched and formed by Iraq and its people is not unique. My parents and many in their generation benefited from the free universal higher education that Iraq offered in the 1960s and 1970s. I was named after an Iraqi friend they met in university whose family was torn apart in the struggle for power between the Ba'thists and the Communists in the late 1960s and early 1970s.

The history of the Communists, the Ba'thists, and other movements in Iraq is documented in great detail by Hanna Batatu in his book, *The Old Social Classes and Revolutionary Movements in Iraq*. Batatu was a Palestinian-American sociologist who offered the most systematic social history of Iraq from the late nineteenth through to the late twentieth century. Reflecting on his monumental work, he writes:

> When I began working on *The Old Social Classes* in the late 1950s, I was irresistibly drawn to the literature on revolution. I do not know precisely why, but probably my Palestinian background explains it. The disruptions of the lives and world of many Palestinians made them, so to speak, natural rebels. In Iraq the time was one of troubles and unusual ideological and emotional ferment.[4]

Though this is not the sole sentiment animating my project, it resonates with me deeply.

The shared histories of this part of the world are wider than what one can capture in a brief precursor of an introduction.[5] They are deep and complex in ways that are not immediately apparent. However, certain events do stand out, both for their impact on my personal formation and, later, this project.

[4] Hanna Batatu, 'The Old Social Classes Revisited', in *The Iraqi Revolution of 1958: The Old Social Classes Revisited*, ed. Robert A. Fernea and William Roger Louis (London: I. B. Tauris, 1991), 211–222, 211.

[5] The free movement of people and ideas under the Ottoman Empire also meant that localities were linked in more ways than is possible under a state system (familial, linguistic, economic, and so on). On the importance of localities, particularly cities, and the relevance of flows in the Ottoman Empire in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, see Cyrus Schayegh, *The Middle East and the Making of the Modern World* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2017). The long-lived legacies of the Ottoman Empire in the political, legal, and social realms are documented in Adam Mestyan, *Modern Arab Kingship: Remaking the Ottoman Political Order in the Interwar Middle East* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2023), 1–21.

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For instance, the 1948 war in Palestine and the establishment of the Israeli state. Countless trajectories ended abruptly during this time, and many histories were changed in radical ways; among those whose lives were changed overnight was my grandmother, Aisha. She had married into a family in a village in Jenin a few kilometers south of her village. When the lines for the new state of Israel were drawn, she was severed from her family, who suddenly found themselves to be subjects of a newly established state. The exception was one sister who had also moved to Jenin prior to the war.[6] Between the 1948 war and the 1967 war (which changed her life again), Aisha saw her siblings and family twice. One of those times was when her father died: his body was brought in a Red Cross ambulance for her and her sister to say goodbye. Aisha's other siblings accompanied the body in that ambulance, making the most of a precious window of opportunity to see kin across the dividing line. My grandmother died in Amman in 1978.[7]

Also in 1948, Iraqi Army units, sent to fight in the war in Palestine, were stationed in Jenin. Aisha's husband, my grandfather, and his brother were part of the local fighting units, which had already been established in the Palestinian anti-British revolt in 1936, and they fought alongside the Iraqi Army. The defeat of the Arab armies in 1948 informed the political vision of many Iraqi and Egyptian army officers: for them, it embodied a defeat by global imperialism, which they linked to forms of social injustice at home. In 1952, the Egyptian Free Officers conducted a revolutionary coup d'état in Egypt, ending the monarchy and declaring the country a socialist Arab republic. And in 1958, the Iraqi Free Officers did the same, ending the monarchical era and declaring Iraq a republic. These new revolutionary republican regimes had visions for social justice and for economic and social

[6] In addition to her sister Ruqiyya, Aisha had another close relative who was trapped outside of new state borders. Her cousin Ibrahim was in Damascus at the time of the 1948 war and ended up in Lebanon for the rest of his life. I saw uncle Ibrahim during my studies in Beirut in the early 1990s. He and Ruqiyya's children were the only relatives from my grandmother's side who I knew growing up.

[7] My father remembers that his mother always listened to a radio program called *salam wa tahiyya* (a greeting and a salutation), which aired on the Arabic channel of Israel's state radio station. Families who lived on the Israeli side would phone in and send greetings and share news to family members on the other side of the line. This was the only means of communication in the absence of postal or phone services between Israel and Arab countries at the time. Sometimes Aisha's family would call in to send their greetings to her and her sister Ruqiyya.

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progress, which were connected to a larger anticolonial movement in the second half of the twentieth century. Despite the relatively short-lived success of their experiments, they have had long-term effects on people's lives, some of which are traced in this book.

In 1948, a twenty-nine-year-old Palestinian man from Bethlehem who had come "out of the working class through Arab education and British scholarships to the United Kingdom"[8] could not go back home after completing his studies and instead settled in the city of Baghdad. Jabra Ibrahim Jabra went on to become a central figure in the literary movement that modernized the Arabic novel, contributed to the thriving cultural and artistic life of Baghdad in the 1950s, and had a wide impact across the Arab-speaking world.[9] Jabra spent most of his life in his Princesses' Street house in Baghdad until his death in 1994. But that is not the end of the story, and not the only reason I mention Jabra here. Years later, in March 2010, a car bomb targeted at the Egyptian embassy in Baghdad killed seventeen people and burned a nearby house: Jabra's house. It contained Jabra's archives and was inhabited by his relative, Raqiya Ibrahim, who was also killed in the explosion. A journalist reporting on the incident, Lebanese-American Anthony Shadid, captured the sense of loss. He wrote that Jabra's neighbors and friends saw him as

> a dissident who drew determination from the dispossession of his people, a Christian who celebrated his identity as an Arab, a secular artist who was inspired to link the societies of his birth and his education, and a thinker who found strength to be open to the world through faith in his own culture … To some of them, [his house's] destruction serves as an epitaph of sorts, the end of eras in Iraq and the Arab world and the eclipse, in war and strife, of the ideal he represented.[10]

I share these personal connections for their resonance with this project. Some colleagues, students, and academics assume that I'm Iraqi because I work on Iraq – an assumption that carries deep

[8] Bashir Abu-Manneh, *The Palestinian Novel: From 1948 to the Present* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2016), 35.

[9] For a discussion of Jabra's work and its political and cultural relevance more widely see both the introduction and the first chapter of Bashir Abu-Manneh's book: Abu-Manneh, *The Palestinian Novel*.

[10] Anthony Shadid, 'In Baghdad Ruins, Remains of a Cultural Bridge', *The New York Times*, 21 May 2010, sec. World. I thank Nabil Saleh for alerting me to this moving report.

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orientalist grammar, even among the well-meaning who subscribe to critical scholarship. I now joke that I always thought that my Scottish colleague was Jordanian because he wrote a book on Jordan. I am not sharing these connections to make authenticity claims or identity claims in relation to my work, but because this small and very partial autobiography frames the deeper levels of this inquiry. It informs questioning of the sources of disruption and injustice, at a very existential level, which Batatu writes about, and which are increasingly experienced not only by Palestinians in the region, but by many, many others.

I have realized that most of my scholarship is an attempt to make sense of how one's world, and one's ancestral worlds, can abruptly and radically change in ways over which one has no control as an adult (let alone as a child). I have also come to understand that I share this destiny with many people in my part of the world and other places. I return once more to my interviewee who exclaimed, "Now, there is no state!" I had to ask, "How did she *know*?" How do people, how does anyone, *know* "the state"? Slowly, the question has gone from "How did she know the state?" to "Why did it matter to her?" Why and how did/does the state matter?

I.2 Messy Realities

In his book *After Method*, John Law invites social science researchers to embrace the messiness of our social life rather than try to discipline its representation through our methods. The world, he tells us, is textured in ways that are not necessarily stable, coherent, definite, or clear. This causes a challenge for academic inquiry, as "[p]arts of the world are caught in our ethnographies, our histories and our statistics. But other parts are not, or if they are then this is because they have been distorted into clarity."[11]

Law draws on the sociological discipline of science and technology studies (STS), which itself comes out of several traditions in philosophy and social theory that rest on an acknowledgment of the limits *and* politics of knowledge. Law identifies two main such traditions: philosophical romanticism and post-structuralism. Philosophical

[11] John Law, *After Method: Mess in Social Science Research* (London: Routledge, Taylor & Francis Group, 2004), 2.

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romanticism, which also influenced the work of social theorists such as Karl Marx and Max Weber, holds that theories about the world will never be able to capture the totality of the world, and that knowledge about the world can only be generated from within rather than from an external vantage point. Post-structuralism, which influenced social theorists such as Michel Foucault and Jacques Derrida, starts from the assumption that there is no external reality that is waiting to be discovered and captured in totality.[12]

These ideas are clearly linked to a strong theme in STS, namely that knowledge about the world cannot be neutral. Social and scientific inquiry and the methods that inform it not only describe "but also help to *produce* the reality that they understand."[13] This is what others may call the *performativity* of knowledge. The basic insight – that all knowledge is generative of new realities in ways that we do not anticipate nor necessarily intend – places a responsibility upon those of us who produce this knowledge. It highlights the inevitable normativity of all knowledge production. Put differently, all knowledge production *is an intervention* in the world that *affects* the world – no intervention and no effect can ever be value-neutral. The question then becomes: how can we be responsible in our quest to understand a messy, and often tragic, reality without obscuring and distorting its textures or producing new layers of injustice (for example)?

Inevitable normativity is not the same as inevitable moralizing. Indeed, Law wants us to cultivate methods that "are not moralist; that imagine and participate in politics and other forms of the good in novel and creative ways … slow method, or vulnerable method, or quiet method. Multiple method. Uncertain method. Diverse method."[14] Though it does not follow an STS path, the analysis in *State Matters* is informed by the same set of methodological concerns and aspirations that Law outlines. It also draws heavily on social theorists, particularly Max Weber and Pierre Bourdieu, whose work is informed by the core concerns of philosophical romanticism and post-structuralism. It is wary about the reification of concepts and has an acute sensitivity to historical context. The latter does not detract from theorization about the social world but rather helps us appreciate both that world's

[12] Law, *After Method*, 8–9.
[13] Emphasis in original. Law, *After Method*, 5.
[14] Law, *After Method*, 9–11.

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unrepresentable complexity *and* the through-lines connecting different times, places, and people.[15]

One answer to the challenge of producing knowledge from within experience in the world that is not moralizing comes from the pragmatist philosophical tradition,[16] particularly the idea that experience and reality cannot be understood through ideal abstractions. Rather, they can only be understood, and solutions be imagined, through practice and engagement with the world. This idea is at the heart of Iraqi sociologist Ali al-Wardi's critique of ideologically driven and moralizing political and intellectual trends. In this book, I draw extensively on al-Wardi's pragmatism-informed social theorizing about how to identify and address (though never fully resolve) the inevitable conflict and political instability of human societies.

The social reality which I try to partially capture in this book is messy. With a commitment to responsibly normative, non-moralizing academic inquiry, it tackles a set of questions that have long animated the practices of politics and contestation around the state in Iraq. The relative clarity with which those questions (and proposed answers) appear in this book is the result of a process of messy method. In a nutshell, this book is a historically informed social theoretical account of state consolidation. The theoretical account is elaborated most clearly in the first and last chapters, and in between are chapters that attempt to convey the messiness of the social phenomena in an empirically and historically textured fashion. The theoretical tools used in this book are interrogated against experience rather than employed because they represent an ideal. This interrogation plays a key part in how the theoretical arguments of the book are made and how they unfold. This is made clear in Section I.3. Finally, while this book does not attempt to create universal rules, it does rest on an experience-based commitment that rejects exceptionalism and draws global (generalizable) links.

[15] I would like to thank Grace Garland for suggesting the formula in this sentence to help link the preceding methodological discussion to my work more concretely.

[16] This is not mentioned in Law's text as a key tradition that influenced STS. But it is possible to trace an affinity. For example, John Dewey, one of the key philosophers in the American Pragmatist tradition, is referenced in substantial ways in one of the classic STS texts: Bruno Latour, *Reassembling the Social: An Introduction to Actor-Network Theory* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2005).

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I.3 Overview and Argument

In October 2019, a protest movement erupted in Iraq, demanding an end to the consociational system of governance that had shaped the state since 2003. Protestors blamed this system and its underlying sectarian politics for the state's fragmentation and the systemic corruption that feeds on it. They demanded a civic nonsectarian state of equal citizens that would ensure justice (*'adala*) and bring back their homeland (*watan*). What came to be known as the *Tishreen* (October) Movement started from Basra, Iraq's largest southern city, and spread to the poor Shi'a urban quarters of Baghdad before reaching eleven out of eighteen governorates in central and southern Iraq. The protestors were not only demanding social justice and regime change, but they were also demanding an end to state fragmentation and a remaking of the Iraqi state itself. As many observers have noted, this was a statist movement,[17] a movement that saw the state's integrity as a prerequisite to a politically viable public order. Even though *Tishreen* was unable to bring about the changes it demanded, it signaled a number of important points. One of these is that, clearly, in Iraq, the state matters to its own people. How and why the state came to be *desired*, even if at the same time *dreaded* by its subjects, is a story of state consolidation, which this book aims to tell.[18]

Underpinning *State Matters* is the claim that a theorization of state consolidation is, in effect, a theorization of the modern state. What distinguishes the modern state from earlier forms of political organization is not only the massive range of control over its territories and population, but also its persistence in form and relevance.[19] This

[17] Omar Jaffal, 'taẓāhurat tishriyn al-'irāqqiya: thābit al-siyāsā wa tahuwwl al-mujtama'', *Assafir al-Arabi*, 16 October 2020. Observations about the uniquely statist nature of the movement compared to other protests was also documented by International Crisis Group, 'Iraq's Tishreen Uprising: From Barricades to Ballot Box', 26 July 2021.

[18] Ghassan Salamé reflects on this innate tension within the modern state in general, but also in the Arab context, between desire and suspicion of the state among its subjects. Ghassan Salamé, 'Al-Kalima al-Muftāhiyya: Al-'atash li-al-Dawlaa wa al-Rayba Minha [Keynote: The Thirst for the State and Suspicion of It]', in *Al-'atash Li-al-Dawla Wa al-Rayba Minha [The Thirst for the State and Suspicion of It]* (Beirut: Arab Council for the Social Sciences, 2019), 3–20.

[19] See, for example, James Scott on the early human states and their "seasonality": James C. Scott, *Against the Grain: A Deep History of the Earliest States* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2017). On the persistence of the state as a

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persistence, I argue here, is linked to historically contingent and sociologically elaborate processes of consolidation.

State Matters' theoretical approach and methodological choices offer an interpretation that is neither Eurocentric nor simply theorizing from the Global South. The book is a connective analysis that moves between different intellectual traditions and disciplines to offer a grounded contribution to the understanding of modern state consolidation. My aim, in reanimating in the Iraqi context social theoretical accounts of the modern state by sociologists in different twentieth and late nineteenth-century intellectual traditions (e.g., Iraqi, German, French, and American), is to generate political theorization that is analytically robust and relatable to experiences around the globe. As Adom Getachew and Karuna Mantena argue, reanimating concepts in "radically diverse contexts" generates political theorization following a method of "analytical universalism, which moves beyond the global ubiquity of practices and institutions to uncover recurring logics and dynamics that might appear most visible in the postcolonial contexts."[20] In this sense, arguing that the Middle Eastern state, or the Iraqi state, is *different* and requires a different kind of theorization would only reinforce paradigms of exceptionalism to a western norm. It would also ignore global links that have historically connected Iraq and the Middle East to the rest of the world (western and all the rest) through flows of ideas, finance, trade, migration, wars, and power politics.

Decentering the European colonial encounter is not only a normative choice but a historically grounded one. The formation of the Iraqi state, as the book illustrates, had strong roots in and continuities with the Ottoman imperial system, of which it had been a part from the mid

political organization even during what seemed to be a decline in state relevance in relation to 'globalization', see: Quentin Skinner, 'A Genealogy of the Modern State', in *Proceedings of the British Academy, Volume 162, 2008 Lectures*, ed. Ron Johnston, 1st ed., Proceedings of the British Academy (London: British Academy, 2009), 325–370. Fukuyama has a similar view on the continuing relevance of the state, despite coming from a different scholarly orientation to Skinner: Francis Fukuyama, 'The Pandemic and Political Order: It Takes a State', *Foreign Affairs*, July/August 2020. I discuss Fukuyama's work in Chapter 5.

[20] Adom Getachew and Karuna Mantena, 'Anticolonialism and the Decolonization of Political Theory', *Critical Times (Berkeley, Calif.)* 4, no. 3 (2021): 359–388, 377.

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sixteenth to the early twentieth century. And, although the League of Nations–authorized British and French Mandates were subsequently formed after the empire's collapse, this does not mean that these new political formations were solely shaped by European powers. Iraq's population and territories had already been shaped by modern state-ordering projects introduced by Ottoman bureaucracies in the late eighteenth and nineteenth centuries[21] and, in what Mestyan calls the "recycling of empire,"[22] many of these elements lived on into the mandate period and beyond. Furthermore, European forms of intervention in the occupied Arab regions of the former Ottoman Empire, like Iraq, were different from colonial methods in that they incorporated legal sovereignty into techniques of domination. In other words, the new governments were sovereign in so far as they exercised authority over their territories but were subordinated through the mandate system to foreign powers. Hence, Ottoman legacies in ordering public life lasted through the end of the first half of the twentieth century.[23] *State Matters* draws on Iraqi intellectual output during that period by individuals who were first Ottoman subjects and then became Iraqi citizens, and who were informed by and in dialogue with not only Islamic and Arab intellectual traditions, but European and US contemporaries as well.[24]

[21] While some suggest that Ottoman state reforms were influenced by European governing methods, historian Butrus Abu-Mannah has shown that those reforms have origins in indigenous and Islamic thought that corresponds to local contexts: Butrus Abu-Manneh, *Studies on Islam and the Ottoman Empire in the 19th Century (1826–1876)* (Piscataway, NJ: Gorgias Press, 2011), 73–97. Dina Khoury makes the argument that the links between the central state and provincial social groups were strengthened rather than weakened during the early modern period. Her study is based on the province of Mosul, which is now in Iraq. Dina Rizk Khoury, *State and Provincial Society in the Ottoman Empire: Mosul, 1540–1834* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997). Ali al-Wardi draws on works of Iraqi and Arab historians to give a sociological overview of Ottoman Iraq in volumes 1, 2, 3, and 4 of his book: Ali Al-Wardi, *Lamaḥāt 'ijtimā'iyya min tāriykh al-'iraq al- ḥadiyth [Social Glimpses from Iraq's Modern History]*, 6 vols. (London: Alwarrak Publishing Ltd., 2022).

[22] Adam Mestyan, *Modern Arab Kingship: Remaking the Ottoman Political Order in the Interwar Middle East* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2023), 1–18.

[23] Mestyan, *Modern Arab Kingship*.

[24] See Orit Bashkin for an account of the rich intellectual life under the Hashemite monarchy in Iraq (1920s through the 1958 revolutionary coup): Orit Bashkin, *The Other Iraq: Pluralism and Culture in Hashemite Iraq* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2009).

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Similarly, stating that "postcolonial" states have unique qualities that require a different form of theorizing both contributes to the "exceptionalism to the west" paradigm and projects the homogeneity implied by that label onto the experience of a large part of the world where heterogeneity is actually the norm.[25] What this book offers, in contrast, is a serious and novel mode of theorizing the state beyond both Eurocentric frameworks and the flipside options of exceptionalism or regionalism. It starts from the assumption that the modern state carries universal qualities that can be theorized, while at the same time acknowledging the diversity of particular trajectories and specific articulations globally.

By rejecting a Eurocentric framework and its flipside of exceptionalism or regionalism, this book is able to address encounters with colonial and imperialist powers at the same analytical level that it addresses national and local interventions and agencies. For instance, while the US invasion of Iraq played a major role in instigating the current state fragmentation, I also illustrate that the causes of this fragmentation can be traced to decisions by Iraqi politicians operating both in and outside of the state's institutional boundaries.

The book builds a theoretical framework from an examination of the particular experience of Iraqi state consolidation during the past century. The main argument of *State Matters* is that state formation is maintained through processes of state consolidation. The latter is not a one-off event but a set of arrangements that have to be maintained. State consolidation rests on two interdependent factors, which must be realized in sequential order: first, *domination* – the state's capacity to dominate land and population; second, *legitimation* – whereby the state is accepted and expected by the population to be the final arbitrator of collective life based on common principles. Drawing on Iraq's political and intellectual history, I further propose that legitimation entails the fundamental step of identifying the subjects who would bestow legitimacy on the state and thereafter maintain state legitimacy by upholding principles of social justice. The appearance of the state as a reified actor that is coherent, bounded, and autonomous in its actions is an effect of the actions that produce a sufficiently *consolidated* state,

[25] Consider, for instance, British colonization of India for three hundred years. Iraq, on the other hand, was part of the regional Ottoman imperial system for centuries and only fell under European occupation after World War I.

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rather than a reflection of an independent sociological reality. At the same time, this effect is necessary for the maintenance of state consolidation.

Understanding the basis for consolidation also allows us to understand the roots of state fragmentation. Fragmentation is when the state's authority ceases to be the final arbitrator of collective life. An extreme form of state fragmentation is civil war – an episode wherein the state's authority over public life completely collapses. Competition among different partisans to dominate starts to translate into different zones of authority, each controlled by a partisan depending on who is in control at a particular time and space. Like consolidation, fragmentation is not a one-off event. Nor is it a total event. A state's authority could be fragmented even in the absence of a civil war. The question of authority in this context is not simply a question of formal rules or existence of institutional setups, but it is a question of *who decides* at the end of the day in ordering collective life. The question of *who decides*, this book argues, has serious consequences for the possibilities of social justice. The latter is linked directly to the fragmentation of state authority in Iraq by a number of Iraqi critics whose accounts this book elaborates on.

It is important to note here that this understanding of consolidation and fragmentation of state's authority is radically different from the conventional political science discussion of weak states and fragile states. Chapter 4 addresses this literature more directly. But for the purposes of this introductory discussion, it is useful to consider a distinctive feature of those frameworks: namely, their reliance on an understanding of the state through its institutional functions. This understanding allows the ranking of states according to their varying degrees of institutional capacities, or "stateness." This is especially the case in the state fragility framework that is mostly employed in policy metrics: Is the state *able* to maintain certain function (e.g., secure border, administer vaccines). This reductive understanding of the state is fully discussed in Chapter 5. What state *consolidation* and *fragmentation* refer to is a larger experience of a phenomenon that is reified through its consolidation, rather than a "thing" or an "actor" whose reification is taken for granted.

One common critique of the approach that measures "stateness" is to mistakenly categorize it as a Weberian model that is western-centric. While I discuss in detail this misrepresentation of Max Weber's views

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on the state in Chapter 5, it is sufficient here to point out that such reified understanding of the state that allows for classifications of "stateness" may be traced to trends within the American political science traditions that appropriated Weberian elements in ways that do not necessarily reflect Weber's approach to understanding the state.

In the spirit of rejecting western "ideal models," some scholars of the Middle East have coined new categories to capture the realities of states such as Iraq, Lebanon, Syria, and Yemen. Terms like "hybrid" state were coined to signal that those are not deficient states, but states that do not follow the western model.[26] A hybrid state is, as this book illustrates, a euphemism for what is in fact a state with fragmented authority.

Others have attempted to develop alternative frameworks that rely on Pierre Bourdieu's insights on the state. Some of those are discussed in Chapter 5 along with earlier attempts by scholars belonging to various Marxist traditions. One problem with employing Bourdieu's insights is that they do not lend themselves to the direct transposition of his analytical categories to different historical and geographical contexts. Bourdieu offers a method, not a theory nor a model. The core point of a Bourdieusian sociological approach is its inherently inductive method that relies on tracing patterns in order to identify social structures. Thus, categories such as "competitive fields" and "social capital" cannot simply be used as labels to be affixed to disparate social realities. Bourdieu's categories emerged out of specific sites (mostly French in Bourdieu's work) and are meant to *illustrate* a method rather than inscribe a model or a theory.

In a recent example of such studies, Toby Dodge links Bourdieu with other (Marxist) theorists to construct an "alternative model of the state."[27] Bourdieu's understanding of the state, as discussed in Chapter 5, is both linked (rather than opposed) to a Weberian conception of the state and openly opposed to Marxist traditions of theorizing

[26] See, for example, the discussion of the term, Raymond Hinnebusch, 'Foreword: Hybrid Governance in the Middle East and North Africa', in *Limited Statehood and Informal Governance in the Middle East and North Africa*, ed. Ruth Hanau Santini, Abel Polese, and Rob Kevlihan (London: Routledge, 2021), xii–xv.

[27] Toby Dodge, 'Rethinking the Postcolonial State in the Middle East: Elite Competition and Negotiation within the Disaggregated Iraqi State', in *Making Sense of the Arab State*, ed. Steven Heydemann and Marc Lynch (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2024), 85–110.

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the state. Most importantly, in developing this understanding of the state, Bourdieu insists on identifying the "structure of the mechanisms deemed to *produce*"[28] the state. A closer reading of Bourdieu would discourage the development of a model given the historically and sociologically context-sensitive nature of *how* such structures of the mechanisms of producing the state emerge. This, indeed, is the approach that *State Matters* adopts: a theorization that identifies fundamental political logics, rather than producing a model of a state.

A fragmented state is not a nonexisting state, but a state with fragmented authority. The issue of state fragmentation and/or consolidation is fundamentally a quest into the sociology of a phenomenon that has other representations. The state has been and can be understood through different categories. For instance, it can be understood through institutional (which will be discussed in Chapters 4 and 5), and also legal definitional categories. Definitional categorization is *not* what *State Matters* is concerned with. Consider, for example, that a state can be recognized by other states and yet have no authority at all. This is the case with the state of Palestine. It is recognized as a sovereign state by 146 out of the 193 members of the United Nations (as of the writing of this introduction). But this legal categorization is not a reflection of a sociological (or political) reality of Palestinian sovereignty or authority over its territories and people. In other words, a de jure international legal reality does not cancel the other (sociological) reality of that state having no authority over any territories or people who, in fact, are under complete domination of another occupying state. This is simply because consolidation and fragmentation are ongoing processes that are constitutive of the state phenomenon rather than fixed categories of a stable and reified reality.

I illustrate my arguments through a historically informed narrative and an original reading of key historical episodes of state consolidation and consolidation crises in Iraq. These include crises of legitimation and of domination from the foundation of Iraq as a League of Nations British Mandate in 1921 through the post-2003 era: how the early state-makers in the 1920s and 1930s approached questions of domination and legitimation in a place where communalism was part of the

[28] Pierre Bourdieu, *On the State: Lectures at the Collège de France, 1989–1992*, ed. Patrick Champagne et al., trans. David Fernbach (Cambridge, UK: Polity Press, 2020), 5. My emphasis.

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former imperial order; the lead up to and ramifications of the 1958 revolutionary coup d'état that transformed Iraq into a republic; the possibilities of state consolidation that appeared with the nationalization of the oil industry in the 1970s; and finally the 1980s Iran–Iraq war and its long-term consequences both for legitimation and domination. The book further explicates how state consolidation elements were historically challenged by, and had to navigate, Kurdish national aspirations in different eras. This includes the notorious 1988 counter-insurgency campaign against Kurdish military groups and the Iraqi army's attack on the civilian Kurdish village of Halabja in the same year, and ending with the unprecedented de jure autonomous Kurdish status post-2003. The 1990s witnessed key episodes that had long-term effects on state consolidation and are also of relevance to this book: the Iraqi invasion of Kuwait and the subsequent Gulf War, comprehensive international sanctions, and uprisings against the ruling party both in southern and northern Iraq. And finally, the ramifications of the US-led invasion in 2003: its grand plans for state-building that led to complete state collapse in the 2006 civil war and the subsequent fragmentation of state authority that persists today.

I animate these episodes through theoretical lenses that connect Iraq's experience and political thought with a global and generalizable experience of the modern state. In building the relationship between legitimation and domination in state consolidation, I draw on a historical reading of how Iraqi state-makers have approached this question and also on common elements in the thought of Max Weber, Carl Schmitt, and Pierre Bourdieu.[29] I show that state domination is

[29] Examples of texts employed: Ali al-Wardi, *W"āẓ al- Salāṭiyn [The Sultans' Preachers]* (Beirut: Alwarrak Books, 2017); Max Weber, *Economy and Society: An Outline of Interpretive Sociology*, ed. Guenther Roth and Claus Wittich, trans. Ephraim Fischoff et al. (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1978); Al-Wardi, *Lamaḥāt 'ijtimā'iyya min tāriykh al-'iraq al- ḥadiyth [Social Glimpses from Iraq's Modern History]*; Carl Schmitt, *The Leviathan in the State Theory of Thomas Hobbes: Meaning and Failure of a Political Symbol*, Foreword and Introduction by George Schwab, trans. George Schwab and Erna Hilfstein, Contributions in Political Science No. 374 (Westport, CT: Greenwood, 1996); Max Weber, *Max Weber: Collected Methodological Writings*, ed. Hans Henrik Bruun and Sam Whimster, trans. Hans Henrik Bruun, Weber in Translation (London: Routledge, Taylor & Francis Group, 2014); Benjamin A. Schupmann, *Carl Schmitt's State and Constitutional Theory: A Critical Analysis*, 1st ed. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2018); Bourdieu, *On the State*; Quentin Skinner, *From Humanism to Hobbes: Studies in Rhetoric and Politics*

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necessary to produce *sociological legitimacy* – a condition of habituation, whereby the population expects that their collective life be arbitrated by the state rather than any other social organization. Yet, as is clear from Iraq's own history and also from social theoretical accounts, this kind of legitimacy is not sufficient for upholding the state's consolidation.

The state may be expected to be the arbitrator of collective life and is thus *sociologically* legitimate; but, just *how* it arbitrates requires another form of *normative legitimacy*. *Legitimation* in this book refers to *how* normative legitimacy of the state is reached. Legitimation addresses a key problem: people who live within a state's order must accept not only the state as the arbitrator but also the ruling principles through which it acts. It is this latter form of legitimation crisis – a crisis of ruling principles – that has frequently characterized and motivated challenges to the state in Iraq.

To explore this subtle but vital aspect further, I turn to the work of an Iraqi sociologist and public intellectual who is widely influential in Iraq and the Arab-majority countries but less well-known outside that region, Ali al-Wardi. Drawing on al-Wardi's work, I develop a framework to understand the question of legitimation, a framework which places social justice at its core as a normative factor for state legitimation. It proposes that social injustice is an inevitable problem that is intrinsic to any state order, and that the nature of this injustice at any given time and space can only be recognized, and the mechanisms to address it can only be articulated, through a robust democratic system.

In keeping with the pragmatist tradition that refrains from fixing meaning to an experience a priori, and instead, seeks to understand the world through lived experience, al-Wardi does not give a fixed definition of what is social (in)justice. The general understanding of social injustice in this context is that social stratification that is constitutive of organized human societies will inevitably lead to social subjugation (and thus injustice). The scope and particular meaning of this injustice will vary in time and place and cannot be identified except through a robust democratic system that allows those who experience injustice to articulate its political meaning at any given time and place.

(Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2018); David Dyzenhaus and Thomas Poole, *Law, Liberty and State: Oakeshott, Hayek and Schmitt on the Rule of Law* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2015).

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Democracy, similarly, is not defined in al-Wardi's framework but is understood through the experiential knowledge that al-Wardi argues it should produce: it is the process that allows a society to both articulate problems of social injustice and find appropriate solutions to them in any given time and space. This understanding is similar in spirit to Timothy Mitchell's articulation of democracy as referring to the "ways of making effective claims for a more just and egalitarian common world."[30] This is in contrast to a conventional understanding of democracy that Mitchell is critical of wherein democracy is understood as "a mode of governing populations that employs popular consent as a means of limiting claims for greater equality and justice by dividing up the common world."[31] For al-Wardi, democracy only matters as long as it can deliver social justice (the first meaning), rather than as a political form of governance that is often employed in democratization formulas similar to those brought to Iraq post-2003 (the second meaning).

The Iraqi state was sufficiently consolidated until its fragmentation in the aftermath of the 2003 US-led occupation. In a nod to the legacy of a historically consolidated state, Iraqis refer to the fragmentation as *al-la-dawla* (the non-state).[32] This fragmentation, as I show in the book, is the indirect consequence of weakened consolidation over the course of the 1980s and 1990s, and the direct consequence of the undoing of state domination during the early months of the occupation.

The fact that state fragmentation in Iraq appears to take place along ethno-sectarian lines may be a reflection of the post-2003 power-sharing arrangement along consociational lines.[33] This fragmentation and the power-sharing arrangement evoke questions that are often brought forward by some proponents of the "artificial" state thesis – the view that Iraq, like other postcolonial states, was put together by colonial powers with no consideration for its communal makeup

[30] Timothy Mitchell, *Carbon Democracy: Political Power in the Age of Oil*, revised 2nd ed. (London: Verso, 2013), 9.

[31] Mitchell, *Carbon Democracy*, 9.

[32] On the use of this term in Iraq by politicians and the public, as well as an exploration of its early usage by Iraqi sociologist Faleh Abdel Jabbar, see Sardar Aziz, 'On the Non-State (Ladaula) in Iraq', Fikra Forum, Washington Institute for Near East Policy, 25 September 2020, www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/non-state-ladaula-iraq.

[33] I discuss this arrangement and the background of it in Chapter 1.

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(understood along ethno-sectarian lines) and that this will always lead to conflict within such "artificial" states.[34] The discourse of state artificiality has its roots in 1920s and 1930s British colonial narrative that Iraq must remain under British Mandate because it is not sufficiently coherent to govern itself. True to its political origin, this discourse is mostly employed to further agendas from across the political spectrum. Pan-Arabists and members of the Islamic State group, for example, argue that those artificial borders *divide* a larger natural or historic nation that is, depending on who is making the argument, Arab or Islamic. Similarly, progressive anti-imperialist figures make similar arguments about the colonial imposition of the borders in the Middle East.[35] On the other side of the political spectrum, the senior security editor at the right-wing *Jerusalem Post*'s *Jerusalem Report*, employed state artificiality to advocate for dividing states such as Iraq, Lebanon, Syria, and Jordan on the grounds that they lack homogeneity and were put together by colonial powers. The piece appeared in a Washington-based publication just after the fall of Bashar al-Assad's regime in Syria in December 2024. The author suggests that Israel "could be a model for nation-states in the Levant because it was created for a people of shared history, tradition, indigeneity and religion."[36]

Historians, Iraqi and others, have been refuting the historical validity of the artificiality claim. Sara Pursley, for instance, traces the creation of Iraqi borders illustrating the complex political forces that went into this process – a process that was shaped by colonial, local, and regional actors and agendas.[37] Other scholars have also highlighted the problematic ethical implications of this discourse, citing, for example, how advocating for an ethnically or religiously

[34] See, for example: Hendrik Spruyt, 'Civil Wars as Challenges to the Modern International System', *Daedalus (Cambridge, MA)* 146, no. 4 (2017): 112–125.

[35] Sara Pursley, '"Lines Drawn on an Empty Map": Iraq's Borders and the Legend of the Artificial State (Part 1)', *Jadaliyya*, June 2015, www.jadaliyya.com/Details/32140.

[36] Eric R. Mandel, 'Time to Rethink the Borders of the Middle East Map', Opinion, *The Hill*, 27 December 2024, https://thehill.com/opinion/5057286-middle-east-artificial-nations/.

[37] Sara Pursley, "Lines Drawn on an Empty Map": Iraq's Borders and the Legend of the Artificial State (Part 2)', *Jadaliyya*, June 2015, www.jadaliyya.com/Details/32153; Haider Saeed, 'Al-Mu'arikh Wa al-Dawlaa [The Historian and the State]', *Ostour* 14 (July 2021): 245–261.

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homogenous nation-state has historically led to massive atrocities of population transfers and ethnic cleansing.[38]

State Matters offers a more nuanced and context-sensitive understanding of these dynamics. It illustrates that the political significance and meaning of communal formations in Iraq, whether along sectarian, ethnic, or tribal lines, has taken on different meanings and political significance in response and in relation to processes of state consolidation at different junctures. Following Max Weiss, I do not take sectarianism, or other communal categories, as a phenomenon that *explains* politics, but one that *requires explanation* based on the context of a given time and space.[39] I also follow Faleh A. Jabar's rejection of communalism as a frame to understand the socio-cultural manifestations of communal formations or their political mobilization. Communalism, in Jabar's account, is a reductive frame that can lead to a primordial reading of a social context. It is also incapable of capturing socially fluid and historically contingent formations without reducing them to one another. Examples of such formations are political Islam, sectarianism, religious cultural expressions, or spiritual and theological religious practices.[40]

Furthermore, I argue that a consociational system of governance should not necessarily lead to state fragmentation. In the Iraqi case, the clear and immediate reason that triggered a collapse of state authority and subsequently led to its continuous fragmentation is the American occupation's dismantling of the state's capacity to dominate without filling the vacuum that this dismantling had created (even if temporarily) in enforcing public order. The reinstatement of such institutional capacity only took place three months after the occupation, allowing enough time for competing partisans to establish presence as competing authorities in Iraq.

State Matters suggests that the state is critical to our understanding of modern Iraqi politics. More precisely, that the *politics to consolidate*

[38] Asli Ü. Bâli, 'Artificial States and the Remapping of the Middle East', *Vanderbilt Journal of Transnational Law* 53, no. 2 (2020): 405–460.

[39] Max Weiss, 'The Matter of Sectarianism', in *The Oxford Handbook of Contemporary Middle Eastern and North African History*, ed. Amal Ghazal and Jens Hanssen, Oxford Handbooks (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2020), 144–161.

[40] Faleh A. Jabar *The Shi'ite Movement in Iraq* (London: SAQI, 2003), 33–37. I discuss Jabar's account on communalism in further details in the Epilogue.

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the state must be at the heart of this understanding. Further, this approach lays out ways to de-exceptionalize the politics of Iraq and the Middle East, as it helps to expose global commonalities in the effects of state consolidation on collective political life. Such a positioning makes the book of interest to a readership beyond Middle East specialists and students.

Importantly, the book's approach departs from a common and long-standing approach to understanding Iraqi politics, which is informed by methodological nationalism and which takes at face value the state's projection of itself as a coherent, autonomous, and bounded actor. Common in the 1980s and 1990s,[41] this perspective is a result of methodological biases that were formed by the Iraqi state's own restrictions on the study of Iraq, as I have argued elsewhere.[42] Fundamental elements of this approach are still prominent in some more recent political science writings on Iraq,[43] as well as in those of political economy, particularly the rentier state theory,[44] which has come to dominate how many oil-rich Middle Eastern states are understood.

I.4 Sources and Outline

State Matters relies on a wealth of empirical and archival sources. Archives consulted include: the Iraqi Tribunal court evidence in the cases of Dujail and Anfal; Human Rights Watch's Anfal investigations and legal arguments; investigation reports by the US Congress and the United Nations into the corruption allegations in the Oil for Food Programme; US court documents and Special Inspector General for

[41] For example, Marion Farouk-Sluglett and Peter Sluglett, *Iraq since 1958: From Revolution to Dictatorship* (London: Taurus, 2001); Charles Tripp, *A History of Iraq*, 3rd ed. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007).

[42] Nida Alahmad, 'State, Oil, and War in the Formation of Iraq', in *A Critical Political Economy of the Middle East and North Africa*, ed. Joel Beinin, Bassam Haddad, and Sherene Seikaly (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2021), 143–160.

[43] For example: Lisa Blaydes, *State of Repression Iraq under Saddam Hussein* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2018).

[44] See critique of that literature in terms of its understanding of the state in Adam Hanieh, 'Rethinking Class and State in the Gulf Cooperation Council', in *A Critical Political Economy of the Middle East and North Africa*, ed. Joel Beinin, Bassam Haddad, and Sherene Seikaly (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2021), 105–122.

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Iraq Reconstruction (US Ombudsman) reports on the execution of, and corruption allegations surrounding, US-sponsored state-building projects in Iraq between 2003 and 2006; and the archives of the Coalition Provisional Authority (CPA). The book draws on the memoirs of CPA advisors and Iraqi politicians who were involved in establishing the bases of the post-2003 political system in Iraq. Finally, the work is informed by extensive interviews that I conducted in different Iraqi cities, Beirut, Amman, and New York during the first year of the US occupation. Those interviews ranged from random samples of the population in Erbil, Baghdad, Mosul, and Najaf; to political actors who were either active as opposition to the Ba'thist regime or as members of the former regime; to interviews with legal experts and researchers who were involved in building Human Rights Watch's case of genocide against the Ba'thist regime in the early 1990s; and finally to UN investigators into the Oil for Food corruption case and businessmen who were involved in aspects of this program.

The ordering of the chapters in this book reflects its conception as a historically informed theorization of the state, rather than a history of the Iraqi state.[45] While the ordering attempts to maintain a historical chronology in the interest of clarity, its core choices reflect theoretical problems in the last instance. Chapter 1 opens with a discussion of the question of how to achieve *normative legitimacy* of the state (legitimation). How does the state become accepted and expected by a population to be the arbitrator of their collective life? By the mid twentieth century, it was clear that this had happened in the case of the Iraqi state. The state had *sociological legitimacy*. Yet the *principles* that inform the state's action as an arbitrator were contested in various historically unsettled junctures. These are disputes over the state's normative legitimation. The chapter reviews legitimation crises at four key historical junctures: the foundational moment in 1921, the 1958 revolutionary coup d'etat, and the 1990s in the lead-up to the post-2003 state. The choice of centering the 1958 revolutionary coup is a theoretical one. Even though 1958 is not the first coup d'etat, it is the *first* (and only) time in Iraq's history that an internal challenge to the

[45] The pre-Ba'thist period has been written about extensively by historians whose work I draw on in this book. The historical contribution of *State Matters* is its revisionist framing and interpretation of the last twenty years of the Ba'thist rule (1980–2003). The book remains, first and foremost, a theoretical intervention rather than a historical account.

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state's legitimacy succeeds and results in revolutionizing the state's order. This makes it a critical point of entry to engage with theoretical questions at the heart of this book. I draw on the work of Iraqi sociologist Ali al-Wardi in theorizing normative legitimation and make the core argument in this chapter that legitimation of a state's ruling principles (normative legitimation) is linked to a *state's ability to address social injustice*. Furthermore, social injustice is intrinsic to any state order. A robust democracy is the only reliable mechanism through which to uncover the nature of injustice – and ways of addressing it – at any given time and space, and thereby avoid a legitimation crisis.

Chapter 2 explores the significance of domination in state consolidation. It argues that while violence is the crudest and most basic form of establishing domination, it remains constitutive of state consolidation: within its boundaries, the state's relationship to violence is constitutive. The chapter explicates an extreme case when the state lost all control over portions of its territory and population. These events were centered around the interstate war with Iran in the 1980s and a state-organized counterinsurgency campaign to capture the northern Kurdish territories in 1987 and 1988. The case allows us to zoom in on one of the longest legitimation and domination problems in Iraq: the reach of the state vis-à-vis Kurdish national aspirations. It also illustrates how this episode of state violence in Kurdistan triggered a series of developments that led to de facto and de jure Kurdish autonomy in Iraq. I show how the processes that contributed to the weakening of the Iraqi state consolidation are the same ones that also made the Kurdish autonomy possible.

When writing about the state in Iraq, one must inevitably address the question of oil. Instead of expanding on the role of oil in general terms, Chapter 3 focuses on a period in the 1990s when oil flow was restricted and closely regulated by a special UN Security Council committee, thus severely reducing the state's ability to collect or spend oil revenues. By homing in on the state's enterprising response to the sanctions regime, we can see clearly *how the state navigated its consolidation in the margins of the economy, of institutions, of borders, and of legality*. As an illustration, the chapter examines one of the largest oil-smuggling operations during the sanctions period. It shows how the Iraqi state was able to maintain its consolidation during the sanctions period through multiple channels that were often *outside* its

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institutional and geographic boundaries, such as smuggling groups, Kurdish militias, and international and regional shipping companies, among other actors. Via such "external" and "marginal" means, which allowed the Iraqi state to maintain elements of consolidation (legitimation and domination), it was able to project a reified and consolidated image even under the pressure of sanctions.[46] What emerges from tracing the state in those margins is thus consistent with a number of sociological understandings of the state as a non-bounded actor. In other words, once examined on the ground, the state's boundedness disappears, giving way to a multitude of actions that together contribute to the production of the state as a unitary actor.

For the first time in its modern history, the post-2003 state faced a severe legitimation crisis, which was compounded by its inability to establish the authority to dominate. Chapter 4 argues that *the fragmentation of the state's authority resulted from the undoing of its domination capacity by the US-led invasion during the first three months of the occupation*. The extent of the fragmentation was plain to see in 2003 when militia-backed political groups moved into the space where the state used to be – by the end of the 2006 civil war, these political groups had firmly consolidated their demarcated domains of authority over Iraq's economy and politics. In fact, there were already signs of fragmentation less than two months into the US-led occupation in Iraq. This occupation had a *state-building* impetus and strategy, actively transforming the existing governing structures in the country through policies, orders, and directives. Critically for our purposes here, these interventions prioritized state legitimation over state domination, which directly contributed to the state's collapse in the civil war and its subsequent exacerbated fragmentation. To illustrate this, the chapter investigates what was arguably the Coalition Provisional Authority's biggest civil project between 2003 and 2006: repairing the national electrical grid. Technical and material elements of that project became sites of physical and political contestation over the state's consolidation at a moment when its

[46] This chapter is a revised and updated version of Nida Alahmad, 'The Politics of Oil and State Survival in Iraq (1991–2003): Beyond the Rentier Thesis', *Constellations: An International Journal of Critical and Democratic Theory* 14, no. 4 (2007): 586–612.

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domination had disappeared.[47] The chapter also traces the trajectory of "state-building" as an influential and ultimately dangerous framework, from its roots in 1980s US academia and 1990s UN peacekeeping practices to its arrival in Iraq with the US-led invasion.

Drawing on the foregoing chapters, Chapter 5 reanimates social theoretical accounts of the state, particularly those of Carl Schmitt, Max Weber, and Pierre Bourdieu. Bringing together common elements of their work and context and linking these with al-Wardi's work and context reveals profound resonances with the Iraqi experience of state consolidation. With these in hand, the chapter articulates a theorization of state consolidation, a theorization that simultaneously revisits the historical episodes detailed throughout the book. It argues that the state is an order that is consolidated through two main factors: a state's ability to dominate population and territory, and the sociological legitimacy of the state as the arbitrator of collective life. Domination is a prerequisite for legitimacy, and establishing legitimacy is a historically contingent process. When these two elements come together sufficiently, a state may appear as a reified actor that is coherent, bounded, and autonomous in its actions. But this appearance is an effect of the state's disciplinary power rather than a reflection of a sociological reality. At the same time, this effect is necessary for the maintenance of state consolidation.

The book's Epilogue tells the story of how a 2024 proposal to amend the Iraqi family law (Personal Status Law [PSL]) came to pass in early 2025 and outlines the objections to it in the context of this book's main thesis about how and why state consolidation matters. The amendment allows Iraqi Muslims to opt out of the state's legal code that governs matters related to their personal status (such as marriage, inheritance, custody, divorce), and opt into a Shi'a religious code that is to be set by a religious council. The Epilogue highlights main objections to the amendment, coming from Iraqi critics, which are focused on the social justice implications of introducing a legal structure wherein an authority is granted decision-making power over an aspect of public life that is parallel to, and outside of, the state's authority. Critics see this as a canonization of state fragmentation and

[47] This chapter is a revised and updated version of Nida Alahmad, 'Illuminating a State: State-Building and Electricity in Occupied Iraq', *Humanity: An International Journal of Human Rights, Humanitarianism, and Development* 8, no. 2 (2017): 335–353.

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the underlying ethno-sectarian power-sharing arrangement on which it rests. The Epilogue illustrates through this political and legal contestation the connections that run through sites of state fragmentation the attempts to consolidate a political order, historical legacies of state consolidation, and social justice. What the PSL story suggests is that *who decides on public life is consequential to the political possibilities of justice*.

The relation of social justice to state consolidation, which I theorize through al-Wardi's work and the voices and actions of Iraqi statemakers, activists, and writers, highlights a critical aspect of why the state matters to its people. State consolidation, in other words, can be understood as a political project with high normative stakes. This book will attempt to lay out the complexities of the political project and the messiness of the social life of the state, while being attentive to the normativity and wary of the traps of moralization.

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