

**How to cite this article:**

Nouri Nayef, T., & Dara, J. (2027). Political Party Institutionalization and State-Building in Post-2003 Iraq. *Journal of Historical Research, Law and Policy*, 5(8), 1-28. <https://doi.org/10.61838/jhrp.2.4.1>



Article history:
Original Research

Dates:

Submission Date: 13 July 2026

Revision Date: 01 October 2026

Acceptance Date: 08 October 2026

First Publication Date: 10 October 2026

Final Publication Date: 01 August 2027

Political Party Institutionalization and State-Building in Post-2003 Iraq

1. Tamim. Nouri Nayef¹ : Ph.D. Student, Department of Political Science, Tarbiat Modares University, Tehran, Iran
2. Jalil. Dara^{2*}: Associate Professor, Department of Political Science, Tarbiat Modares University, Tehran, Iran

*corresponding author's email: j.dara@modares.ac.ir

ABSTRACT

The transformation of Iraq's political system after 2003 created a pluralist environment in which numerous political parties entered electoral competition and became central actors in government formation, parliamentary representation, and the distribution of political power. Despite this expansion of partisan activity, the development of a stable and institutionalized party system has remained incomplete, while the process of state-building has continued to face serious structural constraints. This study examines the relationship between the institutionalization of political parties and state-building in Iraq from 2003 to 2025, with particular attention to the role of the muhasasa system as an intervening mechanism. The study adopts a qualitative documentary and historical-analytical approach and examines the evolution of the Iraqi party system across three periods: the formation of the post-Ba'ath multiparty order from 2003 to 2010, the consolidation of quota-based governance and intensified institutional fragmentation from 2010 to 2017, and the period of electoral reform, social protest, and declining party legitimacy from 2017 to 2025. The findings indicate that the numerical growth and organizational durability of political parties did not necessarily produce substantive party institutionalization. Many political organizations remained dependent on ethno-sectarian mobilization, patronage networks, access to public institutions, and negotiated distributions of state resources. These patterns weakened bureaucratic autonomy, reduced governmental accountability, contributed to corruption and administrative fragmentation, and complicated the consolidation of unified state authority. The study further shows that the relationship between party institutionalization and state-building is conditional rather than inherently positive or negative. Political parties can contribute to state-building when they are programmatic, socially rooted, organizationally autonomous, electorally accountable, and committed to common institutional rules. In Iraq, however, the persistence of quota-based governance has frequently transformed parties from intermediaries between society and the state into actors competing for institutional shares. Sustainable state-building therefore requires a transition from patronage- and identity-based competition toward programmatic party politics, stronger bureaucratic professionalism, clearer political accountability, and a more effective separation between partisan organization and state institutions.

Keywords: *Political Party Institutionalization; State-Building; Iraq; Muhasasa; Political Parties; Political Development; Patronage; Post-2003 Iraq*

Introduction

The political transformation of Iraq after 2003 represents one of the most consequential attempts at simultaneous regime change, democratization, institutional reconstruction, and state-building in the contemporary Middle East. The collapse of the Ba'athist regime dismantled a highly centralized authoritarian order in which political



organization had been subordinated to the state and meaningful partisan competition had been systematically suppressed. The abrupt disappearance of that institutional structure did not merely create an opportunity for pluralistic politics; it also produced an institutional vacuum in which a new political system had to be constructed while the country faced insecurity, social fragmentation, contested legitimacy, foreign intervention, and profound disagreements over the distribution of political authority. The historical legacy of centralized rule had left Iraq without a deeply rooted competitive party system capable of immediately assuming the representative, aggregative, and integrative functions normally associated with political parties in consolidated political orders (1). At the same time, the territorial, communal, and institutional tensions inherited from the previous state structure meant that post-2003 political reconstruction could not be reduced to the organization of elections or the legalization of parties. Iraq confronted the more fundamental problem of reconstructing effective state authority while simultaneously creating mechanisms through which formerly excluded political and social forces could participate in government. This dual process produced an inherent tension: political opening required the pluralization of political organization, whereas effective state-building required the establishment of coherent institutions capable of exercising authority beyond particularistic political, sectarian, ethnic, and organizational interests. The post-2003 experience therefore provides an analytically important case for examining whether an expansion in party competition necessarily contributes to state-building or whether, under certain institutional conditions, political parties can become instruments through which state authority is fragmented and public institutions are appropriated.

The emergence of a multiparty order after the fall of Saddam Hussein dramatically altered Iraq's political landscape. Political organizations representing Shi'a Islamist currents, Sunni Arab constituencies, Kurdish nationalist movements, secular tendencies, local networks, tribal interests, and newer reformist forces acquired opportunities to compete for institutional power. Yet the multiplication of parties should not be equated automatically with the institutionalization of a party system. Historical analyses of modern Iraq underline the limited continuity of pluralistic party development and the repeated interruption of autonomous political organization by authoritarian state structures (2). Consequently, the rapid expansion of political parties after 2003 occurred without the gradual processes of organizational consolidation, social integration, rule stabilization, and programmatic differentiation that normally underpin institutionalized party competition. Post-Saddam political pluralism therefore developed in a context characterized by organizational fluidity and strong identity-based mobilization. Recent research on political parties and the party system in post-Saddam Iraq similarly emphasizes that the existence of numerous political organizations has not necessarily produced a stable or programmatically differentiated party system (3). This distinction is essential because a party becomes politically consequential for state-building not merely when it is registered, participates in elections, or holds public office, but when it possesses organizational continuity, autonomous decision-making structures, stable relationships with constituencies, acceptance of institutional rules, and an ability to transform social preferences into public policy. The central problem of the Iraqi experience is therefore not simply whether political parties became numerous or electorally active, but whether they developed institutional characteristics that enabled them to strengthen rather than appropriate the state.

The architecture of political reconstruction after 2003 substantially shaped this trajectory. In attempting to accommodate Iraq's communal diversity and prevent renewed domination by a single political group, the emerging order relied heavily on ethnosectarian understandings of political representation and power-sharing. The system commonly described as *al-muhasasa al-ta'ifiyya*, or sectarian-communal quota-based allocation, increasingly influenced the distribution of senior positions, ministries, administrative resources, and political opportunities. The

appeal of such arrangements was understandable in a society emerging from dictatorship and profound intercommunal distrust: inclusion could be made visible by guaranteeing different political communities access to institutions of government. Comparative analysis of consociational arrangements shows that power-sharing can reduce fears of permanent exclusion where political divisions are deeply entrenched (4). In Iraq, however, the practical evolution of *muhasasa* extended beyond a formula for communal accommodation. Party organizations increasingly acquired access to public institutions through negotiated distributions of political office, thereby creating incentives to defend organizational shares of the state rather than to construct autonomous and impersonal state institutions. Mansour's analysis of post-2003 networks of power illustrates how formal institutions became intertwined with political, economic, and coercive networks that frequently crossed the conventional boundary between state and party (5). This transformation is particularly important for understanding why party competition did not consistently generate the accountability expected in democratic theory. Where access to governmental resources depends more heavily on coalition bargaining and quota-based allocation than on programmatic performance, parties may have stronger incentives to preserve their position within the distributional arrangement than to improve the effectiveness of state institutions.

The significance of political parties for state-building is theoretically substantial because parties occupy the intersection between society and government. Institutionalized parties can aggregate heterogeneous interests, recruit political elites, structure electoral competition, organize legislative coalitions, generate political legitimacy, and create mechanisms through which citizens reward or sanction governments. The institutionalization of party systems is therefore not simply an electoral phenomenon; it affects the predictability and durability of political competition, the capacity of governing institutions to formulate policy, and the quality of democratic accountability. Mainwaring's analysis of party-system institutionalization emphasizes the importance of stable patterns of competition, socially rooted political organizations, legitimacy of political actors and electoral processes, and organizational structures that are not reducible to transient personalities (6). These dimensions provide a particularly useful framework for Iraq because they make it possible to distinguish between formal political pluralism and substantive institutionalization. An electoral system may accommodate dozens or hundreds of organizations while still producing highly unstable alliances, weakly rooted political identities, personalized leadership structures, and extensive dependence on public resources. Conversely, a smaller number of durable, autonomous, programmatic parties may contribute more effectively to stable governance. For this reason, the analytical focus of the present study is the quality of party institutionalization rather than the sheer quantity of political organizations.

State-building likewise requires a broader conceptualization than the construction of constitutional bodies or the holding of elections. A functioning state must possess sufficient institutional capacity to formulate and implement collective decisions, administer public resources, provide services, enforce legal rules, and exercise authority throughout its territory. Fukuyama distinguishes the existence or scope of state functions from the actual strength and quality of institutions capable of performing them, an important distinction in cases where a state possesses extensive formal responsibilities but limited administrative effectiveness (7). This distinction is highly relevant to Iraq, where ministries, parliamentary bodies, electoral institutions, security agencies, and administrative structures exist formally, yet their performance has frequently been constrained by politicized appointments, fragmented authority, patronage networks, corruption, and competing centers of coercive power. State-building in Iraq must therefore be evaluated not simply through institutional presence but through institutional effectiveness, autonomy, accountability, political legitimacy, and the capacity of public authorities to operate according to general rather than

factional rules. Post-conflict approaches further demonstrate that political liberalization cannot substitute for the creation of viable institutions. Brahimi's analysis of state-building in crisis and post-conflict environments stresses that legitimate political structures must be supported by functioning institutions capable of managing conflict and delivering governance (8). Iraq's experience demonstrates the difficulty of pursuing both objectives at once when the political organizations responsible for democratic representation also acquire direct organizational stakes in the fragmentation of public authority.

The relationship between political parties and state-building in Iraq is additionally complicated by ethnosectarian mobilization. Sectarian identity did not originate with the post-2003 political order, but the institutional arrangements developed after regime change gave communal categories increased political salience. Haddad shows that sectarianism in Iraq should not be understood simply as an ancient or immutable conflict between communities; rather, sectarian identities are shaped and reproduced through political narratives, struggles over legitimacy, and competing understandings of the Iraqi state (9). When party competition becomes organized primarily around communal claims, political organizations may strengthen their electoral positions by maintaining boundaries between groups instead of developing cross-cutting programmatic coalitions. Such incentives affect state-building because public institutions then become arenas in which communal representation is negotiated rather than mechanisms through which universal state authority is exercised. Lust similarly demonstrates that democratic institutions in Middle Eastern settings cannot be evaluated independently of the social and institutional contexts within which electoral competition develops (10). The Iraqi case thus requires an approach that neither assumes that pluralism will automatically strengthen democracy nor treats identity-based politics as an inevitable obstacle to institutional development. The question is instead how specific institutional incentives shape party organization and how those forms of party organization subsequently affect the development of state capacity.

The trajectory of post-2003 governance illustrates the depth of this problem. Political parties played indispensable roles in electoral participation, constitutional politics, coalition formation, and representation, yet many also developed relationships with ministries, public employment systems, commercial networks, and security organizations that blurred the distinction between partisan organization and state administration. Dodge characterizes post-invasion Iraq as a political order in which weaknesses in institutional reconstruction contributed to the concentration and fragmentation of power rather than the emergence of a straightforward liberal democratic settlement (11). Al-Ali similarly emphasizes that corruption, institutional incompetence, and sectarianized governance undermined the democratic promise of the post-2003 constitutional system (12). The importance of these developments lies in their cumulative effect. Weak bureaucratic autonomy encourages parties to seek administrative control; partisan administrative control weakens institutional performance; declining institutional performance increases citizens' dependence on informal or partisan networks; and this dependency can further entrench the parties that benefit from weak state capacity. Thus, weak institutionalization of the state and a particular form of party institutionalization can become mutually reinforcing.

The objective of this article is to analyze the relationship between the institutionalization of political parties and the development of state-building in Iraq from 2003 to 2025, with particular attention to the conditions under which party organization has strengthened or weakened state institutions. The central research question asks how the degree and form of political party institutionalization have affected state-building in post-2003 Iraq and why the relationship has often produced contradictory outcomes. The article argues that the principal explanatory variable is not party pluralism itself but the form through which parties became institutionalized within the post-2003 political

order. Where parties developed primarily through ethnosectarian mobilization, access to state resources, patronage networks, and negotiated institutional quotas, organizational consolidation did not necessarily enhance state capacity. Instead, party durability could coexist with—and sometimes depend upon—weak bureaucratic autonomy, fragmented public authority, and restricted accountability. The argument is therefore conditional: institutionalized parties can support state-building when they are socially rooted, organizationally autonomous, programmatically competitive, accountable to voters, and committed to impersonal institutional rules; but party organizations embedded in quota-based resource distribution may consolidate themselves by colonizing rather than strengthening the state.

Methodologically, the article adopts a qualitative documentary and historical-analytical approach. Documentary analysis is appropriate for studying institutional development across an extended period because it permits systematic examination of legal frameworks, political developments, institutional reports, scholarly interpretations, and evidence concerning party and state performance (13). Qualitative content analysis provides a basis for identifying recurring patterns concerning party organization, political legitimacy, administrative capacity, identity-based mobilization, and state capture (14). The study also uses within-case temporal comparison, treating the post-2003 period as a historically evolving case rather than as a static institutional configuration. Such an approach is consistent with case-study methodology in which changes within a single case can illuminate causal mechanisms linking institutions and political outcomes (15). The analysis distinguishes three broad phases: the formation of the multiparty order and foundational institutions from 2003 to 2010; the consolidation of *muhasasa* alongside severe security and governance crises from 2010 to 2017; and the period from 2017 to 2025 characterized by protest, electoral reform, challenges to established party legitimacy, and continuing conflict over the relationship between parties, armed actors, and state institutions. This temporal framework enables the article to examine not only whether party institutionalization occurred, but how its changing forms affected the trajectory of Iraqi state-building.

Theoretical and Analytical Framework: Party Institutionalization and State-Building

Political party institutionalization refers to the process through which parties and patterns of interparty competition acquire stability, legitimacy, organizational continuity, and social meaning beyond temporary electoral mobilization or the personal authority of individual leaders. An institutionalized party is not merely an organization that repeatedly participates in elections. It develops durable procedures of decision-making, recognizable relationships with constituencies, mechanisms of leadership recruitment, internal rules, organizational resources independent of temporary access to office, and a political identity that persists across electoral cycles. At the system level, institutionalization also requires sufficiently stable patterns of competition so that political actors regard parties and elections as legitimate arenas for resolving political conflict. Mainwaring conceptualizes party-system institutionalization through precisely this concern with the stability of competition, rootedness of parties in society, legitimacy of political institutions, and organizational strength of parties (6). These dimensions are closely connected but analytically distinct. A party may possess a highly disciplined internal hierarchy while remaining socially narrow or dependent on state patronage, just as a party system may hold regular elections while remaining volatile and poorly rooted. For the Iraqi case, this multidimensional conception is preferable to a purely legal definition because the post-2003 system displays extensive formal party activity while simultaneously exhibiting unstable alliances, personalized leadership, communal segmentation, and dependence on public resources.

The distinction between institutionalization and numerical pluralism is particularly important in transitional political systems. Multiplication of political organizations can signal genuine democratization when it reflects broader participation and freer competition, but it can also reflect organizational fragmentation, personalistic entrepreneurship, elite factionalism, or strategic proliferation around access to state resources. Kitschelt and his collaborators demonstrate that party systems differ fundamentally according to the character of the linkages they establish with citizens, especially the distinction between programmatic representation and clientelistic exchange (16). Programmatic parties seek support by offering relatively coherent policy commitments applicable to broad categories of citizens, whereas clientelistic organizations distribute selective benefits through networks of personal or organizational dependence. This distinction is central to Iraq because a political party can become durable without becoming programmatic. Indeed, if access to ministries, public employment, contracts, and administrative influence allows a party to maintain a loyal constituency, then institutional survival may become tied to control over state resources rather than to policy performance. Such a party is institutionalized in the limited sense of organizational persistence but may weaken the conditions required for an institutionalized state. The Iraqi case thus reveals the need to distinguish institutionalization that generates organizational autonomy from institutionalization that entrenches partisan penetration of the state.

Social rootedness constitutes another critical dimension. Parties contribute to stable state-building when they connect social interests to national institutions through relatively predictable and inclusive forms of representation. Yet the meaning of rootedness depends on the nature of the cleavage around which political organization occurs. A party deeply embedded within a single communal network may be electorally durable while contributing little to political integration across communities. Haddad's examination of sectarianism in Iraq shows that communal identities are politically constructed, interpreted, and mobilized within competing narratives of national belonging (9). Accordingly, strong social embeddedness within a sectarian or ethnic constituency cannot automatically be considered equivalent to nationally integrative institutionalization. In Iraq, several major political organizations developed durable support within particular communities, but this often occurred alongside weak cross-communal linkages. The consequence is a fragmented form of social rootedness in which parties may effectively represent segments of society while failing to aggregate interests at the level of the national polity. State-building, however, requires precisely such aggregation because state institutions must formulate policies that possess authority beyond any one partisan or communal constituency.

Organizational autonomy is equally consequential. Political parties require sufficient independence from individual leaders, external patrons, armed groups, and state resources if they are to operate as autonomous intermediaries between citizens and public institutions. The issue in Iraq is not simply that political parties have leaders or external relationships; these characteristics are common across political systems. The deeper concern is whether the survival of political organizations depends on controlling state institutions or maintaining connections with coercive actors outside the ordinary hierarchy of state authority. Mansour's work on networks of power demonstrates the extent to which post-2003 political organizations have interacted with economic, administrative, and coercive networks that complicate the formal distinction between party and state (5). Where political organizations derive organizational strength from ministries, public contracts, armed formations, or transnational sponsorship, autonomy acquires a double meaning: the party may be autonomous from voters and public accountability while remaining dependent on resources that arise from state penetration or external support. This is the inverse of the form of autonomy conducive to democratic institutionalization.

State-building can be defined as the development and strengthening of political institutions capable of exercising legitimate, effective, and rule-bound authority over a defined political community. Its content includes administrative capacity, political order, institutional autonomy, implementation of law, public-service provision, fiscal and organizational competence, political accountability, and effective authority over coercive institutions. Fukuyama's distinction between the scope and strength of the state is useful because a government may possess ministries and agencies responsible for a large range of functions while lacking the institutional capacity to implement those functions consistently (7). Post-2003 Iraq exemplifies this potential divergence. The Iraqi state possesses a substantial formal bureaucracy and significant financial resources, particularly through oil revenues, yet institutional effectiveness has repeatedly been constrained by corruption, patronage, political intervention, and fragmented authority. State-building should therefore be assessed through the quality and autonomy of institutions rather than through their formal existence alone.

Political parties can theoretically contribute to state-building through several interconnected mechanisms. First, they aggregate social interests. Modern societies contain numerous demands that cannot be addressed individually by state institutions. Political parties simplify this complexity by combining demands into broader platforms and establishing priorities that can be converted into public policy. Programmatic competition therefore reduces the transaction costs of political decision-making. Where parties represent coherent policy alternatives, coalition formation and legislative bargaining can occur around identifiable preferences. Where parties are organized primarily as vehicles of identity or patronage, by contrast, coalition negotiations may revolve around the distribution of offices rather than competing approaches to policy. The latter pattern has been particularly consequential in Iraq, where post-election coalition bargaining has frequently concerned the allocation of institutional positions among political blocs. The problem is not coalition government itself but the substantive object of coalition bargaining. If parties negotiate primarily over shares of state authority, political competition can weaken administrative coherence even while remaining electorally pluralistic.

Second, institutionalized parties can generate political legitimacy. Elections alone do not guarantee legitimacy, but parties provide an organizational link between electoral choice and government. Citizens can identify governing alternatives, assign responsibility for outcomes, and replace political actors through institutional procedures. This process requires parties to accept the legitimacy of electoral competition and to permit meaningful alternation in authority. Repeated political crises surrounding government formation in Iraq have demonstrated that electoral results do not translate straightforwardly into accountable government. International Crisis Group's examination of the Iraqi parliament highlights persistent difficulties in converting formal electoral institutions into effective legislative and governmental accountability (17). When voters cannot determine which political actor is responsible for policy because government positions are distributed through opaque bargaining among numerous blocs, electoral legitimacy becomes disconnected from policy responsibility. Parties continue to confer procedural legitimacy by participating in elections, yet they may simultaneously erode substantive legitimacy when governing arrangements obscure accountability.

Third, parties recruit and socialize political elites. An institutionalized party system can function as a training structure in which political actors develop experience in legislative negotiation, policy formulation, constituency representation, and administrative oversight. Such functions contribute to state-building because public institutions depend on political leadership capable of operating within predictable rules. In a patronage-centered system, however, recruitment can become based on loyalty to party networks rather than professional or administrative

competence. Al-Ali's account of Iraq's post-2003 political development emphasizes the damaging interaction of corruption, sectarian allocation, and institutional incompetence (12). When partisan loyalty determines access to administrative positions, parties cease to serve merely as mechanisms for selecting political leadership and begin to shape the internal composition of the bureaucracy. The distinction between legitimate political appointment and systematic partisan colonization is consequently central to evaluating the relationship between parties and state-building.

Fourth, parties can enhance horizontal and vertical accountability. Opposition parties monitor government, parliamentary blocs scrutinize executive conduct, and voters use party labels to judge performance. Yet accountability becomes weakened where political organizations collectively benefit from the same distributional arrangement. If competing blocs each control portions of the state, opposition and government cease to be clearly differentiated. Political organizations may criticize one another publicly while simultaneously participating in negotiated arrangements concerning public offices. Such conditions encourage what may be described as fragmented responsibility: each party possesses enough institutional access to benefit from the state but insufficient responsibility to be held accountable for overall governmental performance. Transparency International's assessments of corruption provide an important contextual indicator of the persistence of governance problems in Iraq (18). Corruption under such conditions should not be conceptualized merely as individual misconduct. It can become structurally connected to party financing, patronage, administrative appointments, and competition over institutional resources.

The relationship between party institutionalization and state-building is therefore not necessarily linear. One theoretical possibility is complementarity. Parties become more institutionalized, generate stable competition, recruit competent political elites, and strengthen accountability; stronger state institutions then enforce political rules impartially, thereby creating incentives for parties to invest in organization rather than coercion or patronage. Dammert's discussion of political institutions and security problems, although developed in a different regional context, helps illuminate the broader importance of institutional capacity for structuring political competition (19). A second possibility is competitive erosion, in which parties increase their organizational strength by capturing resources that would otherwise strengthen state autonomy. In this model, stronger parties do not necessarily mean a stronger party system in the democratic sense; they can become durable organizations precisely because they control segments of government. A third and more appropriate model for Iraq is conditional. The effect of party institutionalization depends on the institutional environment within which parties compete, the nature of social cleavages, the design of electoral incentives, and the relationship between political organizations and public resources. Haggard and Kaufman's comparative work highlights how transitions and regime outcomes depend on interactions among institutions, elite strategies, and social forces rather than on a single organizational variable (20). This conditional perspective avoids the assumption that parties are inherently constructive or inherently destructive.

Within this framework, *muhasasa* functions as the principal intervening mechanism in the Iraqi case. Power-sharing initially provided a mechanism through which major communal and political forces could obtain representation in the post-Ba'athist order. Yet as this arrangement became embedded in political practice, it altered the incentives of parties. Rather than competing exclusively for a mandate to govern, political blocs could compete for a proportional or negotiated share of institutions. Bogaards notes that consociational systems must balance inclusion against risks of entrenching political segmentation (4). In Iraq, quota-based arrangements increasingly

encouraged parties to treat ministries and senior offices as organizational domains. Mansour documents how networks of political influence developed around control over public institutions and resources (21). The resulting structure changed the direction of the party-state relationship. Instead of parties functioning as intermediaries that organize society for participation in the state, segments of the state became resources through which parties reproduced their organizational position.

The *muhasasa* mechanism affects party institutionalization in several ways. It reduces incentives for ideological and programmatic differentiation because electoral success can be pursued through communal mobilization and post-election bargaining. It encourages parties to cultivate particularistic constituencies by offering access to jobs, services, or institutional intermediaries. It strengthens party leaderships that control negotiations over appointments and coalition shares. It can also inhibit internal democratization because access to public resources flows through centralized leadership networks. At the state level, the same mechanism undermines bureaucratic autonomy, complicates coordination between ministries, fragments responsibility, and makes reform costly for parties whose organizational survival is partly tied to existing arrangements. Consequently, the party system and state apparatus become locked in a mutually reinforcing equilibrium: weak state institutions create opportunities for partisan penetration, while partisan penetration reproduces weak institutions.

The analytical proposition advanced here is therefore that party institutionalization contributes positively to state-building only when three conditions are substantially present. Parties must establish programmatic rather than predominantly identity- or patronage-based linkages with citizens; electoral and constitutional institutions must reward competition that extends beyond narrow communal boundaries; and the state must possess a minimum level of bureaucratic autonomy sufficient to prevent political parties from transforming administrative bodies into organizational resources. Where these conditions are absent, organizationally durable parties may weaken state-building even as formal electoral competition continues. This model explains the central Iraqi paradox: political parties have unquestionably become enduring elements of the post-2003 order, but their durability has not consistently produced stronger state institutions. The key question is therefore what kind of institutionalization has taken place and how that institutionalization has interacted with the architecture of the Iraqi state.

The Evolution of Political Party Institutionalization in Post-2003 Iraq

The first phase of post-2003 political development, extending approximately from the fall of the Ba'athist regime to the 2010 parliamentary elections and subsequent government-formation crisis, was characterized by rapid political opening combined with institutional discontinuity. The dismantling of the previous authoritarian order created opportunities for political organizations that had operated in exile, clandestinely, regionally, or under repression to participate openly in national politics. This pluralization represented a genuine break with the monopolistic political structure of Ba'athist rule, yet it did not arise from a gradual consolidation of democratic organizations within society. Dawisha's historical account shows that modern Iraqi politics had repeatedly experienced cycles of ideological mobilization, military intervention, authoritarian centralization, and suppression of autonomous political organization (1). The post-2003 party system thus emerged under circumstances in which organizations possessed highly unequal institutional histories. Kurdish parties had developed territorial and administrative structures in the autonomous north, Shi'a Islamist parties possessed networks shaped by opposition and exile, while Sunni Arab political organization had to adjust rapidly to the collapse of a regime whose state institutions had disproportionately structured Sunni participation. This asymmetry strongly influenced the early party

system because organizations entered the new political arena with different levels of organizational capacity, access to resources, relationships with external actors, and experiences of governance.

The 2005 constitutional and electoral processes gave formal structure to party competition, but formalization occurred before stable patterns of interparty trust had emerged. Stansfield's analysis of Iraq after regime change illustrates how state reconstruction unfolded amid unresolved disputes concerning identity, territory, federalism, and political authority (22). Parties therefore operated not only as electoral organizations but also as representatives of communities concerned about their status within the new political order. The early electoral system reinforced coalition-building through large political lists, many of which were organized around broad communal identities rather than detailed programmatic differences. This arrangement helped bring major social components into the political process, but it also established a connection between electoral mobilization and communal representation that shaped later institutional development. Marr emphasizes that Iraq's modern political history has repeatedly been affected by the difficulty of reconciling state centralization with ethnonational and communal pluralism (2). After 2003, that problem was addressed through inclusion rather than coercive homogenization, but inclusion became increasingly mediated through parties claiming to represent distinct communities.

During this first period, party institutionalization displayed a contradictory structure. Several major parties possessed relatively strong organizations, recognizable leaderships, ideological histories, and stable constituencies. Yet the party system as a whole lacked stable programmatic competition and sufficiently autonomous institutions capable of enforcing common rules. Political organizations were often better institutionalized within their own communal constituencies than the national party system was institutionalized as an integrated arena. Haddad's analysis of sectarian narratives shows how competing conceptions of victimhood, entitlement, and national identity influenced political mobilization in post-2003 Iraq (9). This meant that social rootedness, normally treated as an indicator of party institutionalization, had an ambiguous effect: parties could be deeply rooted in specific social networks while contributing to the political segmentation of the national arena. The institutional challenge was not absence of political attachment, but the weakness of cross-cutting mechanisms capable of transforming sectional attachments into broadly accepted national political competition.

The security crisis of the mid-2000s intensified these dynamics. Sectarian violence and insurgency reduced the space for ordinary programmatic competition and increased the importance of communal protection, security networks, religious authorities, and armed organizations. Under such conditions, voters had powerful incentives to support political organizations perceived as capable of defending communal interests. Party competition thus became intertwined with existential security concerns. Dodge argues that weaknesses in the post-invasion reconstruction of state institutions contributed significantly to the fragmentation of authority and the emergence of coercive political dynamics (11). As state security capacity remained contested, political organizations developed or maintained relationships with armed actors, further complicating the distinction between partisan competition and sovereign state authority. The consequence for institutionalization was significant: organizations could strengthen their position through mechanisms external to normal electoral and bureaucratic channels, reducing incentives to subordinate all political competition to impersonal state institutions.

At the same time, the early post-2003 period demonstrated that parties were not simply destructive actors. Participation in elections created institutional channels through which competing groups could seek representation without relying exclusively on violence. Political organizations helped negotiate constitutional arrangements, form governments, and integrate diverse constituencies into a common parliamentary framework. Kadhim's historical

analysis of Iraqi state formation underscores the enduring importance of contestation over representation and sovereignty in the construction of the modern Iraqi state (23). In this sense, post-2003 party competition supplied mechanisms of representation that had been absent under dictatorship. The weakness lay not in representation itself but in the institutional incentives through which representation was translated into governmental power. The emerging system increasingly normalized the principle that political inclusion should be reflected through negotiated access to state offices. What began as a means of preventing exclusion thereby created the foundations of a distributional political order.

The period surrounding the 2010 election marks a transition from the fluidity of the early post-2003 system toward a more entrenched form of party-centered power sharing. The prolonged process of government formation following the election illustrated a fundamental weakness in the relationship between electoral competition and governmental authority. Electoral outcomes did not produce a straightforward transfer of executive responsibility; instead, bargaining among political blocs over the distribution of leadership positions and institutional influence became decisive. Ottaway and Kaysi describe post-2003 Iraq as possessing formal political institutions whose effectiveness was constrained by unresolved power struggles and weak consensus over the rules of governance (24). The 2010 crisis demonstrated that parties had acquired sufficient organizational strength to block outcomes unfavorable to them, but this strength did not necessarily translate into more effective state institutions. On the contrary, the ability of political blocs to bargain over the composition of government reinforced the perception that ministries and senior offices constituted negotiable political assets.

From 2010 to 2017, *muhasasa* became more deeply entrenched as a practical mechanism of governance. The party system acquired greater continuity: many major organizations survived multiple electoral cycles, leadership networks became established, and coalition patterns became more recognizable. According to a superficial measure, this durability might indicate institutionalization. Yet substantive analysis reveals a more problematic pattern. Political parties consolidated their organizational presence partly through access to public institutions, creating overlapping networks of party, administration, business, and patronage. Mansour's analysis of Iraqi networks of power demonstrates how formal state structures became embedded within broader political networks that distributed influence and resources beyond transparent administrative procedures (5). This form of consolidation strengthened parties as organizations while reducing the autonomy of the bureaucracy. The Iraqi case therefore challenges any assumption that stronger political organizations necessarily produce stronger states.

Administrative politicization became one of the most consequential mechanisms in this period. Parties that secured control or influence over ministries could shape appointments, allocate employment, facilitate contracts, and distribute services through networks connected to their political constituencies. This pattern encouraged citizens to interact with political parties not merely as vehicles of electoral representation but as intermediaries capable of providing access to the state. Such relationships resemble the clientelistic linkages analyzed by Kitschelt, in which selective material access can substitute for programmatic policy commitments (16). The result is a self-reinforcing institutional problem. When citizens require partisan intermediaries to obtain services or employment, political organizations gain from bureaucratic weakness because institutional impersonality would reduce the value of mediation. Conversely, citizens faced with ineffective public institutions may rationally rely on party networks, thereby reproducing the system.

The crisis generated by the rise of the Islamic State after 2014 further transformed the relationship between political parties and the state. The rapid deterioration of security exposed deficiencies in formal military and

administrative institutions and contributed to the mobilization of the Popular Mobilization Forces. The PMF played a major role in confronting the Islamic State, but its subsequent institutionalization created complex questions concerning the boundary between state and non-state coercive authority. Haddad emphasizes that the Hashd al-Sha'bi cannot be treated as a single, socially detached militia structure; it developed through multiple relationships among state institutions, society, religious authority, and political organizations (25). This complexity is crucial because some armed formations established close relationships with political parties or developed political wings participating in elections. Mansour and associated research on the relationship between militias and the state demonstrates how formal incorporation of armed organizations does not automatically establish unified command or eliminate autonomous political networks (26). Consequently, the party system came to include organizations whose political influence could be reinforced by coercive capacity, further complicating the state's monopoly over legitimate force.

The adoption of the Political Parties Law in 2015 represented an attempt to provide clearer legal foundations for party organization. Formal regulation can contribute to institutionalization by establishing rules for registration, financing, organizational transparency, and political activity. Yet law alone cannot transform the incentive structure of a party system. Where parties obtain significant resources from access to state institutions or parallel networks, formal organizational rules may have limited effects unless accompanied by effective enforcement. Al-Ali's analysis of post-2003 governance illustrates the broader problem of the gap between constitutional or legal frameworks and their implementation within politicized institutions (12). The significance of the 2015 law therefore lies less in its immediate transformative effect than in its recognition that an open party system requires institutional regulation if pluralism is to become accountable rather than merely competitive.

The third phase, from approximately 2017 to 2025, was marked by growing public dissatisfaction with the established party order. Military victory over the territorial organization of the Islamic State removed one of the dominant security imperatives of the preceding period and sharpened attention to governance, corruption, unemployment, service delivery, and political accountability. Public frustration culminated dramatically in the Tishreen protest movement beginning in October 2019. Hasan interprets the Tishreen uprising as a fundamental challenge not simply to individual officeholders but to the structure of post-2003 political governance (27). Protesters criticized corruption, sectarian quota arrangements, weak services, unemployment, foreign influence, and the dominance of established political parties. The movement therefore revealed a widening gap between procedural representation and substantive legitimacy. Parties continued to occupy the institutions of the constitutional order, yet significant sections of society—particularly younger urban Iraqis—questioned whether those organizations genuinely represented citizens rather than self-reproducing political networks.

The protests were especially significant for party institutionalization because they challenged the established form of social rootedness. Traditional parties could claim durable electoral and communal constituencies, but Tishreen demonstrated the emergence of political identities that rejected the equation of representation with sectarian allocation. Hasan shows that the movement articulated demands centered on citizenship, national sovereignty, accountable government, and institutional reform (27). New political initiatives and independent candidates subsequently attempted to transform protest mobilization into electoral participation. This development suggested a possible transition from identity-centered competition toward issue-oriented politics, although organizational fragmentation and unequal access to resources limited the capacity of newer actors to displace established parties. The durability of incumbent networks illustrates an important characteristic of

institutionalization: organizations that are deeply embedded in resource-distribution systems possess structural advantages that cannot easily be overcome by electoral reform alone.

Electoral reforms adopted in response to protest sought to strengthen the relationship between voters and individual representatives by modifying electoral districts and reducing some of the advantages associated with large party lists. Mansour's assessment of the 2021 elections identifies meaningful changes in the political landscape while also demonstrating the adaptability of established political organizations (21). Independent and newer candidates obtained greater space, but established parties retained extensive organizational, financial, and mobilizational resources. This outcome reinforces the article's central distinction between changing electoral rules and transforming deeper structures of party institutionalization. Electoral engineering can modify incentives, but parties embedded in administrative, economic, communal, and coercive networks can adapt strategically to new rules. Institutional reform therefore requires changes not only in voting mechanisms but also in party financing, bureaucratic autonomy, political accountability, and the relationship between parties and armed organizations.

By 2025, the Iraqi party system had thus become both more durable and more contested. Major parties had survived numerous elections and crises, which indicates a degree of organizational persistence. Elections had become routinized components of political life, and outright restoration of a single-party authoritarian order had not occurred. Yet several central indicators of substantive institutionalization remained weak. Programmatic competition remained limited relative to identity, leadership, and patronage-based mobilization; party organizations continued to depend significantly on access to public institutions; coalition formation often revolved around bargaining over state positions; and the boundary between formal political organization and coercive networks remained incomplete. Rafiei Qahsareh and colleagues characterize the post-Saddam Iraqi party system as facing structural challenges that impede democratic consolidation despite extensive partisan activity (3). The trajectory from 2003 to 2025 can therefore be understood as a movement from rapid pluralization toward selective organizational consolidation without full transformation into an institutionalized, programmatic, nationally integrated party system. This incomplete form of institutionalization provides the necessary basis for examining its consequences for state-building.

Political Party Institutionalization and the Development of State-Building in Iraq

The relationship between political parties and state-building in Iraq is most clearly visible in the domain of political legitimacy. The post-2003 order replaced authoritarian monopolization of politics with constitutional institutions, competitive elections, parliamentary representation, and negotiated government formation. These developments constituted genuine institutional achievements because they established recurring procedures through which political claims could be translated into governmental authority. Political parties were indispensable to this process: they mobilized voters, formed electoral lists, structured legislative blocs, negotiated governing coalitions, and provided organizational continuity across elections. Yet procedural institutionalization did not consistently generate performance legitimacy. Ottaway and Kaysi's assessment of the Iraqi state emphasizes the persistent gap between formal political structures and effective governance (24). Citizens could participate in elections while simultaneously experiencing poor public services, corruption, unemployment, politicized administration, and uncertainty concerning who was responsible for governmental performance. This divergence weakened the capacity of elections to legitimize the state because political participation did not reliably produce accountable or effective government.

The problem was intensified by coalition formation under *muhasasa*. In parliamentary systems, coalition bargaining is normal when no party obtains a majority. In Iraq, however, bargaining frequently extended beyond policy agreements and cabinet composition to broader distributions of institutional influence. Political blocs sought ministries, senior administrative positions, and access to resources commensurate with their bargaining strength. International Crisis Group's analysis of parliamentary politics indicates that the Iraqi legislature has repeatedly struggled to perform autonomous oversight and reform functions within a political environment dominated by bloc-based bargaining (17). When coalition negotiations determine not merely which parties govern but how different organizations divide institutional domains, the state can become horizontally segmented. This segmentation weakens collective responsibility because each political actor may control specific institutions while attributing system-wide failures to competitors. Government thus becomes a negotiated assemblage of partisan interests rather than a coherent administrative hierarchy.

Government-formation crises following elections provide a concrete manifestation of this pattern. Extended negotiations do not by themselves prove institutional failure, but repeated delays indicate that electoral competition has not fully stabilized rules governing executive authority. The difficulty lies partly in the tension between electoral outcomes and negotiated consensus among major political blocs. Mansour's examination of the 2021 electoral landscape demonstrates that electoral change did not eliminate the necessity of complex bargaining among established political actors (21). Parties could win or lose seats, yet their capacity to influence government remained dependent on post-election alliances, institutional vetoes, and negotiated arrangements. This weakens the accountability chain linking voter preference to governmental formation. Where electoral victory does not clearly determine governing responsibility, voters face difficulty sanctioning specific parties for state performance.

The bureaucratic consequences of partisan competition are even more significant for state-building. Administrative institutions require professional continuity, technical competence, predictable procedures, and a degree of insulation from partisan turnover. Political leadership necessarily influences bureaucracy in democratic systems, but the distinction between legitimate policy direction and organizational capture is fundamental. In Iraq, *muhasasa* encouraged political blocs to treat appointments and ministries as components of coalition allocation. Al-Ali describes how corruption and sectarianized allocation damaged institutional competence in the post-2003 order (12). Where appointments depend on party affiliation, communal balance, or loyalty networks, bureaucratic incentives shift away from impersonal professional criteria. Officials may regard party patrons rather than formal administrative superiors or citizens as the source of career security. This weakens vertical administrative discipline and complicates coordination across agencies controlled by different political networks.

The relationship between parties and bureaucracy creates a particularly damaging institutional cycle. Parties seek administrative influence because ministries provide access to budgets, employment, contracts, and services. Once political organizations acquire such influence, they can distribute benefits that strengthen organizational loyalty. Citizens who cannot rely on universal and predictable public services may then turn to parties or associated intermediaries for assistance, further increasing the political value of administrative control. The resulting clientelistic logic resembles the selective linkage structures described by Kitschelt (16). Such networks are not merely forms of corruption external to politics; they can become central mechanisms of political organization. The stronger they become, the more difficult bureaucratic reform becomes because professionalization threatens the resources through which parties maintain constituencies.

Corruption is therefore best interpreted structurally rather than exclusively in terms of individual misconduct. Transparency International's corruption assessments have consistently located Iraq among countries facing substantial public-sector corruption challenges (18). The relevance of this evidence to party institutionalization lies in the interaction between political financing, patronage, procurement, appointments, and administrative access. If parties require extensive resources to maintain organizational networks and electoral mobilization, control over state institutions can become a substitute for transparent party financing. Political competition then creates incentives for extracting rather than safeguarding public resources. Reform becomes difficult because actors benefiting from the arrangement also occupy the institutions responsible for changing it. This is a classic state-capture problem: public institutions formally retain legal authority, but practical decision-making becomes influenced by networks whose objectives are partially organizational or partisan.

Parliamentary performance demonstrates a related problem. In theory, parliament should provide the institutional arena through which parties convert electoral preferences into legislation, scrutinize executive actions, and represent constituencies. An institutionalized party system can strengthen parliament by creating stable blocs, coherent legislative priorities, and predictable government-opposition relationships. In Iraq, however, coalition arrangements frequently blur the distinction between government and opposition. Major parties may participate in power-sharing even while criticizing governmental performance. International Crisis Group notes that structural incentives within Iraq's parliamentary system have repeatedly obstructed meaningful reform (17). When multiple parties possess stakes in the executive distribution, parliamentary oversight may become selective or strategically deployed rather than institutionally consistent. Legislators may be accountable upward to party leaderships controlling nominations and resources rather than outward to constituents. This pattern weakens horizontal accountability and transforms parliament into an arena for negotiating elite arrangements as much as for producing legislation.

The institutionalization of party leadership itself reinforces these tendencies. Strong centralized leadership can provide organizational coherence, but where party leaders control candidate selection, coalition bargaining, access to public positions, and distribution of resources, internal organization can become oligarchic. The party may be durable without being internally institutionalized through transparent and impersonal procedures. Mainwaring's conception of institutionalization emphasizes that organizations should possess value and continuity beyond individual leaders (6). In Iraq, several major parties have long histories and recognizable structures, but leadership personalization and factional fragmentation remain important. Splits can produce new electoral lists or political organizations while preserving networks of patronage and communal identification. This pattern contributes to numerical proliferation without necessarily creating new programmatic alternatives.

State-building is also affected by the relationship between political parties and identity cleavages. Parties can help manage social conflict when they aggregate interests across divisions, negotiate compromises, and persuade constituencies to accept common institutional rules. Alternatively, parties can reinforce cleavages when electoral success depends on presenting themselves as indispensable defenders of particular communities. Haddad's work demonstrates that sectarian politics in Iraq developed through competing political narratives rather than through fixed primordial antagonism (9). Institutional incentives therefore matter. The *muhasasa* system recognized communal representation as a central criterion of political inclusion, which reduced fears of exclusion but simultaneously increased the political value of communal identity. Parties that could claim to represent Shi'a, Sunni, Kurdish, or other constituencies gained bargaining legitimacy from the persistence of those categories.

The Arab-Kurdish dimension illustrates the complexity of this relationship. Kurdish parties possess among the strongest and most durable organizational structures in Iraq, reflecting long histories of nationalist mobilization and regional governance. Their institutionalization has enabled them to negotiate effectively within federal institutions, but it has also institutionalized a territorial and political cleavage concerning sovereignty, disputed territories, natural resources, and federal authority. Stansfield's work on Iraqi politics highlights the centrality of Kurdish autonomy to the restructuring of the Iraqi state (22). The Kurdish case therefore demonstrates that strong party institutionalization can simultaneously stabilize representation and complicate centralized state-building. This is not necessarily a contradiction if state-building is understood in federal rather than unitary terms, but it shows that the relationship depends on agreement concerning the constitutional distribution of authority.

Shi'a political competition presents a different pattern. Post-2003 Shi'a parties initially benefited from demographic majority, religious networks, histories of opposition to Ba'athism, and institutional access. Over time, however, competition within the Shi'a political field intensified, demonstrating that sectarian identity alone did not determine political alignment. Factional competition created opportunities for greater pluralism but also produced rival patronage and security networks. Mansour's analysis of power structures illustrates how competition among political networks can occur within rather than between communal categories (5). This is important because it reveals why reducing Iraqi politics to a simple tripartite Shi'a-Sunni-Kurdish formula is inadequate. *Muhasasa* does not merely allocate resources between communities; it also structures competition among organizations seeking to claim representation within them.

Sunni Arab political organization underwent its own transformation from initial alienation and partial electoral boycott toward greater participation in state institutions. The process demonstrated the integrative potential of party politics: actors previously resistant to the new order could seek influence through elections and parliamentary bargaining. Yet fragmentation of Sunni leadership and dependence on coalition negotiations limited the emergence of stable programmatic representation. Dodge's analysis of post-2003 politics shows how contested inclusion and uneven state reconstruction shaped Sunni engagement with the new political system (11). Again, party politics functioned simultaneously as a mechanism of integration and a source of fragmentation.

The relationship between parties and armed actors constitutes perhaps the most direct challenge to state-building because it concerns the state's coercive authority. The rise of the Popular Mobilization Forces during the struggle against the Islamic State responded to a genuine security emergency and contributed significantly to territorial defense. Yet the subsequent political role of organizations associated with armed formations complicated institutional consolidation. Haddad stresses the heterogeneous character of the Hashd al-Sha'bi and its multiple relationships with state and society (25). The analytical problem is not the existence of formally incorporated auxiliary forces per se, but whether all coercive organizations are effectively subordinated to a unified constitutional chain of command. When political parties possess direct or indirect relationships with armed formations capable of autonomous action, competition ceases to be entirely confined to civilian institutions.

Mansour and related research on militia-state relations show that formal legalization or incorporation does not necessarily dissolve autonomous organizational networks (26). This has major implications for party institutionalization. A party supported by coercive capacity possesses resources fundamentally different from those of ordinary electoral organizations. Such asymmetry can distort political competition, inhibit accountability, and weaken state sovereignty. It can also create dual institutional structures in which organizations participate in formal parliamentary politics while maintaining leverage outside it. From a state-building perspective, this is particularly

problematic because the authority of the state depends not only on legal recognition but on the practical subordination of coercion to public institutions.

The Tishreen movement exposed the accumulated legitimacy consequences of these institutional arrangements. The protests were directed against corruption, poor services, unemployment, external influence, political violence, and the wider structure of quota-based governance. Hasan argues that Tishreen represented a significant attempt to redefine political belonging around citizenship and national statehood rather than established communal and partisan structures (27). The movement demonstrated that a political system can possess institutionalized parties while experiencing de-institutionalization in the relationship between parties and society. Established organizations remained powerful, but their representative legitimacy weakened among substantial segments of the population. This is particularly significant because social rootedness is one of the conventional indicators of party institutionalization. Iraq reveals that rootedness can decay even while organizational resources remain strong.

Electoral reform after Tishreen attempted to address some of these problems by changing the relationship between candidates and constituencies. Smaller districts and changes in voting rules created greater possibilities for independent candidates and localized representation. Yet the 2021 election also demonstrated the adaptability of established political actors (21). Parties with superior resources, networks, organization, and experience could modify nomination strategies to operate under new electoral rules. Institutional reform therefore produced changes without dismantling the deeper political economy of party competition. This outcome supports the argument that electoral design is necessary but insufficient. Party institutionalization is embedded in administrative access, financial structures, social networks, and coercive relationships that cannot be altered through voting rules alone.

The overall relationship between party institutionalization and state-building is thus conditional and nonlinear. The Iraqi experience contains evidence of positive institutional effects. Repeated elections have normalized peaceful competition to a degree that would have been impossible under the Ba'athist system. Parties have represented diverse communities, recruited political elites, negotiated compromises, and helped preserve a constitutional political framework through periods of severe violence and territorial crisis. The persistence of parliamentary institutions across multiple crises demonstrates that the post-2003 order cannot be described simply as institutional failure. Rafiei Qahsareh and colleagues note both the existence of an active multiparty environment and the structural limitations preventing full party-system consolidation (3). Political organizations have therefore contributed to maintaining an arena within which political conflict can be negotiated.

At the same time, the form of party institutionalization has imposed substantial costs on state-building. Where organizations derive strength from the control of ministries, patronage networks, communal mobilization, or armed relationships, stronger party organization can produce weaker public institutions. This is the central paradox of the Iraqi case. Political actors need sufficient organization to participate effectively in democracy, but organizational consolidation becomes detrimental when it depends on appropriating the resources and authority of the state. Fukuyama's emphasis on the balance between state capacity, rule-bound institutions, and political accountability is especially useful here (7). Iraq has developed extensive mechanisms of representation and accountability in formal terms, but the state-capacity dimension has frequently remained subordinate to the distributional demands of the political system. Without administrative autonomy, democratic competition can become a struggle over access to weak institutions rather than a mechanism for strengthening them.

The causal mechanism can therefore be summarized as a sequence. Ethnosectarian insecurity and the political need for inclusive representation contributed to the adoption of quota-based power-sharing practices. These

practices rewarded parties capable of claiming communal representation and negotiating institutional shares. Access to ministries and public resources strengthened party patronage networks, which in turn reinforced organizational durability. Stronger patronage networks reduced incentives for programmatic competition and bureaucratic professionalization. Weak administrative performance then intensified public dependence on intermediaries while simultaneously eroding trust in state institutions. The persistence of this cycle explains why Iraq has experienced both durable party organizations and weak state capacity. It also explains why reform cannot consist simply of reducing the number of parties or replacing one electoral law with another. What must change is the institutional relationship through which parties acquire resources, compete for support, and interact with the state.

A more constructive relationship requires parties to become autonomous from the resources they are supposed to govern. This means that organizational survival must depend increasingly on membership, transparent financing, programmatic credibility, and electoral performance rather than privileged access to ministries or coercive networks. It also requires stronger institutional boundaries between party leadership and the professional bureaucracy. International Crisis Group's analysis of parliamentary reform emphasizes that formal institutions cannot improve substantially without changing the incentives of political actors operating within them (17). Similarly, corruption control cannot succeed through punitive measures alone if political organizations continue to depend on resource-distribution structures. The relationship between party reform and state reform is therefore reciprocal. Iraq cannot develop an institutionalized party system without a more autonomous state, and it cannot develop a more autonomous state while parties retain incentives to treat public institutions as organizational assets.

The evidence from 2003 to 2025 consequently supports a conditional rather than categorical assessment. Political parties are necessary for representative politics, and their institutionalization is potentially central to effective state-building. The problem in Iraq has not been the existence of political parties or pluralism as such. Rather, it has been the consolidation of a political environment in which many parties became institutionalized through mechanisms that undermined the institutionalization of the state. The task is therefore not to weaken party politics but to transform the basis on which parties become strong. Programmatic competition, transparent organization, internal institutionalization, cross-communal political linkages, professional public administration, parliamentary accountability, and unified state control over coercion constitute mutually reinforcing components of such a transformation.

Discussion

The Iraqi experience provides an important theoretical qualification to conventional assumptions concerning democratization, political party development, and state-building. Political science has often treated institutionalized parties as indispensable components of representative government because they organize competition, aggregate interests, structure legislative behavior, recruit political leaders, and create recognizable channels of accountability. That proposition remains valid, but Iraq demonstrates that the concept of institutionalization must be specified carefully. Organizational durability is not sufficient. A party may survive successive elections, possess disciplined leadership, control significant resources, mobilize a stable constituency, and exercise extensive political influence while still weakening the institutional foundations of the state. Mainwaring's multidimensional approach is particularly useful because it prevents institutionalization from being reduced to organizational persistence alone (6). The Iraqi case suggests that the quality of party-state boundaries should be treated as an additional analytical

consideration in post-conflict political systems. Where parties become durable because they capture state resources, organizational institutionalization and state institutionalization may move in opposite directions.

This finding explains why the rapid expansion of party competition after 2003 did not generate the state-building outcomes that might be expected from democratic pluralization. The post-Ba'athist system succeeded in opening political space and incorporating actors excluded from the previous authoritarian order, but political inclusion was institutionalized through mechanisms that frequently linked representation to communal allocation. This pattern cannot be understood solely as a result of sectarianism. Haddad's work cautions against treating sectarian identities as static determinants of Iraqi politics (9). Rather, the post-2003 institutional environment increased the political value of particular identities by making them relevant to representation, bargaining, and access to public authority. Parties responded rationally to these incentives. Where claims of communal representation improved bargaining power, political organizations had limited incentive to abandon identity-centered mobilization in favor of broad programmatic platforms.

This does not mean that *muhasasa* was irrational at the moment of political transition. Power-sharing arrangements can reduce the fear that democratization will produce permanent domination by a majority or exclusion of vulnerable groups. Bogaards demonstrates that consociational and centripetal approaches represent different strategies for managing divided societies, each involving trade-offs between guaranteed inclusion and incentives for cross-group moderation (4). The Iraqi problem arose because an inclusion mechanism evolved into a broader system of institutional distribution. As quota-based expectations spread from senior political offices into ministries, administrative appointments, and resource networks, the distinction between communal representation and partisan control became blurred. Consequently, a mechanism intended to preserve political stability contributed to a structure that weakened administrative coherence.

The findings therefore support a conditional model of the relationship between party institutionalization and state-building. Haggard and Kaufman's comparative approach to political transitions emphasizes that institutional outcomes are shaped by interactions among elite competition, mass mobilization, and inherited structures (20). In Iraq, the effect of party institutionalization depends on at least three interconnected conditions: the character of party-voter linkages, the incentives generated by electoral and coalition institutions, and the autonomy of the state bureaucracy. Where parties compete programmatically, broad social interests can be aggregated into policy alternatives. Where competition is driven primarily by identity or patronage, electoral victories may produce claims to institutional shares rather than mandates for coherent governance. Where bureaucratic institutions possess professional autonomy, parties can govern without converting administrative organizations into partisan assets. Where bureaucracy is vulnerable, political competition can accelerate institutional capture.

The Iraqi evidence also clarifies the relationship between externally supported state-building and domestic political institutionalization. The post-2003 reconstruction process created formal institutions rapidly under conditions of foreign military presence and political intervention. Brahimi's work on post-conflict state-building stresses that viable institutions cannot simply be constructed externally without sustainable domestic political foundations (8). The Iraqi case demonstrates a further difficulty: rapid electoralization can establish mechanisms of representation before the administrative institutions necessary to regulate political competition are sufficiently strong. Parties then enter a state whose resources are extensive but whose institutional protections are weak. In such a context, political actors have strong incentives to secure organizational advantage by accessing state resources. State weakness consequently shapes party development from the beginning.

Dodge's interpretation of post-2003 Iraq similarly emphasizes how institutional weakness conditioned the emergence of increasingly authoritarian and fragmented political tendencies (11). The implications extend beyond Iraq. In post-authoritarian and post-conflict states, sequencing matters not because democratization should necessarily be postponed but because electoral institutions and administrative institutions must develop in a mutually supportive manner. Competitive politics without bureaucratic autonomy can produce state capture; bureaucratic consolidation without political accountability can reproduce authoritarianism. The challenge is therefore simultaneous institution-building in both domains.

The research also demonstrates why corruption should be integrated into the analysis of party institutionalization rather than treated as a separate governance problem. Transparency International's findings indicate the persistence of severe corruption challenges in Iraq (18). Yet corruption in a quota-based party system is not only the consequence of weak law enforcement or individual opportunism. It may serve organizational functions by financing networks, maintaining constituencies, allocating employment, and stabilizing political alliances. This does not imply that every party or political actor participates equally in corrupt practices, but it means that anti-corruption strategies must address the political incentives sustaining resource extraction. Strengthening investigative institutions without reforming party financing, procurement systems, appointment procedures, and coalition incentives may therefore have limited effects.

The parliamentary dimension reinforces this conclusion. Representative institutions are expected to transform partisan competition into lawmaking and oversight, but they cannot perform this function effectively when political responsibility is dispersed across overlapping coalition arrangements. International Crisis Group's analysis of the Iraqi parliament highlights recurring difficulties of reform, accountability, and institutional effectiveness (17). A system in which most major actors participate directly or indirectly in the distribution of government positions produces weak opposition because parties may simultaneously criticize the government and benefit from the political settlement sustaining it. This reduces the clarity of electoral accountability. Voters may punish individual parties, but coalition reconfiguration can permit established elites to remain influential despite electoral losses.

The rise of Tishreen can be interpreted as a societal response to this accountability deficit. Hasan's analysis presents the movement as a challenge to the post-2003 political establishment and an effort to redefine the relationship between citizenship and the state (27). From the perspective of party institutionalization, Tishreen reveals a significant process of delegitimation. Political parties remained institutionally entrenched within parliament, government, and administrative networks, but their societal legitimacy weakened among groups who perceived established organizations as beneficiaries of rather than solutions to state weakness. This divergence between organizational strength and representative legitimacy is theoretically important. Institutionalization cannot be considered complete when organizations are durable but lose their capacity to channel emerging social demands.

The movement also demonstrates the limits of spontaneous or movement-based alternatives. Protest mobilization can articulate political dissatisfaction and produce new candidates or organizations, but transforming protest into durable programmatic parties requires organizational resources, leadership structures, geographic networks, and long-term constituency relations. Established parties possess advantages precisely because they are already institutionalized in organizational terms. The challenge is therefore not simply to replace old parties with independents. Without changes in the institutional environment, new organizations may eventually face the same incentives toward patronage, centralized leadership, and state dependence. Sustainable reform requires altering the rules and resource structures within which all political organizations operate.

Electoral reform after 2019 illustrates this point. Changes to constituency design and voting procedures created opportunities for different forms of representation, but they did not fundamentally dismantle established networks. Mansour's analysis of the 2021 election highlights both political change and continuity (21). Electoral engineering can influence candidate strategies and representation, but it cannot by itself professionalize the bureaucracy, regulate party financing, dismantle clientelistic networks, or establish unified command over armed organizations. The implication is that reform must be multidimensional. Electoral rules should create incentives for broader political appeals, but these reforms must be accompanied by institutional measures that reduce the benefits of state capture.

The coercive dimension presents perhaps the most difficult challenge because it touches the foundation of state authority. Haddad's analysis of the Hashd al-Sha'bi demonstrates the complex social and political origins of the Popular Mobilization Forces (25). Their emergence cannot be understood simply as a failure of the state, since they also responded to a severe security emergency and acquired substantial social legitimacy through the struggle against the Islamic State. Yet long-term state-building requires that political participation and coercive authority become institutionally differentiated. Parties that possess armed affiliates or relationships with autonomous coercive organizations operate under conditions fundamentally different from parties relying solely on electoral and civic resources. Mansour's research on the formalization of the PMF demonstrates that incorporation into official structures does not automatically resolve problems of command, accountability, or organizational autonomy (26). The state therefore faces the difficult task of integrating legitimate security contributions while preventing the emergence of permanent parallel structures.

This challenge interacts directly with party competition. Armed influence can protect political and economic networks, alter bargaining power, and deter institutional accountability. It can also reduce equality among parties by giving some organizations resources unavailable to civilian competitors. Consequently, reform of the party system cannot be separated from security-sector reform. A genuinely institutionalized democratic party system presupposes that electoral and parliamentary institutions constitute the exclusive legitimate means through which parties compete for governmental authority. The use or threat of autonomous coercion fundamentally contradicts that principle.

The findings also qualify the common assumption that social rootedness is uniformly beneficial. In Iraq, strong communal rootedness can stabilize representation while weakening national integration. Kurdish parties, Shi'a Islamist organizations, and various Sunni political networks have each demonstrated forms of durable constituency linkage. Yet when those linkages remain segmented, parties may aggregate interests within communities without aggregating them across the state. The problem is not communal representation itself; suppressing communal identities would neither be democratic nor institutionally realistic. The challenge is to develop cross-cutting incentives so that parties gain electorally from addressing interests that extend beyond their traditional constituencies. Centripetal reforms seek precisely to encourage politicians to obtain support across identity boundaries, although comparative research shows that such arrangements also have limitations (4). For Iraq, the relevant principle is that inclusive representation should not make communal segmentation the permanent organizing logic of the state.

The periodization from 2003 to 2025 demonstrates that the party-state relationship has evolved rather than remaining static. The first period involved rapid pluralization and foundational institution-building under severe insecurity. The second saw the consolidation of party networks, *muhasasa*, and administrative penetration alongside the security crisis associated with the Islamic State. The third brought growing social contestation, protest,

electoral adjustment, and debate over the legitimacy of established parties. This historical progression indicates that institutional trajectories are reversible. Party systems can become more organizationally durable while losing societal legitimacy; state institutions can acquire formal structures while losing administrative autonomy; and reforms can modify electoral incentives without transforming political-economic networks.

From a methodological perspective, these findings demonstrate the value of within-case historical analysis. Case-study research is particularly useful when causal processes unfold through changing combinations of institutions and political strategies (15). Documentary analysis similarly allows legal rules, political developments, institutional reports, and scholarly interpretations to be examined together rather than treating any single indicator as sufficient (13). Because concepts such as institutionalization and state capacity are multidimensional, qualitative content analysis is useful for identifying mechanisms that aggregate indices may obscure (14). Triangulation across different types of evidence can further reduce dependence on the biases or limitations of individual sources (28). This is particularly necessary in Iraq, where informal negotiations, partisan networks, and relationships between political and coercive actors are not always visible through formal institutional records.

The theoretical contribution of the Iraqi case lies in distinguishing three forms of political development that are often conflated: pluralization, party institutionalization, and state institutionalization. Pluralization refers to the expansion of organizations and competitive participation. Party institutionalization concerns the durability, legitimacy, rootedness, and organizational autonomy of political parties and competition. State institutionalization concerns the autonomy, effectiveness, legality, and capacity of public authority. These processes may reinforce one another, but they do not necessarily do so. Iraq experienced rapid pluralization after 2003, partial and uneven party institutionalization, and weaker progress in several dimensions of state institutionalization. This divergence explains why the existence of repeated elections and enduring political parties has coexisted with persistent governance deficits.

The policy implication is therefore not that Iraq has too many parties in a purely numerical sense. Reducing the number of registered parties would not automatically improve state capacity. What matters is the incentive structure governing how parties organize and obtain political resources. Party financing should become more transparent; access to public employment and contracts should be insulated from partisan allocation; internal party governance should become more rule-bound; electoral arrangements should reward broader programmatic appeals; parliament should develop clearer government-opposition accountability; and the bureaucracy should be protected from factional capture. Rafiei Qahsareh and colleagues similarly identify structural weaknesses in the Iraqi party system that constrain democratic consolidation (3). The goal of reform should therefore be to transform the basis of party strength from control over fragments of the state to organizational legitimacy derived from citizens.

Ultimately, the Iraqi case does not demonstrate that political parties are obstacles to state-building. It demonstrates that the relationship depends on how parties become institutionalized. Where party organizations accept common rules, rely on programmatic constituencies, develop autonomous organizational structures, compete without coercion, and treat public institutions as collective rather than partisan assets, party institutionalization can strengthen political order. Where organizational survival depends on communal segmentation, patronage, institutional capture, and parallel coercive power, the same process can deepen state fragmentation. This conditional relationship offers a more precise explanation of Iraq's political trajectory than either an optimistic pluralist interpretation or a deterministic account based solely on sectarianism.

Conclusion

The development of Iraq's political system after 2003 created an unprecedented expansion of competitive political organization, but the resulting multiplication and consolidation of parties did not automatically translate into the institutional consolidation of the state. The experience examined in this article demonstrates that the central analytical issue is not the existence or numerical abundance of political parties but the form of their institutionalization and the institutional environment within which they compete. Iraq has established a constitutional framework, held repeated elections, maintained a multiparty parliamentary arena, integrated previously excluded political forces, and preserved formal mechanisms for negotiated political competition through severe periods of violence and instability. These achievements represent meaningful departures from the authoritarian political order that preceded 2003. Nevertheless, the same period has been characterized by persistent weaknesses in administrative autonomy, political accountability, public-service provision, corruption control, government formation, and unified control over coercive institutions. Understanding this apparent contradiction requires distinguishing democratic pluralization from substantive party institutionalization and distinguishing party institutionalization from state institutionalization.

The analysis shows that many Iraqi parties became durable organizations without developing all of the characteristics associated with an institutionalized democratic party system. Several parties established stable constituencies, leadership networks, electoral machinery, access to public office, and long-term political influence. Yet programmatic competition remained comparatively weak, organizational structures frequently remained concentrated around established leaders and networks, cross-communal political linkages remained limited, and substantial portions of political mobilization continued to depend on identity, patronage, and access to state resources. As a result, organizational durability could coexist with weak accountability. Parties became persistent actors in the political system, but their persistence did not necessarily indicate that voters possessed clear alternatives based on public policy or that electoral competition generated coherent governmental mandates. The distinction between organizational survival and substantive institutionalization is therefore essential for evaluating the Iraqi case.

The principal mechanism explaining this outcome has been the development of *muhāsasa* from a mechanism of political accommodation into a broader structure governing access to state institutions. In its initial logic, power-sharing responded to the profound problem of political inclusion after decades of authoritarianism, repression, conflict, and unequal access to state power. Ensuring that major social and political communities participated in the post-2003 system was important to the legitimacy and survival of the emerging order. The difficulty arose when inclusion increasingly became institutionalized through expectations that political blocs would receive identifiable shares of administrative and governmental authority. Ministries, senior appointments, public employment, contracts, and other institutional resources thereby became integrated into coalition bargaining and party competition. This altered the incentives facing political organizations. Instead of strengthening autonomous public institutions in order to compete over policy, parties could increase their organizational power by securing influence within the administrative structure itself.

The consequences for state-building have been cumulative. Partisan intervention in administrative appointments reduces professional autonomy and weakens incentives based on competence. Weak administrative performance increases citizens' dependence on political intermediaries. Dependence on political intermediaries strengthens

patronage networks. Stronger patronage networks increase the value of controlling ministries and other state institutions. This, in turn, encourages parties to preserve rather than dismantle the arrangements through which state resources sustain organizational power. A self-reinforcing cycle is therefore created in which weaknesses of the state become resources for political organizations, while the strategies through which political organizations reproduce themselves perpetuate those same weaknesses. State capture should consequently be understood not as an accidental deviation from an otherwise functioning system but as a possible structural outcome when party organization and public administration are insufficiently differentiated.

The parliamentary and electoral dimensions of this process reveal both the achievements and limitations of the post-2003 order. Elections have become normalized political events, and political competition is now routinely conducted through constitutional institutions to an extent that did not exist under the former authoritarian system. Political parties have provided mechanisms for representation and have repeatedly negotiated political compromises rather than relying exclusively on coercion. Yet elections have not always produced clear governmental responsibility. Lengthy negotiations over government formation, broad coalition arrangements, and the distribution of institutional positions have frequently weakened the connection between voter choice and executive accountability. When numerous political actors participate in the distribution of government while maintaining the ability to disclaim responsibility for overall state performance, citizens face difficulty identifying who should be rewarded or punished electorally. Procedural legitimacy therefore becomes disconnected from performance legitimacy.

The relationship between political parties and Iraq's ethnosectarian structure has been similarly ambivalent. Political parties have enabled communities with different historical experiences and political demands to obtain representation within common institutions. This has contributed to the survival of the constitutional order and reduced the possibility that national politics would again be monopolized by a single political organization. At the same time, the institutional reward attached to communal representation has encouraged political organizations to reproduce identities that strengthen their bargaining position. Social rootedness within particular communities has consequently not always translated into national political integration. A party can be strongly institutionalized among a specific constituency while contributing only weakly to the construction of cross-communal political competition. For state-building, the challenge is therefore not to eliminate communal representation but to prevent communal affiliation from becoming the permanent basis for allocating state authority.

The interaction between parties and armed actors constitutes an even more fundamental challenge because it affects the effective sovereignty of the state. The security crises Iraq experienced after 2003, especially the struggle against the Islamic State, created circumstances in which armed mobilization outside conventional state structures acquired both necessity and social legitimacy. Nevertheless, a sustainable state ultimately requires a clear hierarchy of coercive authority. Political organizations that participate in elections while maintaining direct or indirect relationships with armed formations create an asymmetry in political competition and complicate civilian accountability. Formal integration of armed groups into state structures is insufficient if command relationships, financing, political loyalties, and operational authority remain fragmented. The consolidation of the state therefore requires not only electoral and administrative reform but also the institutional separation of political competition from autonomous coercive capacity.

The Tishreen protest movement revealed the social limits of the prevailing party-state relationship. The protests demonstrated that significant segments of Iraqi society, particularly younger citizens, no longer regarded

established mechanisms of representation as sufficient expressions of political citizenship. The demand for accountable government, effective public institutions, national sovereignty, and an alternative to quota-based politics indicated a profound gap between the organizational durability of established parties and their representative legitimacy. This gap is analytically important because political institutionalization depends not only on elite agreements but also on continuing social acceptance. A party system can remain electorally operational while losing the confidence necessary for long-term political stability. The emergence of independent and protest-oriented candidates demonstrated the possibility of alternative forms of mobilization, but it also exposed the structural advantages enjoyed by organizations already embedded in administrative and financial networks.

The central answer to the research question is therefore that the relationship between party institutionalization and state-building in Iraq is conditional, nonlinear, and strongly mediated by the structure of political incentives. Party institutionalization contributes to state-building when political organizations aggregate broad social interests, compete through programs, accept common rules, recruit capable political elites, sustain meaningful accountability, and remain organizationally separate from public administration and autonomous coercive structures. It undermines state-building when parties become durable through control of state resources, communal segmentation, patronage distribution, or armed leverage. Iraq has experienced both dynamics, but during much of the period from 2003 to 2025 the second has significantly constrained the first. The weakness of state-building cannot therefore be attributed to pluralism itself. It results from the specific form of pluralism that developed within a quota-based, resource-dependent, and institutionally fragmented political environment.

The implications for reform follow directly from this diagnosis. The objective should not be to eliminate political parties, suppress pluralism, or replace electoral competition with technocratic administration. Political parties remain indispensable to any sustainable representative order. The required transformation concerns the basis on which parties acquire power and maintain organizational strength. Electoral rules should encourage candidates and parties to appeal beyond narrow identity constituencies and to develop recognizable policy programs. Party financing should be subject to transparent and enforceable rules so that organizations have fewer incentives to depend on informal extraction from public institutions. Internal party procedures should become more institutionalized so that leadership succession, candidate selection, and organizational decision-making do not remain excessively concentrated in personal networks. Parliament should develop clearer patterns of government and opposition so that responsibility for policy outcomes becomes visible to voters.

Administrative reform is equally essential. Recruitment and promotion within the civil service should be increasingly insulated from partisan bargaining, and senior appointments should be governed by transparent professional criteria wherever political discretion is not institutionally necessary. Public procurement and budgetary allocation should be subject to oversight mechanisms capable of operating independently of party networks. Strengthening bureaucratic autonomy does not mean separating administration completely from democratic political control. Rather, it means ensuring that elected governments determine policy while professional institutions implement that policy according to general rules. Without such differentiation, every electoral transition risks becoming a redistribution of administrative resources among political organizations rather than a change in public policy.

State-building also requires the consolidation of a unified and constitutionally accountable security structure. No democratic party system can become fully institutionalized while political competition occurs under unequal conditions of coercive capacity. Political organizations should compete through electoral, parliamentary, and civic

mechanisms rather than through armed leverage. The integration of security forces must therefore involve not only formal legal status but practical command accountability, financial transparency, and clear subordination to state authority. This process is politically difficult because armed organizations are embedded in histories of conflict, social constituencies, and security provision, but postponing the issue perpetuates a central weakness in state sovereignty.

The broader theoretical lesson extends beyond Iraq. Post-conflict democratization should not assume that introducing elections and legalizing political parties will automatically generate a mutually reinforcing process of party and state institutionalization. Where public institutions are weak, political organizations can consolidate themselves by appropriating the very institutions they are expected to strengthen. Conversely, attempts to build administrative capacity without representative political institutions risk reproducing authoritarian forms of state power. Sustainable state-building therefore requires a balance in which political parties become strong enough to organize democratic competition but not so embedded in public institutions that the distinction between party and state disappears.

Iraq's post-2003 trajectory should consequently be interpreted neither as a simple failure of democratization nor as evidence that political pluralism is incompatible with state-building in divided societies. It is better understood as an incomplete institutional transition in which the representative dimension of the political order developed more rapidly than the impersonal and autonomous dimensions of state authority. The long-term development of the Iraqi state depends on bringing these trajectories into alignment. Political parties must move from organizations that frequently compete for shares of the state toward organizations that compete over alternative ways of governing a common state. State institutions, in turn, must become sufficiently autonomous, effective, and legitimate that political organizations gain more from governing them successfully than from capturing them. The future of state-building in Iraq therefore depends not on choosing between strong parties and a strong state, but on constructing an institutional order in which stronger democratic parties and stronger public institutions become mutually reinforcing rather than mutually consuming.

Acknowledgments

We would like to express our appreciation and gratitude to all those who helped us carrying out this study.

Authors' Contributions

All authors equally contributed to this study.

Declaration of Interest

The authors of this article declared no conflict of interest.

Ethical Considerations

All ethical principles were adhered in conducting and writing this article.

Transparency of Data

In accordance with the principles of transparency and open research, we declare that all data and materials used in this study are available upon request.

Funding

This research was carried out independently with personal funding and without the financial support of any governmental or private institution or organization.

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