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BASRA GOVERNORATE A LOCALITY IN CRISIS

LOCAL GOVERNMENT CRISIS AND CONFLICT WITH THE FEDERAL GOVERNMENT

Omar al-Jaffal and Safaa Khalaf

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A fireman washes a statue in the centre of Basra after a week of violent protests.

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Basra Governorate: A Locality in Crisis

Local Government Crisis and Conflict with the Federal Government

Omar al-Jaffal and Safaa Khalaf

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Abstract

As successive local governments in Basra miserably failed at providing basic services to the population, such as electricity, water, access to schools and safe streets, people took to the street in anger. This research addresses the reasons behind the failure of Basra's local government in providing services to its citizens and analyses the impact of this failure on the growing distrust between the population and the authorities. The research examines the tense relationship between local and federal authorities in Baghdad and the disputes that are preventing the decentralisation system from being practically implemented. The research then focuses on the relationship between the various local authorities and the obstacles that hinder the delivery of services to citizens. The research also assesses the strained relationship between these local and federal authorities and the residents of Basra.

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This material has been funded by UK aid from the UK government; however, the views expressed do not necessarily reflect the UK government's official policies.



Support for this work also came from the Cross-Border Conflict Evidence, Policy and Trends (XCEPT) research programme.

Introduction

Located in the far south of Iraq, Basra Governorate is considered the hotspot of the protests that have pervaded different regions of Iraq every summer since 2010. The services crisis in the oil-rich province has long been a fundamental impetus for people to take to the streets in anger, as successive local governments in Basra miserably failed at providing basic services to the population, such as electricity, water, access to schools and safe streets. The system of local governance in Iraq was formed while the institutions of the Iraqi state were being built after 2003, through laws that define its relationship with the federal authority and within the provinces. However, as a result of political, legal, bureaucratic and administrative crises related to applying and understanding the role of local authorities, and due to rampant corruption, the system of local government, as it appears in the case of Basra, has become impotent and in many cases an impediment to the development of Iraqi cities and villages. In the face of this deterioration, protests recur with the approaching summer every year, in what has come to be known as the ‘season of protests’. These protests have been escalating since the summer of 2018 and protracted into 2019 and 2020, turning Basra into one of the hot spots of the protest, leading to dozens of injuries and deaths among protesters.

This Research

This research addresses the reasons behind the failure of Basra’s local government in providing services to its citizens and analyses the impact of this failure on the growing distrust between the population and the authorities. The research starts from the point of view of the political and social players in Basra by analysing their tense relationship with the federal authorities in Baghdad. It addresses the administrative, legal and bureaucratic disputes that are preventing the decentralisation system from being practically implemented. The research then focuses on the relationship between the various local authorities, from provinces and districts inside Basra, and the obstacles that hinder the delivery of services to citizens. The research finally assesses the strained relationship between these local and federal authorities and the people of Basra.

The importance of this research lies, first, in it being one of the few studies looking at the issue of local government in Iraq, in both its theoretical and practical aspects, as most post-2003 research focus on central state building. Discussing representation at a local level is essential in order to understand the recurrence of protests and to place them within the political landscape of post-Saddam Iraq.

This research is also distinct in its methodology. It relied on important local sources to understand the relationship between the population and local authorities, as well as the latter’s relationship with the federal authority. For months, we monitored the local press’s coverage of daily news in Basra Governorate. We also conducted interviews and administered a survey with residents and officials from various regions throughout the governorate. The timing of the research was crucial, as it accompanied the protests that

were met with unprecedented violence in Basra in 2018 and then in 2019. These local sources gave depth to the report as they reflect the social, political and economic characteristics of Basra as Iraq's only access point to the Persian Gulf.

Overview

Today, the residents of Basra make up about 8 percent of Iraq's population.¹ The vast majority are Shi'a Muslims while the number of Sunni Muslims has decreased.² The Christian and Sabeen populations have also significantly declined since the US invasion of Iraq in 2003, and the outbreak of violence by armed groups. The coastal city, located 550 km from the capital Baghdad, helps secure 80% of the country's oil budgets.³ Despite its small population and its large volume of oil exports, the citizens of the wealthy province do not benefit from services in line with the value of its exploited resources.⁴

Basra suffers from local mismanagement, as well as weak political representation at the decision-making level. It has little influence within the federal government, as it is only represented by 25 out of 329 deputies in Parliament. Since 2005, local representation has been organised according to a hierarchical structure under the Governorate Council. A legislative and regulatory council are directly elected, while an executive authority represented by the governor and his two deputies, are elected by the Governorate Council.⁵ Members of district and subdistrict councils, also directly elected by residents, then choose their respective heads.

Arguably, Basra has faced major neglect in the reconstruction and development campaigns since the early 1970s,⁶ and its infrastructure has not undergone much modernisation since 1989. Even then, it was a limited cosmetic 'restoration' attempt confined to neighborhoods and towns for political marketing purposes following the destruction of Basra

¹ Iraqi National Statistics Center – Ministry of Planning, '2018 Iraq Demographic Indicators Report', Baghdad, September 2018. Note that Iraq has not conducted a population census since 1997, which makes all statistics on its population an estimate.

² United Nations – Iraq: 'The UN envoy warns against increased targeting of Sunni minorities in Basra Governorate', 20 August 2014 (accessed 7 February 2020).

³ Ali Taher Al-Hammoud, 'Beyond Basra's Events: The problems and possible solutions', *Friedrich Ebert Foundation - Amman Office*, February 2019, p. 7. Available at <http://library.fes.de/pdf-files/bueros/amman/15210.pdf>.

⁴ According to the Iraqi National Statistics Center affiliated to the Ministry of Planning, 'Iraq Demographic Indicators Report for the year 2018', the population of Basra is 2,908,491.

⁵ Report of the International Mission for Iraqi Elections to the House of Representatives 2005; See also: Michael Knights and Ed Williams, 'The Calm before the Storm: The British Experience in Southern Iraq', *The Washington Institute for Near East Policy, Policy Focus* 66, February 2007, p. 23.

⁶ The financial allocations for Basra in the five-year plans that were put in place in 1970–1995 reveal that neglect. A look at the percentages for Basra allocations from the state's general budget, shows the following: The 1970–75 plan: 15 percent; the 1976–80 plan: 21.2 %, the highest percentage received by Basra in the 1981–85 plan: 10.1%, the 1986–90 plan: 17.3%, and finally in the 1991–95 plan, it reached 13.2%. Kifaya Abdullah Al-Ali, 'Construction Industries in Basra: Reality and Prospects', unpublished PhD thesis, *College of Education, University of Basra*, 2005, p. 67.

during the Iran–Iraq War. For the most part, government plans have remained mere official statements about the expansion, demographic pressure, environmental change and transformations of the city’s functional structure, but without implementation on the ground.

After the US invasion of Iraq in 2003, Basra’s development plans remained confined to the political security framework. The needs of the population and the necessity to develop the city were pushed to the bottom of the list of priorities. In late 2006, the British army launched a two-way service and security operation called ‘Sinbad’⁷ to rebuild and rehabilitate the infrastructure facilities. This operation, however, was limited and mainly aimed at containing the rebellion of militia forces in Basra. In the end, the efforts were unsuccessful, because the project funds went to local companies that were only fronts for these militia forces,⁸ while funds intended for reconstruction were wasted without implementing any of these projects.

The Basra crisis only worsened as it witnessed no stimulus of the economy nor a decrease in poverty⁹ or unemployment¹⁰ rates. In addition, the city experienced a deterioration in the environmental services¹¹ and health situations. It also suffered from a lack of urban planning to accommodate the increasing population pressure,¹² and contended with a spread of diseases including cancer, and an increase in suicide¹³ and drug abuse.¹⁴ As for security, Basra still suffers from a continuous expansion of tribal authority, with tribes involved in armed conflicts,¹⁵ and from the proliferation of weapons outside the control of the official state apparatus. The pressures and challenges endured by Basra, past and present, have long pushed residents of the governorate in their various classes to the ranks

⁷ ‘Operation Sinbad to Restore Security and Reconstruction to Basra’, *Al-Sharq al-Awsat*, 28 September 2006. Available at <https://archive.aawsat.com/details.asp?issueno=9896&article=384881#.YHmM2alKj9G> (accessed 10 April 2020).

⁸ ‘Operation Sinbad: Mission failure casts doubt on entire British presence in Iraq’, *Independent*, 8 October 2006. Available at <https://www.independent.co.uk/news/world/middle-east/operation-sinbad-mission-failure-casts-doubt-on-entire-british-presence-in-iraq-419173.html> (accessed 15 March 2020).

⁹ ‘Iraq National Development Plan 2018–22’, Ministry of Planning, June 2018, p. 131.

¹⁰ ‘Soaring unemployment fuels protests in southern Iraq’, *The Associated Press*, 26 July 2018. Available at <https://apnews.com/c335ab38b6924cb8b71bf9579ff8380c> (accessed 15 March 2020).

¹¹ Shukri Al-Hassan, *Environmental Pollution in Basra, Southern Iraq* (Noor Publishing House: Jordan, 2017).

¹² Hilal Joudeh and Tawfiq Abdullah Hajjul Seminar, ‘The Spatial Development in Basra Governorate’, *drawn from a Master Thesis* (Spatial Development Trends in Iraq with Special Reference to Basra Governorate for the period 1977–2012).

¹³ ‘132 suicides in Iraq in three months’, *Al-Jazeera*, 24 April 2019. Available at <https://www.aljazeera.net/news/humanrights/2019/4/24/بغداد-كربلاء-انتحار-حالات-العراق> (accessed 21 May 2020).

¹⁴ ‘The Comprehensive Annual Report on the Situation of Human Rights in Iraq 2018’, *High Commissioner for Human Rights* (Baghdad 2019), pp. 92, 231. Available at <https://www.al-monitor.com/pulse/originals/2016/10/basra-iraq-drug-smuggling-iran.html>. See also: ‘Police overwhelmed as drugs from Iran flood Basra’, *Al-Monitor*, 18 October 2016 (accessed 15 March 2020); ‘Crystal meth epidemic forces Basra’s police to pick battles with smugglers’, *Guardian*, 16 Aug 2016. Available at <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2016/aug/16/no-one-smuggles-oil-any-more-basra-police-battle-crystal-meth-epidemic> (accessed 15 March 2020).

¹⁵ Muhammad Atwan, Tribal Conflicts and their Impact on the Civil Peace in Basra, *Hawkamah Center for Public Policy*, April 2016. Available at <https://www.iqgepp.org/wp-content/uploads/2016/04/محمد-عنوان.pdf>.

of the opposition; they feel that their natural resources are being depleted without receiving development in return. There is also a growing feeling that they are being neglected and their future prospects are non-existent, as the survey results show.

Local Governance and Federal Government

Local Governance between the Law and its Implementation

While the system that was built for Basra on the ruins of the Ba'ath state did not allow it to achieve its hopes of converting to a state or a region, it did establish the basis for decentralised governance designed to grant powers to the governorates to manage their local affairs. However, this system continues to face a large number of legal, political and bureaucratic obstacles in the implementation of decentralisation. Looking at the current situation in Basra, it is clearly the most prominent manifestations of the failure to implement decentralised administration in Iraq post-2003.¹⁶

Basra was actually the first attempt at local governance in Iraq post-2003, where the British tried to connect with civil society and to provide citizens with the opportunity to democratically participate and share responsibility. Later, the British army dissolved the Local Governance Council, and formed what they called the Basra Interim Governorate Council, a committee of local technocrats with limited powers related to services only. It was chaired at the time by the commander of the British forces in Basra, Brigadier Adrian Bradshaw,¹⁷ a foreign governor of Danish origin was later appointed for several months.¹⁸ In the early summer of 2004, local representative councils were formed in all governorates, following the establishment of the Transitional National Assembly and the formation of the first government emanating from the Iraqi Parliament. As of 2005, the Iraqi constitution approved a decentralised federal system that grants broad powers to the governorates, and Basra has since had a Governorate Council directly elected by its residents.

Administratively, the relationship between local and federal governments was regulated by the Law of Governorates not Incorporated into a Region, which was approved by the Federal Council of Representatives in March 2008 to strengthen administrative decentralisation in Iraq and allow governorates to carry out service and legislative tasks. Furthermore, the Iraqi constitution and the Law of Governorates not Incorporated Into a Region stressed the implementation of the decentralised system in Iraq in order to devolve powers away from the federal government, to avoid the return of dictatorship to Iraq. As a result, both the constitution and the Law granted wide powers to local governments to manage their own affairs.

¹⁶ 'The Transitional Council in Basra may spread to the rest of the Iraqi cities', *Al-Quds Al-Arabi* 4340, 5 May 2003, p. 4. Available at <https://pdf.alquds.co.uk/wp-content/uploads/2017/04/Alquds-2003-05-05.pdf> (accessed 20 April 2020).

¹⁷ 'The Basra Council: The British replace it with a committee of technocrats', *Elaph website*, 1 April 2003. Available at <https://elaph.com/Web/Archive/1053807881360723900.html> (accessed 20 April 2020).

¹⁸ 'Basra demonstrates against the appointment of a foreign ruler', *Al-Sharq al-Awsat* 8952, 2 June 2003.

However, the disputes between the federal and local governments over the provisions of the Law and their application, led to four amendments between 2010 and 2018.¹⁹ The federal government in Baghdad, headed by then-Prime Minister Nuri al-Maliki, hinted that strengthening the regions and governorates would break Iraq into pieces, stressing the need for a centralised power.²⁰ The dispute over the laws and their application extends to the relationship of the two legislative powers in Baghdad and Basra. This dispute transforms the relationship between the Iraqi Parliament and the provincial council into a 'hostile relationship', as described by Head of the Basra Council, Sabah al-Bazouni.²¹ The amendments to the law governing federal and local authorities have been followed by widespread debate about whether these had violated the constitution by amending the 'Law of Governorates not Incorporated in a Region' and further consolidated the power of the federal government.²² However, the amendment that took place in 2013 was appreciated by the local authorities, as it strengthened their financial situation by granting them the powers to collect revenues from eight sources within the governorate's borders, including a fixed percentage of the oil production, local taxes and funds generated from the sale and rental of real estate belonging to local governments.²³ However, despite these amendments, some voices in Basra maintain that the federal government does not abide by the Law when it does not rule in its favour.²⁴

Financial Conflict

Local governments depend on the federal government in Baghdad to provide them with budget funds. These funds are divided into two shares: the first is an operational budget for the federal ministries' institutions and government departments and the implementation of their projects; the second is an investment budget, or what is known as the 'regional development budget,' which is allocated to implement local projects approved by the Governorate Council or the governor's office. Local and central governments share monies collected from border crossings and taxes within the governorate. Basra being an

¹⁹ 'The Iraqi legislation rule: The Law of Governorates not Incorporated in a Region', *The Supreme Judicial Council*. Available at <http://iraql.d.hjc.iq:8080/LoadArticle.aspx?SC=020520183940848> (accessed 26 March 2020).

²⁰ 'Al-Maliki warns against dividing Iraq and turning it into pieces,' *Alsumaria news*, 12 January 2009. Available at <https://www.alsumaria.tv/news/4951/اشلا-متناث-الى-العراق-وتحواله-من-تقسيم-العراق> (accessed 13 April 2020).

²¹ An interview with Al-Bazouni, 5 September 2019.

²² Yahya Al-Kubaisi, 'On Decentralization in Its Political Context,' *Al-Quds al-Arabi*, 31 January 2018, Available at <https://www.alquds.co.uk/عن-اللامركزية-في-سياقها-السياسي> (accessed 12 April 2020).

²³ 'Decentralization in Iraq: Another View, The Economic and Social Commission for Western Asia', *ESCWA*, 2017. Document symbol: E/ESCWA/ECRI/2017/BACKGROUND PAPER.1

²⁴ A telephone interview with Muhammad Kamel Abu Al-Hail, a member of the Federal Parliament and one of the well-known tribal figures in Basra, 29 April 2019. Abu Al-Hail said, 'The federal government violates all laws and leaves Basra to an unknown fate. The federal government is only considering obtaining Basra's oil money.'

oil-producing city with Iraq's only gateway to the sea, its residents believe (as the survey results showed) that it does not get its fair share of the wealth, which has always made its relationship with the federal government tense.²⁵

Furthermore, correspondence with the federal government in Baghdad reveals tension and dissatisfaction on the side of the local government in Basra. This is mainly due to what the local government considers an injustice to its right to financial allocations within the federal or investment budgets,²⁶ as well as the loss incurred following the termination of the fixed percentage of oil revenues share – or petro-dollar – worth 5% of the value of the actual production and oil exports extracted from its fields.²⁷

As a result of the accumulation of the financial allocations crisis between Basra and Baghdad, 2018 witnessed a legal escalation, with lawsuits filed in the constitutional courts to challenge the federal budget law. The main problem lies in the federal government's lack of recognition of Basra's role as the main source of the country's oil. The governor of Basra, Asaad Al-Aidani, thought that the 2018 budget's calculation of Basra's share of oil production at 54% is 'wrong'. Yet, he also noted that the ratio was adjusted in the draft budget of 2019, when it was increased to 69%, bringing with it an increase in the governorate's budget. Al-Aidani also mentioned that the general budget for 2019 did not include Basra's allocated 50% share of the revenues from its border entry points, determined by the Law of the Governorates not Incorporated Into a Region, putting the governorate at risk of 'losing tens of billions'.²⁸

Officials in Basra believe that the position of party leaders and officials in the federal administration is what exacerbates the governorates' crises. Their observation is that the successive federal governments do not even believe in decentralisation, and do not share visions concerning preparing financial budgets and implementing projects with local governments in the governorates. However, other obstacles stand in the way of implementing decentralisation, such as obtaining funds to implement projects, disposing freely of these funds, and spending them according to the urgent needs of the governorate.²⁹

²⁵ 'Conflict between Baghdad and Basra over financial allocations,' *Al-Araby al-Jadeed*, 6 August 2018. Available at <https://www.alaraby.co.uk/الصراع-بين-بغداد-والبصرة-على-المخصصات-المالية>; 'The streets of the richest governorate in Iraq are flooded with' garbage 'because of debts!', *Erem News*, 8 February 2020. Available at <https://www.eremnews.com/economy/1693601> (accessed 10 January 2021).

²⁶ 'Basra challenges the budget law and threatens to initiate procedures for forming the region,' *Al-Mada newspaper*, 26 February 2019. Available at <https://almadapaper.net/view.php?cat=216915> (accessed 18 April 2020).

²⁷ During the emergency public session held by the parliament on 8 September 2018 to discuss the violent protests and the crisis of the local government, Basra Governor Asaad Al-Aidani revealed that Basra had not received any revenues from the Petro-dollar programme since 2007, and that public debt on the province amounted to 160 billion Iraqi Dinars. See: YouTube video, *Iraqi Parliament Channel*, 9 September 2018. Available at <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=-DfsKHb4OWc> (accessed 13 February 2020).

²⁸ 'Al-Aidani: The draft budget does not include allocating 50% to Basra from the revenues of its border entry points', *Alsumaria news agency*, 21 October 2019. Available at <https://www.alsumaria.tv/news/250518/من-البصرة-من-تخلو-من-تخصيص-50-من-الموازنة-مسودة-الموازنة-تخلو-من-تخصيص-50-من-البصرة-من> (accessed 21 April 2020).

²⁹ Interview with the head of the Finance Committee in Basra Governorate Council, Ahmed al-Sulaiti, 13 April 2020.

As in all functions of the Iraqi state, bureaucracy poses one of the greatest challenges to managing institutional affairs, and Basra is one of the governorates overstrained by bureaucracy. Preparing the country's financial budgets, approving them and sharing them with local governorates is a bumpy and complicated path. The ministries of finance and planning outline the country's budget then send it to the federal government and Parliament. Tensions usually dominate the relationship between the legislative and executive institutions until the budget is passed. The budgets are then sent back to the Ministry of Finance and the President of the Republic for approval, before being published in the Official Gazette. This complicated bureaucratic process causes months of delays for provinces trying to lay down their service plans. Even when a budget is finally approved, local governments are usually forced to work under pressure and quickly implement projects. Otherwise, by the end of the year, unspent funds would have to be returned to the Ministry of Finance in Baghdad.³⁰ Federal prime ministers have long boasted about the financial 'surplus' that the governorates return to the federal governments,³¹ but this 'surplus' is only due to a mismanagement of time and money.

Therefore, the most prominent impediment to the local government in Basra is the self-management of funds, given that the federal government reserves these financial powers³² to itself. Furthermore, the Law of Governorates not Incorporated into a Region does not clearly specify the financial powers of the executive institutions, nor the right to spend.³³ However, it is worth noting that this conflict³⁴ also involves attempts by Basra's local government to export its crisis to Baghdad rather than hold itself accountable and improve its performance. For example, in 2018, Basra received around 501 billion Iraqi Dinars, but complained about the difficulty it faced to hire 'serious companies' or experienced and efficient companies to execute projects, compelling it to cooperate with local companies, many of which did not execute their projects or delivered to lower standards.³⁵

In fact, inefficient local companies are often known to local authorities. Therefore, these contracts can only be interpreted as corruption and nepotism that the local government tries to cover through its struggle with the federal government. These 'failed' contracts are widespread in Basra, as the Integrity Commission enumerated in 2018 about 233 projects still incomplete in Basra, including 43 that resulted in criminal suits.³⁶

³⁰ Ibid.

³¹ 'The Infrastructure Law is stalled, and Al-Maliki objects,' *Niqash*, 27 September 2012. Available at <https://www.niqash.org/ar/articles/politics/3131/> (accessed 21 May 2020).

³² 'Basra complains about the stumbling of the transfer of powers from the ministries to the governorate,' *Alsumaria news*, 21 April 2017. Available at [https://www.alsumaria.tv/news/201634/Ø\\$Ù](https://www.alsumaria.tv/news/201634/Ø$Ù) (accessed 26 March 2020).

³³ Zainab Abdul-Kazim Hussein, 'Mechanism for Implementing the budget of the Governorates not Incorporated in a Region, Comparative Study', *Journal of Basra Studies* 28, 2018.

³⁴ 'The Finance ministry reveals the sums allocated for Basra Governorate for the year 2018', *Al-Ghadeer satellite channel*, 23 September 2018.

³⁵ 'The Deputy Governor of Basra, Dergham Al-Ajwadi: Basra's 2019 budget is good, but the projects go to local or imaginary companies,' *Al-Mirbad Radio*, 15 March 2020. Available at <https://www.almirbad.com/detail/45866> (accessed 18 March 2020).

³⁶ 'Al-nazaha discloses the number of lagging Projects in Basra Governorate,' *Federal Integrity Commission*, 13 December 2018. Available at http://www.nazaha.iq/body.asp?field=news_arabic&id=4863 (accessed 26 February 2020).

Administrative Disintegration

Efforts by officials in Basra to evade their failure to provide services to the residents are largely due to their inability to hold direct accountability for some projects implemented in the areas of influence of their local government.³⁷ The government reforms package launched by former Prime Minister Haider al-Abadi in 2015 failed to change the reality of the limited powers of local authorities. That was due to the demonstrations that spread across the country,³⁸ as well as to pressure from local governments. In 2015, the High Authority for Coordination between Governorates was activated, which is a body that was previously approved by the Provincial Councils Law to coordinate between local administrations and the government. The federal government then decided to start transferring the complicated powers related to the management of governorates to local authorities,³⁹ but this decision brought the governorates and the federal government into a more complex conflict around the mechanism and timeline for transferring these powers.⁴⁰ The decision impeded the possibility of continuing to transfer the powers less than a year after it was issued. The experiment also failed as a result of the inability of the governorates to take responsibility for the services entrusted to the departments affiliated to the federal ministries, especially the ministries of health and education.⁴¹ In reality, all the federal government did was transfer employees from the authority of ministries to that of local governments. The latter were overwhelmed with employees over whom they had no actual authority and had no financial capacity to improve the functioning of their institutions.⁴² Eventually, attempts to revert powers from the local government in Basra back to the federal ministries faced even greater legal obstacles,⁴³ which shows that there is no foundation nor legal and material infrastructure for local authorities in Iraq to work.

When Mustafa Al-Kadhimi became Prime Minister in May 2020, he seemed to be working towards consolidating power in the hands of the federal government in Baghdad, as he took a decision that prevented any change in the positions of the Deputy Governor, the Dis-

³⁷ 'A representative for Basra: A contractor close to Nouri Al-Maliki monopolized Basra projects and its council is complicit in a suspicious relationship,' *Baratha News Agency*, 19 August 2012. Available at <http://ftp.burathanews.com/arabic/news/166982> (accessed 21 May 2020).

³⁸ Omar al-Jaffal, 'Iraq shakes off despair: A Long Story', *Assafir alArabi*, 20 August 2015. Available at <https://assafirarabi.com/ar/2300/2015/08/20/العراق-ينفض-اليأس-قصة-طويلة> (accessed 21 May 2020).

³⁹ 'The Iraqi government begins to transfer the powers of 8 ministries to the governorates,' *Al-Sharq al-Awsat*, 14 April 2015. Available at <https://aawsat.com/home/article/336261/المحافظات-إلى-وزارات-8-صلاحيات-بنقل-تشريع-العراقية-الحكومة> (accessed 26 March 2020).

⁴⁰ 'Eight governorates threaten to sue the ministries reluctant to transfer powers,' *Al-Mada newspaper*, 26 June 2016. Available at <https://almadapaper.net/view.php?cat=130846> (accessed 26 March 2020). See also: 'Will the governorates succeed to extract their authority from Baghdad?', *Niqash*, 26 March 2020. Available at <https://www.niqash.org/ar/articles/politics/5528/> (accessed 26 January 2017).

⁴¹ 'A deputy: Transfer of powers from ministries to governorates proves their failure,' *Al-Masalla News*, 18 July 2019. Available at <https://almasalah.com/Ar/news/175055/-المحافظات-الى-الوزارات-من-الصلاحيات-من-نقل-الصلاحيات-من-الوزارات-الى-المحافظات> (accessed 26 March 2020).

⁴² Ali Al-Mawlawi, 'Exploring the Rationale for Decentralization in Iraq and its Constraints', *Arab Reform Initiative*, 31 July 2019. Available at <https://www.arab-reform.net/publication/exploring-the-rationale-for-decentralization-in-iraq-and-its-constraints/>.

⁴³ Document issued by the Higher Commission for Coordination between the Governorates, Prime Minister Office 4/275, 18 February 2019. Available at <http://burathanews.com/arabic/documents/345757>.

trict Commissioner, the Assistant Governor and the Director Generals (Director General of Health, Director General of Education, Director General of the Investment Authority), without first obtaining the Prime Minister's approval.⁴⁴ Accordingly, the meetings of the High Authority for Coordination between the Governorates, which were infrequently held, and the transfer of federal powers to the governorates, appeared to be nothing but formalities.

The Problems of Local Administration in Basra

The Basra crisis manifests itself not only in the relations between its local governments and the federal government, but also within its internal structure and the strained relations between the pillars of its local government. Basra's local governance consists of two powers: the first, a legislative and regulatory authority represented by the Governorate Council, which is directly elected by residents; the second, an executive authority represented by the governor and his two deputies, who are elected by the Governorate Council.⁴⁵ In addition, there are legislative, supervisory and executive sub-authorities represented in the district and subdistrict councils that are directly elected by residents, who in turn select their heads.

Basra is divided administratively into 7 districts, each having a Judicial Council as a legislative authority and a Head of District (*qa'em maqam*) who plays an administrative and oversight role. A number of administrative units (subdistricts) stem from each district. There are 16 subdistricts in Basra which, until 2018, had a legislative and regulatory municipal council.⁴⁶ These authorities and their branches are governed by a hierarchical relationship, which in turn is governed by another pyramidal relationship between them and the federal government, as mentioned above. Our interviews with officials from different parts of the local authority showed that there is deep distrust amongst them and a lack of faith in the efficacy of the structure of local governance. Public and local policies play a key role in the fragmentation of local governance officials who use these policies to serve their own benefit.

⁴⁴ 'Al-Kadhimi subject the change of local officials to his authority and instructs the provision of electricity,' *Shafaq News*, 28 June 2020. Available at <https://shafaq.com/ar/سياسة/الكاظمي-يحصّر-تغيير-المسؤولين-المحليين-به-شخصيا-ويوجه-بتوفير-الكهرباء> (accessed 30 January 2021).

⁴⁵ Michael Knights and Ed Williams, 'The Calm before the Storm: The British Experience in Southern Iraq', *The Washington Institute for Near East Policy*, *Policy Focus* 66, February 2007, p. 23.

⁴⁶ 'Basra Statistical Summary 2018', *Central Statistical Organization*. Available at <http://cosit.gov.iq/ar/1206-2018-8> (accessed 11 May 2020).

Conflicts of the Political Powers

Like the Iraqi political system in general, local alliances and political disputes in Basra play a central role in poor governance and lack of trust among various authorities and between these authorities and the population. Conflict between these local authorities reflects the political divisions in Baghdad, as the majority of the forces in the city are branches of the main powers in government. Moreover, additional local alliances impose themselves according to wealth management, electoral representation, power and influence. These alliances are often reflected in the process of forming local administration in Basra. Sometimes, local alliances outweigh central alignments, other times they fail. For example, the Islamic Virtue Party (Hizb al-Fadhila al-Islami) was able to unilaterally form the local government by holding a majority of seats in the Governorate Council, and control the position of the governor in the first local elections of 2005.⁴⁷ But the party failed to reach an agreement regarding its shares in the federal government, and therefore was compelled to leave the Shi'a alliance in anger, and opted to control Basra unilaterally. During that same period, demands to convert the governorate into a region were raised.

Following this experience, the main forces in Baghdad understood the dangers of a single faction unilaterally ruling Basra. In order to avoid this repeating itself at the 2009 elections, they formed a local alliance that secured the rise of the Da'wa Party to take over the city government. Since then, the movement of seats within the Governorate Council appears to be unbalanced in a manner that does not give the majority to one faction. However, the division of seats among several powers with sharp political disagreements in Baghdad triggered the crisis in Basra. Furthermore, the failure to provide services usually changes the map of local alliances to avoid losing the votes of the population in elections, as the ruling forces in the city often favour their party interests when development or service projects are proposed, by trying to use these projects to win the public's votes. But these same forces collide with each other, which hinders any development or service projects that might be counted in favour of a party. Often, the Governorate Council impedes the implementation of projects on legal or administrative grounds to block the way for governors to exploit the implementation of these projects in the interest of their political parties, or the opposite may happen by the governors regarding the implementation of projects approved by members of the Governorate Council.⁴⁸

⁴⁷ Knights and Williams, 'The Calm before the Storm', p. 22.

⁴⁸ For example, skirmishes between the government and the governor over resolving the electricity and housing crises, see: 'Basra Governor accuses the provincial council of obstructing a project to improve electricity', *Almasalah*, 19 April 2017; See also: 'Basra Council accuses the governor of obstructing the land distribution to the poor: poor planning and performance', *Almasalah*, 4 September 2019. Available at <https://almasalah.com/ar/news/177798/العمل-والخطيطة-والعمل-سوء-التخطيط-والعمل> (accessed 10 May 2020).

Since 2009, four people have held the position of governor, which is the first executive position in Basra,⁴⁹ and have tipped the balance between central alliances and local powers. This has affected the Basra administration and caused a significant setback in services. It was evident with the last governor, Asaad Al-Aidani, who played several roles and moved from one political camp to another as a result of the fluctuating alliances in Basra and Baghdad, which caused a crisis with former Prime Minister al-Abadi. This affected the release of financial allocations to Basra and strained the relationship between the local and federal governments in the midst of the explosive street protests of 2018. A crisis between the political powers before al-Aidani's inauguration led to the collapse of the local government. The political conflict opened the corruption files of the former Basra governor, Majed Al-Nasrawi, who escaped to Iran,⁵⁰ while the president of the Governorate Council, Sabah Al-Bazouni, was sentenced to a three-year strict imprisonment. Yet, he was released 6 months later and returned to his position.⁵¹

The Uneasy Relations between Local Authorities and their Subdivisions

Tensions between local authorities in Basra extend to the district and subdistrict councils, their administrators, and their *qa'em maqams* subdistrict administrators.⁵² The districts and subdistricts administrations were exposed, through amendments made to the Law of Governorates not Incorporated into a Region, to successive injustice and their roles were undermined. The amendment of the Law passed by Parliament in 2018, abolished the subdistrict councils. The councils appealed to the Federal Court, but their appeal was rejected, and the amendment was deemed legal. The amendment even opened the door to abolish the district councils by declaring that 'the only prerequisite stipulated by the constitution is the prerequisite presence of the (Governorate Council) as per the Article

⁴⁹ Shaltagh Aboud Al-Mayahi (Al-Da'wa Party, 2009–10), Khalaf Abdul Samad Khalaf (Al-Da'wa Party, 2010–13), Majed Al-Nasrawi (The Supreme Council headed by Ammar Al-Hakim, 2013–17), Asaad Abdul-Amir Al-Aidani (2017–present). In the beginning Al-Aidani, was a member of the National Congress Party led by the late Ahmed El-Jalabi, he then ran for parliamentary elections of 2018 as a member of the National Congress with the electoral list of the Al-Hikma movement of Ammar al-Hakim. When he was selected governor of Basra, it was based on an agreement between the Congress and Al-Hikma movement, but after the parliamentary elections and Al-Aidani's victory, he left Al-Hikma movement and aligned himself with Al-Fateh's coalition led by Hadi Al-Amiri.

⁵⁰ 'Basra governor escapes to Iran after accusations of corruption that embarrassed the Iraqi authorities,' *Al-Arabi al-Jadeed*, 12 August 2017. Available at <https://www.alaraby.co.uk/العراقية-السلطات-يخرج-إيران-إلى-بصرة-محافظة-هروب> (accessed 15 March 2020).

⁵¹ 'The President of Basra Council was sentenced to three years severe imprisonment,' *Al-Sumaria News*, 6 June 2018. Available at https://www.alsumaria.tv/news/238623/alsumaria-news/ar?fb_comment_id=1703642109718596_1704159639666843 (accessed 15 March 2020); 'The President of Basra Governorate Council Sabah Al-Bazouni was released,' *Al-Sumaria News*, 27 December 2018. Available at <https://www.alsumaria.tv/news/256352/البزوني-صباح-بصرة-محافظة-مجلس-رئيس-سراح-اطلاق-ar> (accessed 15 March 2020).

⁵² 'Cleanliness raises a fight in Basra Governorate Council: a local official was beaten,' *Al-Akhbaar*, 7 December 2009. Available at <https://akhbaar.org/home/2009/12/81281.html> (accessed 23 April 2020).

(122 / IV).⁵³ The successive amendments to the Law reduced the number of representative seats for the districts from ten to seven,⁵⁴ with the possibility of adding an extra seat for every 100,000 people if the population exceeds 500,000. In comparison with the provisions that elaborate the powers of the Governorate Council and the Governor, the law lacks extensive clarifications concerning the role of the districts and subdistricts councils. However, the Law of Governorates not Incorporated into a Region grants powers to the district councils to plan their own affairs.

The law defines the following main tasks for the districts: prepare the judiciary draft budget; approve budget plans for judiciary departments and refer them to the governor; approve naming streets and planning roads; approve the basic designs of the districts and submit recommendations to the *qa'em maqam* and the governor to refer them to the Governorate Council. In addition, districts were tasked with monitoring education, health, agricultural and social activities, and working to develop them in coordination with the appropriate authorities; monitoring the regulation concerning the exploitation of public land within the geographical area of the judiciary; and developing agriculture and irrigation. The law allows the district councils to approve the security plan submitted by the heads of local security services through the *qa'em maqam*; to establish an internal system for the Judicial Council; and finally, to add any other powers authorised by the Governorate Council to the Judicial Council in compatibility with the applicable laws.⁵⁵

Indeed, just as the federal government in Baghdad imposes its conditions on the local government in Basra, the latter also imposes its conditions on local administrations. Some members of the district, subdistrict, *qa'em maqamiya* and subdistrict heads of councils feel constrained with no powers to develop their areas. Although the law gives them the authority to allow accountability, they believe that their role is limited to following-up, supervising and reporting back to the governor about the conditions of their areas.⁵⁶ 'These reports, for the most part, fall upon deaf ears', added the head of the Zubair Subdistrict Council, Walid al-Mansoori. Just as the federal government in Baghdad does not involve the local government in Basra in planning the financial budget, the Basra government and its Governorate Council follow the same path with the district, subdistrict, *qa'em maqamiya*, councils and the subdistricts directors, as these districts also complain of a lack of equity in the distribution of wealth. For example, al-Mansouri recounts that the district which council he heads produces the largest percentage of oil in Basra, yet it receives only a small share of Basra's allocated budget in return.⁵⁷ Given that the districts, subdistricts, *qa'em maqamiya* and district directors are the bottom link of the chain in the Iraqi state administration – and its weakest – higher authorities offer them as scapegoats when the demonstrations demanding services intensify. Basra's Governorate Council voted to

⁵³ 'The Federal government rejects three lawsuits challenging the cancellation of the subdistrict councils', *Azzaman*, 28 May 2018. Available at <https://www.azzaman.com/م-بإلغاء-تطعن-دعوى-تلاش-دعوى-تطعن-بإلغاء-م/> (accessed 7 May 2020).

⁵⁴ Law of Governorates not Incorporated in a Region No. 21 – 2008.

⁵⁵ *Ibid.*

⁵⁶ Interview with the Adeir District *qa'em maqam*, Adnan Hussein, 17 April 2020.

⁵⁷ Interview with Walid Al-Mansouri, head of the Zubair district Council, 30 April 2020.

dissolve these councils during the 2015 and 2018 demonstrations,⁵⁸ although there is no clear law that gives the Governorate Council the authority to do so.

Iraqi officials, including Basrawi ones, may believe that concentrating the power in one institution leads to unified decision-making and faster services provision, but the implementation on the ground shows otherwise. Basra experiences a significant increase in its population, especially with the migration from other governorates due to the presence of oil companies. Mounadel al-Jourani, the head of the Safwan subdistrict council, recounts how the increase in the number of residents of the subdistrict from about 10,000 in 2004 to over 100,000 in 2019, added to the lack of subdistrict councils, will lead to an aggravation of the situation in Basra, especially since the Governorate Council concentrates its focus on the city and the large districts, at a time when there is no real representation of the population in the less dense regions.⁵⁹

In a country like Iraq, suffering from deep service and political crises and an increase in population, decentralised governance can be the best solution to satisfy the population and bring about political stability.⁶⁰ Clinging to centralisation drives a number of regions, in their present representation, to feel marginalised, leading them to follow radical paths to express their anger, such as demanding secession and calling to join the neighbouring countries, which happened in al-Siba subdistrict,⁶¹ or demanding to convert into a governorate, as is the case of larger districts such as Zubair.⁶²

Bullying through Tribes and Militia Forces

Given the many disagreements that prevail between the executive and legislative institutions in Basra, they usually resort to the authority of their tribes to resolve their issues, obtain protection, and pressure higher powers. Tribes are a haven for officials to seek protection and secure votes during election times. A number of officials interviewed reported that resorting to the authority of tribes, although it weakens the law, is actually a way to enforce the law. A subdistrict director confirmed that he resorted to his tribe when he tried to stop a project suspected of corruption that involved figures in the Governorate Council. 'All legal means could not help stop the project, and when the tribe interfered and threatened to escalate to stop it, the executing company was replaced,' he said.⁶³

⁵⁸ 'Directors and members of the councils of Basra's districts and subdistricts intend to resort to the judiciary to cancel the decision to dissolve the councils', *Alsumaria news agency*, 17 August 2015. Available at <https://www.alsumaria.tv/news/143601/> (accessed 25 April 2020).

⁵⁹ Interview with Mounadel Al-Jourani, head of 'Sifwan' subdistrict, 10 May 2020.

⁶⁰ Brinkerhoff, D. and Johnson, R., 'Decentralized local governance in fragile states: learning from Iraq', *International Journal of Administrative Science*, 75/4 (2010), pp. 585–607.

⁶¹ 'Because of its suffering: Al-Siba subdistrict demands to leave Iraq and join the neighboring countries', *Al-Mirbad Radio*, 3 July 2017. Available at <https://www.almirbad.com/Details/46070> (accessed 21 May 2020).

⁶² 'Abbas Maher / *Qa'em maqam* of Al-Zubayr on converting the district into a governorate', *Al-Rasheed Media*, 10 July 2019. Available at <https://www.alrasheedmedia.com/2019/07/10/167185/> (accessed 19 April 2020).

⁶³ Interview with a subdistrict director who declined to be identified, 28 April 2020.

The involvement of tribes in these political issues gives them the power to impose their rules on the city, and this power is often exemplified by the use of power, mostly through light to medium weapons, but sometimes heavy weaponry and drones.⁶⁴ The survey results reflect how powerful the tribes' authority is in Basra, with 55% of respondents finding that tribes are stronger than the government, and 21% saying they are 'somewhat stronger'.

In the face of tribes, militia forces that usually own parties representing them in local and federal governments are growing in power in Basra. These factions have become forces waging guerilla wars among themselves to exert influence. For example, 40 explosions and many assassinations targeting individuals and leaders in the militia forces took place in one month of 2017 alone, all while the police stood idly by.⁶⁵ As a result of their increasing power, these factions became a major player in the smuggling of oil and drugs.⁶⁶ They 'are the supreme authority in a number of border crossings, and executive or legislative officials cannot hold them accountable,' according to a subdistrict director in Basra.⁶⁷

Militia forces also stand in the way of the population and civil society in taking part in democratic practices that would bring about political change within the city. These forces are accused of participating in suppressing the protests in Basra and of assassinating prominent political activists,⁶⁸ or those activists who started forming new parties to bring about change from within the political process by participating in the elections.⁶⁹

Lack of Representation and Trust between the Authority and the Population

All previous crises created deep divisions between the population and the ruling parties in the city. The relationship between local residents and the local government leaders in Basra is marked by distrust. Basra residents hold the parties and their militia forces

⁶⁴ Ali Qais, 'The Basra tribes, old vendetta and heavy weapons: Is the government powerless?', *Irfa' Sawtak*, 25 April 2019. Available at <https://www.irfaasawtak.com/iraq/2019/04/25/عشائر-البصرة-تأر-قديم-وأسلحة-ثقيلة-الحكومة-عاجزة؟> (accessed 12 May 2020).

⁶⁵ Baraa Al-Shammari, 'Basra on the brink of a volcano: Militia mobilization and absence of the army and the police', *Al-Araby al-Jadeed*, 15 February 2017. Available at <https://www.alaraby.co.uk/الشرطة-والجيش-وغياب-مليشيو-استنفار-بركان-فوهة-على-البصرة> (accessed 12 May 2020).

⁶⁶ 'Iraq: The oil and drug war in Basra,' *Ultra Sawt*, 18 February 2017. Available at <https://www.ultrasawt.com/العراق-حرب-النفط-والمخدرات-في-البصرة-الترا-صوت/سياق-متصل-سياسة/> (accessed 12 May 2020).

⁶⁷ Interview with a subdistrict director who declined to be identified, 28 April 2020.

⁶⁸ Yaseen Taha Mohammed, 'Eliminating the Protests? The Motives and Circumstances of Basra Assassinations', *Arab Reform Initiative*, 11 September 2020. Available at <https://www.arab-reform.net/publication/eliminating-the-protests-the-motives-and-circumstances-of-basra-assassinations/> (accessed 30 January 2021).

⁶⁹ Hamid Al-Kafai, 'Elections preceded by assassinations', *Sky News Arabia*, 10 January 2021. Available at <https://www.skynewsarabia.com/blog/1406331-انتخابات-تسبقها-تصفيات> (accessed 30 January 2021).

responsible for the ‘tragic situation’ in the city.⁷⁰ When asked about the real culprit or who is responsible for the deterioration of services in Basra, 68% of respondents said that the political parties and militia forces bear the responsibility for the collapse, while 36% held the local government responsible, and 18% found that the federal government bears the responsibility.

Furthermore, the recurrence of protests in Basra, reflects the deep distrust between the population and the authorities. As the survey we conducted shows, the most prominent problem facing Basra is corruption, with 85% of respondents pointing to it. The presence of parties and militia forces is the second major problem in the governorate, followed by the issue of tribal influence and the spread of drugs, then pollution and the collapse of services. The survey also showed that there is distrust in the law and the judiciary, as well as the executive authority, such as security forces in the governorate. About half of the participants believed that the law is not applied in Basra, while the second half believed that the law is applied ‘to some extent’ or ‘unevenly’, while only 4% found that the law is actually applied. Almost similar numbers show the participants’ lack of confidence in judicial authorities, as 51% believe that the judiciary in Basra is ‘not impartial’, while 43% said it is ‘fairly impartial’, while only 8% thought it is ‘impartial’. When asked if they believed official security services carried out their duties, 48% answered ‘no’, 37% ‘somewhat’ and 8% ‘yes’.

Yet, what mainly reinforces the lack of confidence among the population in officeholders is the fact that they do not practice the most important requirement for democratic governance, which is voting. Federal executive and legislative powers changed three times between 2013 and 2018, with the balance of political powers witnessing a wide shift. During this period, Iraqis were allowed to choose their representatives for the federal parliament twice. On the other hand, the governorates did not witness a change in their two main chambers, the Governorate Council and the local government, through direct elections since 2013. Furthermore, the district and subdistrict councils in Basra did not hold any elections, as members of the district and subdistrict councils were appointed in a manner similar to the communities’ system under the American–British occupation authority in 2004. Political differences in Baghdad have hindered the holding of local elections for years, under various pretexts. Eventually, the governorates, districts councils and the legislative authorities in the provinces were dissolved, and the federal parliament in Baghdad became responsible for holding the governors accountable.⁷¹ Therefore, this representation vacuum of Basra residents increased the power of militia forces, tribes and parties that have political fronts and fight for the management of the city’s resources,

⁷⁰ In a poll conducted in 2007, Basra residents agreed that ‘local leaders are incompetent and incapable’, that it is necessary ‘not to be associated with any political party’ and ‘to strengthen the judiciary and the army’. See: ‘Where is Iraq headed? Lessons from Basra’, *Crisis Group, Middle East report 67*, 25 June 2007, p. 17. Available at <https://www.crisisgroup.org/ar/middle-east-north-africa/gulf-and-arabian-peninsula/iraq/where-iraq-heading-lessons-basra>.

⁷¹ ‘The Iraqi parliament dissolves the Governorate Councils’ in principle ‘to calm the protester’, *Anadolu Agency*, 10 October 2019. Available at <https://www.aa.com.tr/ar/1606244/الدول-العربية-البرلمان-العراقي-يحل-مجالس-المحافظات-مبدأيا-لتهدئة-المحتجين> (accessed 23 April 2020).

which turned Basra into a mine of financial opportunities and investments for political parties.⁷²

Ensuring electoral representation for the population may help reduce corruption and the delay in implementing service projects. It can also strengthen the authority of the state and reduce the influence of tribal norms that allow tribes to use violence. However, and most importantly, local elections reduce the gap between the citizens and the state.⁷³ Direct elections of local authorities hold those responsible accountable for the implementation of the programmes promised to the population. 'I live here in the subdistrict, and if the district's residents vote for me and I did not implement my programme, my political future will be completely over. Direct voting for me is an official mandate to represent residents, and the residents support of their candidate (...) The practice of voting in the subdistrict and provincial elections empowers these institutions and contributes to defining their importance for the population,'⁷⁴ says the director of a subdistrict, before adding, 'at the subdistrict and district level, candidates cannot evade their responsibility, and they cannot practice corruption because matters are exposed to the population.'

Indeed, corruption might be found everywhere, but at the levels of small administrations, corruption cannot be on a large scale neither can fictitious projects be implemented, as they take place at the governorate level. The elections at the district and subdistrict levels may help people to even assemble themselves into small political parties and move towards becoming larger formations in the political system, such as the provincial council or the federal parliament. Such participation can provide good training for the population to engage in politics and national responsibility towards their representatives.

Lack of Stability

Basra did not enjoy stability after the political changes in 2003 which allowed residents to elect their local representatives directly and to choose governors. Given the deteriorating conditions in the city, Basra residents often demanded the removal of their local officials, even those elected by them. However, the only governor who was fired due to popular protests was Shaltagh Abboud al-Mayahi in 2011.⁷⁵ It is noteworthy that he did not acquiesce to step down until he faced political pressure.⁷⁶

⁷² 'The truth is, Basra is a city that represents to the political parties in Baghdad a mine of financial opportunities and investments. Thus, representation by parties is not a political representation as much as it is representation (strength) through the factions. The factions focus on ensuring the flow of money in their favor, as well as ensuring the survival of their public in the neighborhoods, suburbs, and slums within the electoral supporters' circle'; excerpt from Al-Hammoud, 'Beyond Basra's Events', p. 12.

⁷³ 'Local Democracy', *International IDEA*, July 2015, p. 9. Available at <https://constitutionnet.org/vl/item/local-democracy>.

⁷⁴ Interview with head of a district in Basra who declined to be identified, 29 January 2020.

⁷⁵ 'Basra governor resigns after a popular demonstration calling for his dismissal', *Kuwait News Agency*, 25 February 2011. Available at <https://www.kuna.net.kw/ArticlePrintPage.aspx?id=2147969&language=ar> (accessed 21 March 2020).

⁷⁶ 'The governor of Basra resigns, and a number of demonstrators storm the governorate building', *News Agency*, 25 February 2011. Available at <https://www.ikhnews.com/index.php?page=article&id=9048> (accessed 30 April 2020).

The conflict between local authorities and tribal and militia forces in Basra and the ensuing local mismanagement have left the city in distress, which has led to significant growing despair among the population. For activists and the Basrawi elite, the political system is problematic. Kadhim Al-Sahlani, a leader in the popular demonstrations and a well-known academic in Basra, believes that ‘Basra is governed by the same system that governs the federal government. This system has proven to be a catastrophic failure in managing the country in general and Basra in particular. It is based on quotas and on the distribution of spoils, considering that Basra and Iraq are spoils shared by these political parties.’⁷⁷

The outlook of the population in the Basra Governorate in general and in the city in particular is pessimistic, which indicates a lack of prospects and a loss of hope for change. 64% of the survey respondents believe that it has become necessary to declare Basra a ‘disaster city’, 56% of them indicated that its future is uncertain, while 32% believe that the situation will get worse in the next five years; only 9% think it will improve. The executive authorities’ continuous failure to provide services, the weakness of regulatory authorities in the governorate in fulfilling their duties, and fierce political competition without following legal means to resolve disputes, threaten that residents use extreme ways to voice their demands, through violent protests, burning premises and closing oil-extracting areas and ports. Moreover, they lead some residents to support non-democratic authorities to monopolise the violence in Basra between armed factions and tribes. 43% of respondents supported the idea of imposing direct military authority to impose security, while 30% of them refused, and 20% remained undecided. In any case, residents do not want military authority to be in the hands of the Popular Mobilization Forces, with 85% of respondents rejecting the idea, while only 9% supporting it. If local and federal authorities continue following the same approach in managing the institutions, this may widen the gap of distrust between the population and the authorities to the extent of delegitimising them through renewed and violent protests, refusal to participate in elections and a lack of faith in the institutions and their effectiveness in performing the roles assigned to them.

Conclusion

The decentralised system in Iraq – despite the legal flaws in its organisation – appears to have multilayered authority, allowing for broad representation of the population. For a state like Iraq, trying to build a new regime on the ruins of a dictatorship, decentralisation should constitute the best guarantee for political stability. Theoretically, the chain of legislative, regulatory and executive powers in place provides a model of adequate political representation for the population, that extends from the residential neighborhood where they live to the state as a sovereign entity. Therefore, it should ensure the population attains its demands for services on a small-scale up to their direct vote on national policy programmes and even regional and international ones.

⁷⁷ Interview with activist and academic Kadhim Al-Sahlani, 19 July 2019.

However, practices on the ground confirm that all these authorities view the subordinate powers as inferior and try, in many cases, to limit their role and marginalise them. As Faleh Jabar stated, administrative or regional federalism appears like a strange creature in the eyes of most political actors.⁷⁸ Political parties controlling the institutions eliminate each other. For example, the federal parliament in Baghdad exercises powers related to local councils in the governorates, even though they do not fall within its powers as defined by the law. Furthermore, the push by federal political forces, the government and parliament to continuously postpone local elections leads to a lack of legitimacy of local authorities in the governorates according to the population. The federal government also restricts the governor's work by constraining his financial and executive powers, even without the legal authority to do so, which make him unable to provide the services to those he represents.

The fragility of implementing decentralisation is reflected at the level of local authorities themselves, as the local government exercises abolitionist roles for the lower authorities, such as the district and subdistrict councils. They rarely involve them in setting budget plans, and do not seek their plans to develop their regions. Local government heads look down upon the *qa'em maqamiya* and the heads of subdistricts, which undermines adequate representation and service provision to the population. This string of disrespect for the roles and powers conferred on each authority highlights the eagerness of every authority to abolish the authority watching over it or sharing the management with it. These abuses are often carried out outside the law, and by using the power of militia forces, tribes or political bullying.

The failure to implement administrative decentralisation exacerbates the weakness of services and – contrary to what is prevalent – leads to growing separatist sentiments, not only in an entire governorate but also at the district and subdistrict levels. Furthermore, this failure leads to destabilisation throughout the country, because popular pressure will turn towards the federal governments and demonstrators will therefore demand to replace them incessantly. Persisting in the current approach to governance, federally and locally, drives the population to question the usefulness of democratic governance and its mechanisms, and pushes them to follow extreme ways to achieve their demands, including seeking to 'overthrow the regime', a slogan raised in Iraq on a large scale for the first time during the 2019 demonstrations. Failure to take the right steps in managing the government will lead to the expansion of the protest movement and its demand to topple the regime. As authorities continue to use power against protesters, and weapons circulate among the population owing to their tribal affiliation, this may conduce to the use of arms by both parties, which may lead to civil war. Failure to correctly implement federalism, decentralisation and just resource sharing may take Iraq down a more dangerous path, and ultimately lead to the termination of the Iraqi nation, as Faleh Jabar puts it.⁷⁹

⁷⁸ Faleh Jabar, 'The difficult birth of federalism in Iraq', *Al-Hiwar al-Mutamadin*, 2 November 2016. Available at <https://www.ahewar.org/debat/show.art.asp?aid=79764> (accessed 12 October 2020).

⁷⁹ Ibid.

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