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# Rethinking political settlements in the Middle East and North Africa

How trading accountability  
for stability benefits elites  
and fails populations

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# Summary

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- The US, the UK and other like-minded governments are disengaging from the Middle East and North Africa to focus on conflicts in other parts of the world where they see greater threats and can exert greater influence. They argue that conflicts that once ripped through countries like Iraq, Lebanon or Libya are now being managed through political settlements (or ‘elite bargains’) that incentivize rival elites to lay down arms and govern under power-sharing political systems. But this view is flawed.
  - International policy in these and similar contexts has prioritized stability over accountability, amid fears of a return to violent clashes or civil war. But the compromise of one form of stability achieved via elite bargains has created and perpetuated political systems that benefit those elites at the expense of citizens. As a result, many Iraqis, Lebanese and Libyans now protest against, and demand an end to, the very settlements that were meant to solve the problem of violence.
  - This research paper argues that the logic behind such settlements is primarily concerned with curbing one form of violence – direct, inter-elite violence – and fails to account for others. These other forms include structural violence, in which elite capture, corruption and profiteering cause harm to people’s everyday lives. In each of the three countries discussed, elite bargains have successfully reduced direct violence but have not improved – and, in some cases, have worsened – corruption and human development scores.
  - The failure to address such basic concerns means that countries like Iraq, Lebanon or Libya remain unstable and cannot meaningfully be described as ‘post-conflict’. Captured political systems are unable to address grievances or absorb greater participation from ordinary people, and are inherently more likely to lead to outbreaks of direct violence due to the inequalities they produce. When corruption is widespread, a political settlement is more likely to collapse into some form of armed confrontation.
  - This paper proposes a revised approach to political settlements centred on increasing accountability. In particular, it suggests working with reform-oriented individuals who are technically capable and therefore indispensable in their roles across state or society. Increasing connectivity between these actors and building their capacity can help foster accountability and positive change. Ultimately, the approach proposed seeks to minimize direct violence through an inclusive political settlement that also addresses the daily harms caused by violence in all its forms.

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# 01

# Introduction

**‘Elite bargains’ are championed as a means of stabilizing conflict-affected states. But they have not led to a sustainable peace and overlook less visible, structural forms of violence inflicted on the population.**

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Attempts at controlling violence and instability have long been at the heart of international peacebuilding efforts in the Middle East and North Africa (MENA). To achieve this end, the US, the UK and other like-minded governments (mostly referred to in this paper as ‘policymakers from the Global North’) have either focused on stabilization<sup>1</sup> policies that promote political settlements based on the concept of ‘elite bargains’, or failed to deliver the ‘inclusive’ forms of negotiations that their strategies target.<sup>2</sup>

Elite bargains are defined as agreements that incentivize leaders in a conflict to lay down arms and govern under a power-sharing political system.<sup>3</sup> This concept

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<sup>1</sup> The UK Government’s 2019 Stabilisation Strategy notes that there is no widely accepted definition of ‘stabilization’. The strategy defines stabilization as ‘an activity which seeks to support local and regional partners in conflict-affected countries to reduce violence, ensure basic security and facilitate peaceful political deal-making, all of which provide a foundation for building long-term stability’. Stabilisation Unit (2019), *The UK Government’s Approach to Stabilisation: A guide for policy makers and practitioners*, London: Department for International Development, [https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment\\_data/file/784001/The\\_UK\\_Government\\_s\\_Approach\\_to\\_Stabilisation\\_A\\_guide\\_for\\_policy\\_makers\\_and\\_practitioners.pdf](https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/784001/The_UK_Government_s_Approach_to_Stabilisation_A_guide_for_policy_makers_and_practitioners.pdf).

<sup>2</sup> This approach is explicit in the UK Government’s 2019 Stabilisation Strategy which identifies three principles of ‘peaceful political deal-making’, the second of which is ‘foster political deals and bargains among key conflict elites to secure reductions in violence and build support for a transition out of conflict.’ Ibid. p.13. ‘Stabilization’ is one of four goals of the US’s 2020 Strategy to Prevent Conflict and Promote Stability. The stabilization goal states that ‘[T]he United States will support inclusive political processes to resolve ongoing violent conflicts, emphasizing meaningful participation of youth, women, and members of faith-based communities and marginalized groups, respect for human rights and environmental sustainability.’ The US strategy does not explicitly mention elite bargains or elites, defining stabilization as a ‘political endeavour (sic) involving an integrated civilian-military process to create conditions where locally legitimate authorities and systems can peaceably manage conflict and prevent a resurgence of violence.’ However, as this paper will demonstrate, ‘inclusive’ political processes have not emerged in Iraq, Lebanon and Libya, and have instead remained dominated by engagement with elites. See US Department of State (2021), *United States Strategy to Prevent Conflict and Promote Stability*, <https://www.state.gov/wp-content/uploads/2021/01/2020-US-Strategy-to-Prevent-Conflict-and-Promote-Stabilit-508c-508.pdf>, pp. 1–8.

<sup>3</sup> ‘Elite bargains’ are defined by the UK Stabilisation Unit as ‘discrete agreements, or a series of agreements, that explicitly re-negotiate the distribution of power and allocation of resources between elites.’ According to a synthesis paper published by the unit in 2018, ‘such agreements play a crucial role in managing violence and shaping post-war transitions.’ See Cheng, C., Goodhand, J. and Meehan, P. (2018), *Securing and Sustaining Elite Bargains that Reduce Violent Conflict*, London: Stabilisation Unit, [https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment\\_data/file/765882/Elite\\_Bargains\\_and\\_Political\\_Deals\\_Project\\_-\\_Synthesis\\_Paper.pdf](https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/765882/Elite_Bargains_and_Political_Deals_Project_-_Synthesis_Paper.pdf).

has become central to stabilization policies, and more broadly, to the approach of international policymakers and organizations engaged in conflict management across the world.<sup>4</sup> But while these elite bargains have, in many cases, successfully reduced direct, inter-elite violence, they have perpetuated other forms of violence and fuelled political systems that enable corruption and serve elite interests over those of the population.

In Iraq, Lebanon and Libya, such agreements among elites emerging from wars have failed to bring stability to the everyday lives of the people. Instead, the harms and hardships have led many Iraqis, Lebanese and Libyans to protest against their countries' elites, and to call for an end to the very political settlements that were meant to stop violence.

## The settlements agreed in Lebanon, Iraq and Libya became the basis of long-lasting governing systems, incentivizing consensus among elites to the detriment of the wider population.

The settlements agreed in Lebanon after 1989, Iraq after 2003 and Libya after 2011 were intended as short-term measures to halt direct violence. But instead, they became the basis of long-lasting governing systems, incentivizing consensus among elites to the detriment of the wider population. In Lebanon, the 2019 protest movements did not demand the removal of a specific political party or the incumbent government. They did not base their grievances along the ethno-sectarian lines that underpinned the political system. Instead, those movements came together across those lines to call for an end to the settlement itself. During the protests, demonstrators chanted 'all of them means all of them' (in Arabic, *killon yaani killon*). Similarly, in 2019, Iraqis taking part in the 'Tishreen' ('October') uprisings called for an end to their country's political system (known locally as *muhasasa*), which is also based on an ethno-sectarian power-sharing and was imposed in the wake of the 2003 US-led invasion.

In both Iraq and Lebanon, the political settlements designed to end violence in fact propped up governing systems that harmed the lives of their people. But when people rose up against their country's political settlement, they were met with violence – designed this time not for civil war but to maintain corrupt, authoritarian orders. In Iraq, for instance, armed actors killed over 600 and wounded more than 30,000 Tishreen protesters.

Evidence suggests that similar dynamics are now emerging in Libya. In March 2023, Libya's Government of National Unity issued a circular that sought to revoke the legal registration of all civil society organizations formed since 2011.<sup>5</sup> Meanwhile,

<sup>4</sup> Diamond, T., Emory, D. and Grace, J. (2021), *Elite Bargains and Political Deals Toolkit: A User's Guide to Applying EBPD Theory in Localised Conflict Settings*, February 2021, London: Chemonics International Inc., <https://chemonics.com/wp-content/uploads/2021/01/Elite-Bargains-and-Political-Deals-Toolkit.pdf>.

<sup>5</sup> Lawyers for Justice in Libya (2019), 'Libyan organisations call on authorities to stop draconian laws and civil society crackdown', press release, 6 April 2023, <https://www.libyanjustice.org/news/libyan-organisations-call-on-authorities-to-stop-draconian-laws-and-civil-society-crackdown>.

arbitrary arrests of activists and those criticizing the corruption of political elites are on the rise.<sup>6</sup>

In all three countries, the systems have become resilient enough to violently suppress contentious politics. In other words, while the political settlements championed by international actors have steered these elites from fighting each other, they have turned their violence against the population at large.

While data shows that elite bargains have lowered the number of deaths from direct violence in each of the three reference countries, human development indicators reveal a different story – one in which the lives of ordinary people have not been improved. Instead, the political settlements have failed to reduce high levels of corruption or to improve poor human development statistics. Corruption has meanwhile become an invisible killer.<sup>7</sup>

International policy in these contexts has been predicated on prioritizing stability ahead of accountability. While elite bargaining is intended to be an ongoing process of negotiation rather than a singular ‘grand’ bargain, efforts are often not sustained. Instead, policymakers and policy-oriented academics have repeatedly prioritized the maintenance of the status quo, because they fear that pursuing an alternative could spark a return to violent clashes or even to civil war. But the compromise of one form of stability – via short-term agreements – has in practice entrenched unrepresentative political systems that are underpinned by corruption and deprive people of essential services. Such captured political systems are inherently more likely to lead to outbreaks of direct violence due to the inequalities that they produce.

This research paper illustrates how elite bargains in the MENA region – with specific reference to Iraq, Lebanon and Libya – have transformed violence within political systems from primarily direct and inter-elite conflict into less visible, more structural forms.

As international attention turns away from the MENA region, the paper proposes an approach that could help policymakers from the Global North focused on conflict management. This approach is centred on increasing accountability and includes working with reform-oriented individuals who are technically capable and therefore indispensable in their roles across state and society. The nature of bargaining with and among elites means that such individuals often work in silos, reducing the potential impact of their work, and leaving them feeling isolated and less able to effect change. However, increasing connectivity between those individuals and building their capacity to act can contribute to improving accountability and producing public goods through the auspices of the state. Ultimately, the approach put forward in this paper seeks to minimize violence via more inclusive political settlements that also address the daily harms caused by violence in all its forms.

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<sup>6</sup> There have been an increasing number of incidents where civil society figures have been arrested under the pretence of ‘protecting Libyan and Islamic values’. See, for example, UN Office for the Commissioner of Human Rights (2022), ‘Deepening Crackdown on Civil Society’, press briefing, 25 March 2022, <https://www.ohchr.org/en/press-briefing-notes/2022/03/deepening-crackdown-civil-society>.

<sup>7</sup> Dodge, T. and Mansour, R. (2021), *Politically sanctioned corruption and barriers to reform in Iraq*, Research Paper, London: Royal Institute of International Affairs, <https://www.chathamhouse.org/2021/06/politically-sanctioned-corruption-and-barriers-reform-iraq>.

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# 02 Elite bargains in international peacebuilding

Research informing stabilization policies has argued that reducing violence between elites is a necessary first step to a sustained political settlement. However, the failings of this approach are becoming clear.

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## Resolving inter-elite violence at the expense of the population

Concerned with reducing violence in conflict-affected states, scholars of the ‘new institutional economics’ school of thought have spearheaded a continuing movement to place political settlements among elites at the heart of political peacebuilding efforts.<sup>8</sup> Their ideas have had a deep impact on current policy frameworks and the rationalist logic behind them since the 1970s. The focus of the new institutional economics school is on elites<sup>9</sup> – i.e. political leaders and armed groups – because of their potential to mobilize larger support and influence a wide range of stakeholders in society. This school argues that although these

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<sup>8</sup> This field would become known as ‘new institutional economics’. Prominent academics in this field include Daron Acemoglu, Paul Collier, William Easterley, Douglass North and James Robinson, who have been among the most influential theorists of the links across conflict, violence and development. North, Wallis and Weingast claimed that their work sought ‘to provide a new framework for interpreting the course of human history over the past ten thousand years, and to open new ways of thinking about the pressing problems of political and economic development facing the world today’. North, D., Wallis, J. J. and Weingast, B. R. (2009), *Violence and Social Orders: A Conceptual Framework for Interpreting Recorded Human History*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, p. xix.

<sup>9</sup> The UK Government defines elites as ‘those that hold a disproportionate amount of political power, who are able to influence decisions, mobilize popular support and implement policies at national, sub-national and transnational levels’. Stabilisation Unit (2019), *The UK Government’s Approach to Stabilisation*, p. 89.



elites are naturally prone to violence, they are also driven to maximize their (real or perceived) self-interest. Material incentives can therefore compel them to stop fighting and start negotiating. Offering material incentives to warring parties fitted into a rationalist understanding of the decision-making processes of political leaders and armed groups – i.e. the elites who would emerge from wars to become governors. Douglass North summed up the school's view when he wrote, in 1981, that 'the risk of losing the rents can make it in the interests of powerful individuals and groups to cooperate with the coalition in power rather than to fight'.<sup>10</sup>

To reduce violence in conflict-affected areas, North et al. advocate bargains among a dominant coalition of individuals and groups who have direct access to violence. They describe this social structure as a 'limited access order' that 'creates cooperation and order by limiting access to valuable resources – land, labour, and capital – or access and control of valuable activities – such as contract enforcement, property right enforcement, trade, worship and education – to elite groups'.<sup>11</sup>

The new institutionalist school of thought has subsequently developed to argue that the key for policymakers is to institutionalize these bargains in a way that ensures no return to inter-elite violence. The influential political economist Mushtaq Khan concluded that violent instability can only be mediated through the inclusion of powerful elites.<sup>12</sup> In search of a settlement among those elites, Khan argued that the goal of policymakers should be to secure 'a combination of power and institutions that is mutually compatible and also sustainable in terms of economic and political viability'. He noted:

Institutions and the distribution of power have to be compatible because if powerful groups are not getting an acceptable distribution of benefits from an institutional structure they will strive to change it.<sup>13</sup>

The influence of the new institutionalist school continues to be reflected in policy discussions. For example, several years ago, one senior diplomat posted to Baghdad told the authors of this paper that they had been given North as fundamental reading for understanding peacebuilding and stabilization.<sup>14</sup> A 2011 World Bank Development Report stated, 'the question remains: why do some societies avoid violence when others do not? To answer this question, we build on the hypotheses put forward by North, Wallis and Weingast, who focus on impersonal institutions with open access to political and economic opportunities, creating avenues for peaceful and credible contestation'.<sup>15</sup>

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<sup>10</sup> North, D. et al. (2007), p. 3.

<sup>11</sup> North, D., Wallis, J. J., Webb, S. and Weingast, B. (2007), *Limited Access Orders in the developing world: A new approach to the problems of development*, Policy Research Working Paper 4359, Washington, DC: World Bank.

<sup>12</sup> Khan, M. H. (2012), 'Governance and Growth Challenges for Africa', in Noman, A., Botchwey, K., Stein, H. and Stiglitz, J. E. (eds) (2012), *Good Growth and Governance in Africa: Rethinking Development Strategies*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, pp. 61–3, <https://doi.org/10.1093/acprof:oso/9780199698561.003.0004>.

<sup>13</sup> Khan, M. (2010), *Political settlements and the governance of growth-enhancing institutions*, research paper, London: SOAS University of London, p. 4, <http://eprints.soas.ac.uk/9968>.

<sup>14</sup> Author interview with diplomat in Baghdad, mid-2010s.

<sup>15</sup> World Bank (2011), *World Development Reports 2011: Conflict, Security, and Development*, Washington, DC: World Bank.

The approach of seeking ‘elite bargains’ that reflect compatibility between elites and the distribution of power remains at the heart of so-called ‘stabilization’ policies. The UK government defines stabilization as:

[T]he process that supports states which are entering, enduring or emerging from conflict in order to prevent or reduce violence; protect the population and key infrastructure; promote political processes and governance structures, which lead to a political settlement that institutionalises non-violent contests for power; and prepares for sustainable social and economic development.<sup>16</sup>

As such, stabilization efforts, both in practice and theory, have focused primarily on reducing the likelihood of violence that is inter-elite (horizontal) and direct (visible and physical/psychological violence exercised directly by an actor against a victim). Ending civil wars and insurgencies has therefore meant stopping men with guns from fighting each other and killing civilians. Key to this approach has been the promotion of rent-sharing agreements that seek to achieve stability by incentivizing and institutionalizing political settlements.

In 2018, the UK government’s Stabilisation Unit published analysis of 21 case studies that examined the relationship between elite bargains, armed conflict and external interventions. The analysis supported the logic of economic rationalism as a tool to contain direct violence.<sup>17</sup> Unlike North, the analysis disaggregated different forms of ‘violence’, opening the debate to look at the commission of violence and to identify policy trade-offs. The authors categorized violence as either **competitive** (that which is deployed to contest the distribution of resources and power), **embedded** (that which is institutionalized through a political settlement), or **permissive** (that which the state is unwilling or unable to control).<sup>18</sup> However, despite the attempt to provide a more nuanced picture, all three categories represent forms of direct violence.<sup>19</sup> As such, they fail to capture the lived experiences of people who suffer from the more structural forms of violence stemming from political settlements.

This failure to capture the lived experiences of the population is a conscious choice that is justified by emphasizing the methodological difficulty of measuring structural violence and a concern that it would expand the scope of any policy intervention too widely. However, these arguments ignore the suffering of the population, which cannot be dismissed as an externality. While structural violence cannot be assessed by a singular dataset, accepted composite indices exist that do measure these aspects, such as the Human Development Index (as, for example, in this paper). Second, the exclusive focus on tackling direct violence to the exclusion of other goals undermines policy tools in areas such as development and rule of law, creating contradictions in policy frameworks. Cheng et al. explicitly reference the trade-offs

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<sup>16</sup> For more on the history of stabilization, see: UK Ministry of Defence (2010), *A Guide To Joint Doctrine Publication 3-40: Security And Stabilization: The Military Contribution*, April 2010, [https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment\\_data/file/572960/archive\\_doctrine\\_uk\\_jdp\\_3\\_40\\_guide.pdf](https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/572960/archive_doctrine_uk_jdp_3_40_guide.pdf).

<sup>17</sup> The analysis argues that ‘violent conflict stabilises only when the allocation of benefits, opportunities and resources (such as political positions, business prospects) is consistent with how power is distributed in society [...] providing elites with preferential access to political privileges and economic opportunities (“rents”) can provide the “glue” to hold together fragile coalitions between elites’. See Cheng, Goodhand and Meehan (2018), *Securing and Sustaining Elite Bargains that Reduce Violent Conflict*.

<sup>18</sup> Ibid.

<sup>19</sup> Even where structural forms of violence could be present, such as embedded and gender-based violence, the authors still focus on direct violence, such as rape.

of such an approach, noting that ‘all good things do not come together’, and that interventions to reduce competitive violence may, for example, exacerbate embedded violence. The authors note that ‘formalised power sharing is likely to institutionalise, politicise and entrench social divisions and political identities rather than overcome them’.<sup>20</sup> But no approach is offered to correct this flaw.

Consequently, the dominant frameworks behind international peacebuilding and stabilization have not adequately accounted for the medium- and long-term impacts of short-term efforts solely focused on reducing direct violence. For policymakers, elite bargains and political settlements were an alternative to the ‘liberal peace model’, which argued that building liberal democratic institutions – like elections – could end conflict. In many cases, these institutions did not serve their populations but were hijacked by certain elite groups who resumed violence against their opponents or the public. In an effort to counter the consequences of this model, Jonathan Goodhand argued for ‘a more broad-based and progressive set of alliances... to forge a new grand bargain for peace’.<sup>21</sup> However, by focusing solely on reducing direct violence through these mechanisms, those who supported this model of elite bargaining made an active decision to exclude more structural forms of violence. This omission had a lasting impact on people living under those political systems.

## **The dominant frameworks behind international peacebuilding and stabilization have not adequately accounted for the medium- and long-term impacts of efforts focused solely on reducing direct violence.**

First, elite bargains have not always meant an end to civil war or direct violence. A study found that when corruption is widespread, a political settlement is twice as likely to collapse into some form of armed confrontation.<sup>22</sup> Second, and more critically, such bargains have failed to adequately respond to the fact that an initial agreement becomes an enduring reality that may reduce direct violence but reinforces other forms of structural and indirect violence.

This missing link, and a lack of exploration of other forms of violence, can help explain why political settlements in countries like Iraq, Lebanon or Libya have not brought the kind of stability that the populations demand.

Approaches to stabilization and subsequent state-building are increasingly being called into question as their failings have become clear. For example, in a recently published article for the World Bank, Gaël Raballand and Francesca Recanatini assert the ‘need to think about corruption and fragile settings

<sup>20</sup> Cheng, Goodhand and Meehan (2018), *Securing and Sustaining Elite Bargains that Reduce Violent Conflict*, pp. 3–5.

<sup>21</sup> Goodhand, J. and Walton, O. (2009), ‘The Limits of Liberal Peacebuilding? International Engagement in the Sri Lankan Peace Process’, *Journal of Intervention and Statebuilding*, 3(3), pp. 303–23, <https://doi.org/10.1080/17502970903086693>.

<sup>22</sup> Hegre, H. and Nygård, H. M. (2014), ‘Governance and Conflict Relapse’, *Journal of Conflict Resolution*, 59(6), pp. 984–1016, <https://doi.org/10.1177/0022002713520591>.

differently, expanding our time horizon and updating our toolbox. It takes a long time to address corruption and state building. Waiting for conflict and violence to end means that corrupt practices can become more entrenched and prevent future reforms.<sup>23</sup>

This paper attempts to answer this call, beginning with the need to broaden our understanding of violence and elite bargains.

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<sup>23</sup> Raballand, G. and Recanatini, F. (2023), 'Corruption in Fragile, Conflict and Violent Settings: False dilemmas and inadequate toolbox?', blog post, World Bank, 11 July 2023, <https://blogs.worldbank.org/governance/corruption-fragile-conflict-and-violent-settings-false-dilemmas-and-inadequate-toolbox>.

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# 03

## Understanding structural violence in elite bargains

**Little attention has been paid to the way in which elite bargains perpetuate structures or institutions that harm populations by withholding access to basic resources and needs. Focusing on structural violence reveals the shortcomings of these settlements.**

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A political settlement may deter militias from firing at each other, but in many countries, such settlements have not addressed broader forms of violence, including the ways in which corruption can end up depriving citizens of essential goods and services, leading to lower life expectancy and higher mortality rates. To understand why elite bargains have not ended conflict for many people, it is necessary to broaden the understanding of violence to include the ways in which people are harmed every day.

Built into the social, political and economic systems that stem from elite bargains, structural violence includes the avoidable harms that cause suffering or death to individuals or groups due to their unequal position in society – i.e. those that are excluded from the benefits of the elite bargain. Defined by Johan Galtung as ‘omnipresent and insidious – often unnoticed and unchallenged’,<sup>24</sup> structural violence is less visible than direct violence. It is not episodic – like an armed attack or explosion – but occurs every day.<sup>25</sup>

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<sup>24</sup> Galtung, J. (1969), ‘Violence, Peace, and Peace Research’, *Journal of Peace Research*, 6(3), pp. 167–91, <https://doi.org/10.1177/002234336900600301>.

<sup>25</sup> Kalyvas, S. (2006), *The Logic of Violence in Civil War*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, p. 22.

Scholars have argued that structural violence is greater in frequency and impact on people living in conflict.<sup>26</sup> One study found that the consequences of structural violence were 130 times greater than those of direct violence.<sup>27</sup> Despite the less visible nature of this type of violence, proxy metrics such as life expectancy or sustainable development indices – not typically associated with violence – can offer insights into the true impact of violence in the everyday lives of people.

Perpetrators of structural violence are difficult to isolate.<sup>28</sup> Unlike the perpetrators of direct violence, those involved in structural violence are not armed. Bureaucrats, businesspeople, local authorities, religious leaders or even civilians can harm people.<sup>29</sup> A study of the relationship between bureaucracy, poverty and structural violence in India showed that it was not individual government agents but the political system in general that encouraged and reproduced corruption and poverty, resulting in harms for millions of people.<sup>30</sup> For example, members of a corrupt elite who generate revenue from state funds but fail to redistribute those funds are hollowing out the state's capacity to meet basic social needs, and, as such, perpetuate everyday violence. In this instance, the perpetrator is not a single person or group, but the political settlement and system that develops from it.

## **Perpetrators of structural violence are difficult to isolate. Those involved in structural violence are not armed. Bureaucrats, businesspeople, local authorities, religious leaders or even civilians can harm people.**

A more holistic view of the violence produced by conflict is needed to augment existing international peacebuilding and stabilization frameworks. Figure 1 disaggregates violence into four quadrants, based on the direction and form. As discussed above, policymakers and researchers concerned with conflict have been primarily focused on inter-elite violence (or 'horizontal-direct' violence; e.g. stopping elites from fighting in a civil war). However, at times, they have also focused on elite violence perpetrated against the public ('vertical-direct' violence; e.g. stopping elites from killing protesters). Although less frequent, they have at times looked into elites harming other elites through targeted policies ('horizontal-structural' violence; e.g. the weaponization of judiciaries to target political opponents). However, very little attention or work has been done on the way in which bargains between elites perpetuate political structures or institutions that harm people by withholding access to basic resources and needs ('vertical-structural' violence). For instance, diverting funds earmarked for the health ministry to generate profit for an elite will deny people access

<sup>26</sup> Jackson, B. and Sadler, L. S. (2022), 'Structural violence: An evolutionary concept analysis', *Journal of Advanced Nursing*, 78(11), pp. 3495–516, <https://doi.org/10.1111/jan.15341>.

<sup>27</sup> This study was cited in Gilligan, J. (1999), 'Structural violence', in Gottesman, R. (ed.) (1999), *Violence in the United States: An Encyclopedia*, New York: Scribner.

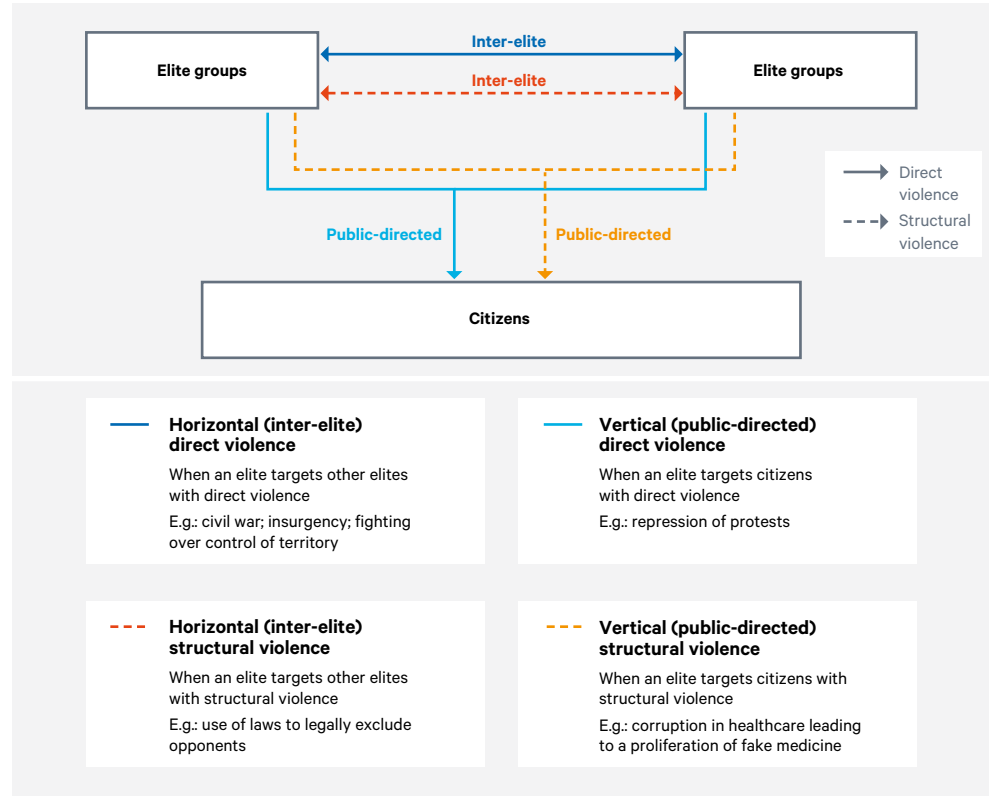
<sup>28</sup> Gupta, A. (2012), *Red Tape: Bureaucracy, Structural Violence, and Poverty in India*, Durham, NC: Duke University Press.

<sup>29</sup> Kalyvas (2006), *The Logic of Violence in Civil War*.

<sup>30</sup> Gupta (2012), *Red Tape*.

to potentially life-saving treatment. Corruption across basic public services – from education to electricity and water – continues to harm people in many countries that are deemed to be ‘post-conflict’ due to horizontal- and vertical-direct violence being reduced.<sup>31</sup>

**Figure 1. Types of violence**



In this context, corruption is not a negative externality – as presented in standard stabilization frameworks – but an inevitable product of an elite bargain. The settlements in Iraq, Libya and Lebanon reveal that a broadened understanding of violence can help policymakers to navigate stabilization in a more comprehensive manner – moving past quick declarations that conflict is over, only for it to re-emerge. They also offer an answer to the question of why people in these countries are now calling for an end to the very political settlements that halted their civil wars.

<sup>31</sup> Mansour, R. (2022), ‘The deadly greed of Iraq’s elite’, *The World Today*, 29 September 2022, <https://www.chathamhouse.org/publications/the-world-today/2022-10/deadly-greed-iraqs-elite>.

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# 04

# How elite bargains have perpetuated conflict in Iraq, Lebanon and Libya

**The political systems in Iraq, Lebanon and Libya have each been captured by the vested interests of elites. Examples of corruption in vital economic sectors show how the elites' pursuit of profit harms the public interest.**

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The political systems in Iraq, Lebanon and Libya have each been captured by the vested interests of elites, albeit at different stages of development. In Iraq, the post-2003 political system is firmly entrenched and has proven resilient to internal threats such as mass protest movements. Lebanon's captured political system has, over 30 years, extracted wealth and diluted the capacity of the state to the extent that the country now faces political paralysis and a deep economic crisis. In Libya, the post-2011 political order is increasingly seeking to consolidate its hold over power.

Wars in Iraq, Lebanon and Libya have all been ended with political settlements partly brokered and sustained by international peacebuilders, who now view the countries as 'post-conflict'. The linear policy frameworks of some countries – that seek to identify stages of conflict and phased responses to events – have helped to organize complex interventions, but have also exacerbated problems. This is particularly the case when it comes to the assumption that resources and support poured into a 'post-conflict' country



can help to create a new, more inclusive political order.<sup>32</sup> Critically, the hypothesis here is that only when the direct violence stops can further objectives be pursued. However, in Iraq, Libya and Lebanon, it is the victorious elites who dominate the ‘post-conflict’ order, and inclusivity has failed to emerge, undermining subsequent efforts towards reconstruction and institution-building.

According to UNHCR, Iraq’s ‘humanitarian context has transitioned into a post-conflict landscape with an increased focus on identifying and removing obstacles to durable solutions’.<sup>33</sup> In 2011, the NATO Defence College published a report entitled *NATO’s Role in a Post-Conflict Libya*.<sup>34</sup> However, this understanding of conflict is centred around inter-elite direct violence (or horizontal-direct violence). For many Iraqis, Lebanese and Libyans, one form of conflict may have been reduced, but another persists in inter-elite competition (or horizontal-structural violence). For the populations of those countries, the situation is far from being ‘post-conflict’, despite the view of external actors. In each country, the population has been subjected to harms caused or exacerbated by the elite bargains initially struck in the name of stabilization and now preserved in the name of upholding stability.

## Iraq

### The post-2003 political settlement

The rebuilding of the Iraqi state following the US-led invasion of 2003 was based on an ethno-sectarian political settlement known locally as *muhasasa*. This settlement brought together Iraq’s opposition political parties to govern the country after the removal of Saddam Hussein’s Baathist regime.

The basic principles of *muhasasa* were drawn up more than a decade before it was formally institutionalized. In October 1992, nearly 400 Iraqi exile leaders and US representatives met in the village of Salahaddin, near Erbil in northern Iraq. US officials had formed and supported this group to incentivize Iraqi major opposition parties from varying ideologies and political histories to come together, with a promise that they would have a role in the post-Saddam political order. This group of Iraqi parties represented the main opposition parties seeking to remove Saddam Hussein from power. It included Kurdish nationalists of the Kurdistan Democratic Party and Patriotic Union of Kurdistan, Shia Islamists representing the Supreme Council for the Islamic Revolution in Iraq and the Dawa Party, as well as secular parties, such as Ayad Allawi’s Iraqi National Accord.

The parties present agreed that the future government had to resemble the country’s mosaic of ethnicities and sects, and the conference ended with the establishment of a three-person leadership council featuring Mohammed Bahr al-Ulum (a Shia Arab), Masoud Barzani (a Kurd), and Hassan al-Naqib

<sup>32</sup> This is the ‘liberal peace model’, which draws upon the experience of Japan and West Germany in the aftermath of the Second World War.

<sup>33</sup> UNHCR (2021), ‘Iraq – 2021 plan - Partnership and Coordination’, <https://reporting.unhcr.org/node/5091>.

<sup>34</sup> Gaub, F. et al. (2011), *NATO’s Role in a Post-Conflict Libya*, research report, Rome: NATO Defense College, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/resrep10309>.

(a Sunni Arab). The breakthrough came with the representation quota, which was the first major instance of a cross-ethnic and cross-sect movement calling for an identity-based agreement.

This agreement, referred to as the ‘Salahadin quota’, was institutionalized in Iraq after 2005.<sup>35</sup> The US-led coalition worked closely with the returning opposition parties to set up a new government, which featured a Kurdish president, a Shia prime minister and a Sunni speaker of parliament. The government formation process would be based on consensus that became known locally as ‘dividing the pie’ (*taqseem al-kaake*). As the Coalition Provisional Authority issued orders disbanding the Iraqi army and the top four layers of the civil service, the new ruling elite were incentivized to build networks of patronage to organize and manage the state apparatus. This process was supported by the US-led coalition, the UN and other international statebuilders.

**As the Coalition Provisional Authority issued orders disbanding the Iraqi army and the top four layers of the civil service, the new ruling elite were incentivized to build networks of patronage to organize and manage the state apparatus.**

The fledgling political settlement broke down briefly in 2006 because a powerful elite leader, Shia cleric Muqtada al-Sadr, had been excluded. In protest, Sadr launched an insurgency against the newly formed government. Backed by the US-led coalition, Prime Minister Nouri al-Maliki won the conflict, and brought the Sadrists into the consensus. The lesson taken from this setback was that conflict could be avoided only if all major elites were included in the settlement.

Since then, this logic of inclusion has been applied to minimize the threat of intra-Shia conflict. Iraq’s political settlement has since proven resilient to horizontal-direct violence. For instance, in August 2022, Sadr sent protesters (some armed) into the Green Zone that houses Iraq’s governing institutions and other countries’ diplomatic missions to try and stop a government formation process. But after 30 people were killed, Sadr pulled back from further confrontation. His advisers confirmed to the authors that they knew that bloodshed would not be accepted,<sup>36</sup> as it ran against the deal underpinning the political settlement to which his movement was a party.

*Muhasasa* has ensured that most parts of Iraq have experienced less direct violence over the years. The elite are incentivized to take part in consensus governments rather than be left outside. Data from Iraq Body Count shows that violence during

<sup>35</sup> Chatham House (2013), ‘Iraq Ten Years On – Iraq’s Political Systems’, meeting transcript, 19 March 2013, <https://www.chathamhouse.org/sites/default/files/public/Meetings/Meeting%20Transcripts/190313IraqPolitical.pdf>.

<sup>36</sup> Author interview with Sadrist official in Baghdad, October 2022.

the civil war caused almost 30,000 civilian deaths in 2006 and 2007. But since 2018, civilian deaths due to physical violence have been in the low thousands. In 2021, only 669 civilian deaths were recorded.<sup>37</sup>

### **The structural violence of the elite bargain**

However, the post-2003 political settlement has perpetuated another form of violence: structural violence. The structures of post-2003 Iraq incentivized a system of corruption that allowed the elite to generate revenue for themselves from state funds at the expense of basic services to the people. Iraq's annual budget totals more than \$100 billion, yet citizens have been deprived of adequate education, electricity, healthcare, water and other key human rights.<sup>38</sup> Despite its wealth, Iraq has one of the lowest life expectancies in the world, ranking at the lower-middle income average of 69 years.<sup>39</sup>

One arena in which the political settlement has killed and harmed many Iraqis is the health sector. The ruling elite saw the Ministry of Health – like all other parts of the government – as a source of profit. But they damaged the health system as a result. For instance, in 2021, two hospital fires killed more than 100 patients who were in COVID-19 wards. Those fires were linked to poor equipment and maintenance, even though the ministry's budget was worth several billion dollars a year. Instead, it appeared that elites had taken the revenue instead of spending it on providing adequate care.<sup>40</sup>

A large chunk of the health ministry's budget is dedicated to the purchase of medicines and medical equipment. KIMADIA, the state-owned pharmaceutical company, has an annual budget of more than \$1 billion. Despite this, more than 70 per cent of medicine in Iraq is unfit for consumption.<sup>41</sup> To generate revenue from the ministry, the ruling elite place their loyalists in senior positions. These civil servants ensure that the ministry awards contracts to companies linked to the ruling elites. Such corruption has wider effects in the healthcare sector, including a lack of public trust in hospitals and other essential services.<sup>42</sup>

### **Policy implications**

Iraq's political settlement has been successful in preventing civil wars at various moments since the US-led invasion and its aftermath. Figure 2 shows that spikes in conflict-related deaths have correlated surprisingly little with Iraq's score on the Human Development Index – a measure of average achievement in health, education

<sup>37</sup> Iraq Body Count (2023), 'Documented civilian deaths from violence', <https://www.iraqbodycount.org/database> (accessed on 2 August 2023).

<sup>38</sup> Between 2006 and 2014, for instance, Iraq lost an estimated \$551 billion to corruption. See Mansour (2022), 'The deadly greed of Iraq's elite'.

<sup>39</sup> Ibid.

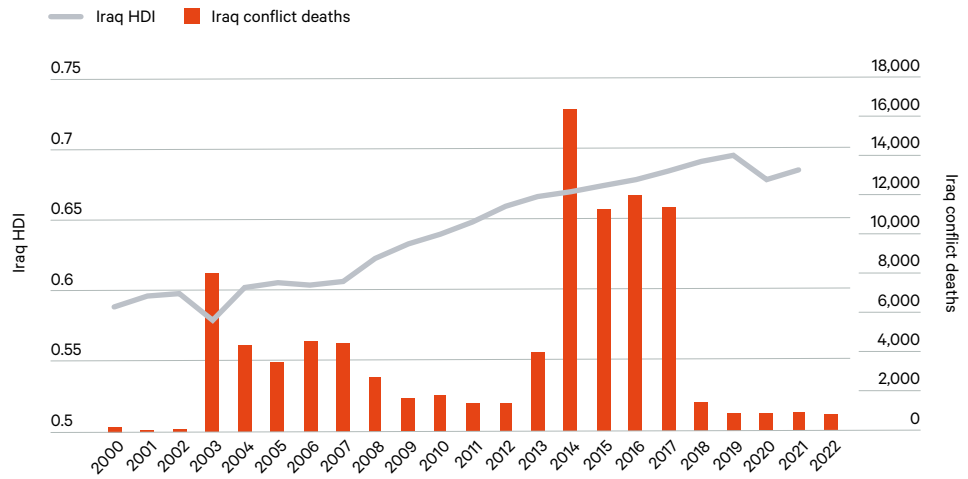
<sup>40</sup> Skelton, M. and Hussein, A. M. (2021), *Medicine Under Fire: How Corruption Erodes Healthcare in Iraq*, Beirut: Konrad Adenauer Stiftung, <https://www.kas.de/en/web/irak/single-title/-/content/medicine-under-fire>.

<sup>41</sup> Mansour, R. and Sirri, O. (2022), 'Moving medicine in Iraq: The political economy of the pharmaceutical trade', Chatham House Expert Comment, 8 June 2022, <https://www.chathamhouse.org/2022/06/moving-medicine-iraq-political-economy-pharmaceutical-trade>.

<sup>42</sup> Loveluck, L. and Salim, M. (2021), 'The U.S. built a hospital for Iraqi children with cancer. Corruption ravaged it', *Washington Post*, 16 December 2021, <https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/2021/12/16/iraq-hospital-corruption>.

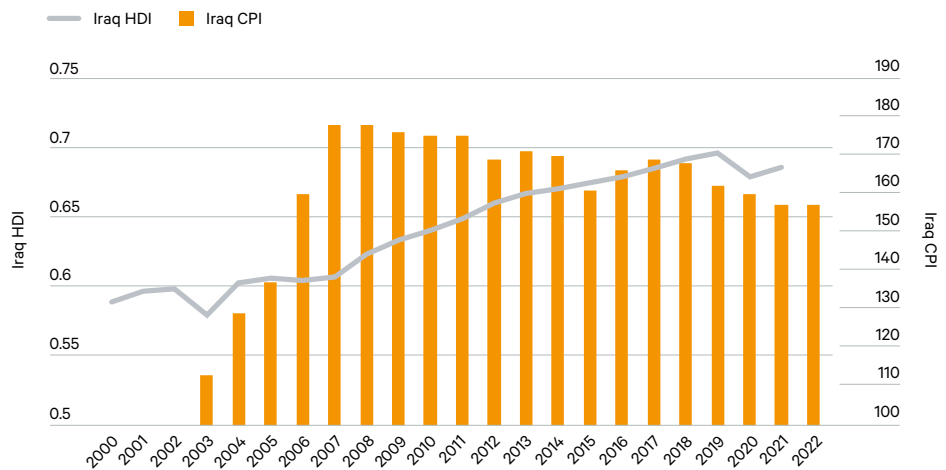
and standard of living.<sup>43</sup> However, Figure 3 shows that both perceptions of corruption (shown in red) and human development (in grey) have remained more consistent. As such, the settlement has reduced direct violence but has been unable to impact either corruption or its deadly consequences on human development.

**Figure 2.** Human development and the number of conflict-related deaths in Iraq, 2000–21



Source: UNDP (undated), 'Human Development Index (HDI)', <https://hdr.undp.org/data-center/human-development-index#/indicies/HDI> (accessed 13 Sep. 2023); and Uppsala Conflict Data Program (undated), 'UCDP Georeferenced Event Dataset (GED) Global Version 23.1', [https://ucdp.uu.se/downloads/index.html#ged\\_global](https://ucdp.uu.se/downloads/index.html#ged_global) (accessed 13 Sep. 2023).

**Figure 3.** Human development and perceptions of corruption in Iraq, 2000–21



Source: UNDP (undated), 'Human Development Index (HDI)', <https://hdr.undp.org/data-center/human-development-index#/indicies/HDI> (accessed 13 Sep. 2023); and Transparency International (2022), 'Corruption Perceptions Index', <https://www.transparency.org/en/cpi/2022> (accessed 13 Sep. 2023).

<sup>43</sup> According to the UN Development Programme, 'The Human Development Index (HDI) is a summary measure of average achievement in key dimensions of human development: a long and healthy life, being knowledgeable and having a decent standard of living. The HDI is the geometric mean of normalized indices for each of the three dimensions.' See UNDP (undated), 'Human Development Reports > Human Development Index (HDI)', <https://hdr.undp.org/data-center/human-development-index#/indicies/HDI>.

Many international stakeholders in Iraq are aware that support for the post-2003 political settlement tacitly condones corruption. Indeed, they have launched various initiatives to reduce that corruption and its impact on society and, more recently, have funded dialogue-based initiatives that bring together citizens with elites, in an attempt to create a conversation that could forge new forms of accountability. They also encourage the development of the private sector as a solution to the problem of corruption in the public sector.<sup>44</sup>

However, these initiatives have not dealt with the bigger, but less visible, violence which harms Iraqis every day – evident in Iraq’s consistently poor human development score. Due to international stakeholders’ fear of rekindling direct violence, their various initiatives have attempted to overcome the deadly consequences of the post-2003 political settlement without changing the nature of the underlying bargain – so the grey line above changes, but the other factors do not. For instance, on the issue of medicine unfit for consumption, policymakers still expressed concern that any intervention to combat this trade could ‘raise new instability risks within and across Iraq’s borders’. They asked, ‘what are the risk factors for resurgent conflict that arise from the exploitation of the pharma industry?’<sup>45</sup> Although many Iraqis struggled with everyday conflict because they could not receive adequate healthcare, many international policymakers viewed that harm as an unfortunate consequence of the necessary political settlement.

## **Due to international stakeholders’ fear of rekindling direct violence, their various initiatives have attempted to overcome the deadly consequences of the post-2003 political settlement without changing the nature of the underlying bargain.**

In that view, the presence of a government represents stability – irrespective of any corruption. Former Iraqi prime minister Haider al-Abadi claimed that the US supported his leadership not necessarily because they liked him, but because any incumbent was better than instability.<sup>46</sup> In 2022, a *Washington Post* article on Prime Minister Mustafa al-Kadhimi’s anti-corruption programme reported that, although diplomats were made aware of human rights abuses, ‘the international community did little to follow up on the claims’.<sup>47</sup> For many international statebuilders in Iraq, difficult questions about corruption or human rights abuses risk destabilizing the political system.

<sup>44</sup> Hamilton, A. (2020), *The political economy of economic policy in Iraq*, LSE Middle East Centre Paper Series (32), London: LSE Middle East Centre, [https://eprints.lse.ac.uk/104086/4/Hamilton\\_political\\_economy\\_of\\_economic\\_policy\\_iraq\\_published.pdf](https://eprints.lse.ac.uk/104086/4/Hamilton_political_economy_of_economic_policy_iraq_published.pdf).

<sup>45</sup> Briefings with Western officials, October 2022.

<sup>46</sup> Utv via YouTube (2023), ‘عقدان من التعقيد.. حيدر العبادي’ [‘Two decades of complexity... Haider al-Abadi’], video, 25 March 2023, [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=eBEJQ1-2PmI&ab\\_channel=Utv](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=eBEJQ1-2PmI&ab_channel=Utv).

<sup>47</sup> Loveluck, L. and Salim, M. (2022), ‘A U.S. ally in Iraq vowed to tackle corruption. Torture and extortion followed’, *Washington Post*, 21 December 2022, <https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/2022/12/21/iraq-kadhimi-corruption-committee-torture>.

When protests erupted calling for an end to the political settlement, the Iraqi elite doubled down, killing hundreds and wounding tens of thousands to keep their hold on power – an outbreak of vertical-direct violence. International actors condemned this violence,<sup>48</sup> but had few tools at their disposal except continuing to engage with the same elites that signed up to the settlement – which they viewed as the ultimate guarantor of relative stability.

## Lebanon

### Ethno-sectarian power sharing

A power-sharing agreement based on the allocation of political seats according to sectarian representation has been in place since the establishment of modern Lebanon in 1920. The rationale behind this system, first implemented when Lebanon was under a French mandate, was to guarantee political representation for Lebanon's main religious communities in a country where no single religious group has a clear majority. Christians are a minority in the Middle East as a whole, but in 1920 they constituted around one-half of the Lebanese population. The National Pact of 1943 – an unwritten part of the Lebanese constitution – reserved the position of president for Maronite Christians, while allocating the position of prime minister to Sunni Muslims and that of speaker of parliament to Shia Muslims.<sup>49</sup> Since then, the majority of political figures who have occupied those roles, as well as other prominent diplomatic and civil service positions, have hailed from elite families.

But this ethno-sectarian system failed to prevent violence from breaking out. Lebanon's different elites and their factions either disagreed on the political path that the country should take regarding regional developments in the Middle East, such as the stance towards the Israeli–Palestinian conflict or towards Iran's influence in the region; or they attempted to extend their own power at the expense of their rivals, whether the rivals were from the same or other religious communities. A short civil war in 1958 was followed by a much longer conflict, beginning in 1975 and ending with the Saudi-brokered Taif Agreement of 1989. The Taif Agreement was part of another elite pact that granted amnesty to the majority of warlords in Lebanon, and retained the pre-existing system of sectarian-based power-sharing.

However, the Taif Agreement stated that the political settlement included in it was intended to be temporary: that Lebanon would eventually replace the sectarian-based parliament with a secular parliament and create an upper house for the leaders of Lebanon's main religious groups. The agreement included neither a date for when this clause would be implemented or a mechanism by which it could be implemented.<sup>50</sup> Lebanon has therefore never implemented this clause of the Taif Agreement. The post-war political system still largely replicates

<sup>48</sup> UN News (2019), 'Denouncing attacks against Baghdad protesters, UN warns "violence risks placing Iraq on dangerous trajectory"', 7 December 2019, <https://news.un.org/en/story/2019/12/1053011>.

<sup>49</sup> Cobban (1986), *The Making of Modern Lebanon*.

<sup>50</sup> McCulloch, A. (2017), 'Pathways from power-sharing', *Civil Wars*, 19(4), pp. 405–24, <https://doi.org/10.1080/13698249.2017.1419001>.

the pre-war system. However, as an incentive to end direct violence, the post-war elite pact came with an allocation of resources which favoured all of Lebanon's political elites. This allowed them to increase their personal wealth by syphoning state resources and profiteering with impunity.

### The structural violence of the elite bargain

Although Lebanon has not witnessed large-scale direct violence among its elites since the end of the civil war, inter-elite bargaining has not prevented political violence from taking place. Since 2005, beginning with the killing of former prime minister Rafic Hariri, Lebanon has witnessed a series of assassinations of prominent figures who belonged to the political camp opposing Iranian influence.

The allocation of resources as part of the elite pact has also had a significantly harmful impact on the population. For example, the waste-processing company created after the civil war, Sukleen, had a board representing all of Lebanon's elite political stakeholders. The company charged the Lebanese state the world's highest rate per tonne for processing waste, and became a way for the country's previously warring elites to access and acquire public money. When the contract between Sukleen and the Lebanese state expired in 2015, the elite stakeholders in the company disagreed among themselves regarding the terms of a potential renewal. This quickly led to refuse piling up in the streets, prompting a series of popular protests that escalated from demands for the restoration of basic waste collection services to calls for the government to resign. The protesters used the slogan 'You Stink' as a reference both to the waste-processing crisis and to the elite in a corrupt political system.<sup>51</sup> In 2017, Human Rights Watch reported an increase in respiratory illnesses among residents of areas where waste was burned during the 2015 crisis.<sup>52</sup>

Lebanon's banking system became another route for elites to profit from the state. Many political leaders had stakes in Lebanese banks, which lent the state money at high interest rates. The Central Bank also facilitated access to low-interest mortgages for members of the elite. Such schemes – based on institutionalized corruption – drained state resources. By 2019, Lebanon had entered a period of financial collapse and, by 2022, 80 per cent of the country's population was reported to be living in poverty.<sup>53</sup>

Similarly, the Beirut port explosion of August 2020 can be attributed to the lack of checks and balances on activities in the port. This negligence was directly linked to the elite's vested interests in the port, including being able to import goods without paying customs fees. The absence of oversight at the port contributed to the blast, as a result of which 219 people were killed and 250,000 people lost their homes.

<sup>51</sup> Kraidy, M. M. (2016), 'Trashing the sectarian system? Lebanon's "You Stink" movement and the making of affective publics', *Communication and the Public*, 1(1), pp. 19–26, <https://doi.org/10.1177/2057047315617943>.

<sup>52</sup> Human Rights Watch (2017), *As If You're Inhaling Your Death: The Health Risks of Burning Waste in Lebanon*, report, New York: Human Rights Watch, [https://www.hrw.org/sites/default/files/report\\_pdf/lebanon1117\\_web\\_1.pdf](https://www.hrw.org/sites/default/files/report_pdf/lebanon1117_web_1.pdf).

<sup>53</sup> Azhari, T. and Bassam, L. (2022), 'Poverty in Lebanon's "city of billionaires" drives deadly migration', Reuters, 26 September 2022, <https://www.reuters.com/world/middle-east/poverty-lebanons-city-billionaires-drives-deadly-migration-2022-09-25>.

New waves of protests against the political system began in 2019, and at the 2022 parliamentary elections a small number of independent, reform-oriented politicians secured parliamentary seats for the first time. However, many policymakers from the Global North dismissed these events as being insufficient to loosen the grip of the elites on power in Lebanon.<sup>54</sup>

Foreign aid flowing into Lebanon is mainly directed towards humanitarian causes, such as food security, and the country's military institutions. Comparatively little attention is given to the structural violence born of the elite pact that continues to rule the country. The stance taken by policymakers from the Global North towards Lebanon is primarily driven by their adoption of an understanding of peacebuilding as being based on averting direct violence, whether vertical or horizontal. Those policymakers regard Lebanon's elite pact as an imperfect but functioning tool for stopping direct violence. While they acknowledge that vertical-structural violence is causing the protests, they believe that the status quo remains workable as a measure for protecting Lebanon from direct violence on a large scale.<sup>55</sup>

### **Policy implications**

As in Iraq, a series of national dialogues have been held in Lebanon over the years to try to resolve political tensions that periodically arise among the elites, including a prominent dialogue brokered by Qatar in 2008, which resulted in the agreement on a cabinet seat distribution that gives the pro-Iran camp veto power over cabinet decisions.<sup>56</sup> But these national dialogues have always been a platform for the elite to revise the pact in such a way as to maintain the status quo rather than to reform the political system. External powers like Qatar and Saudi Arabia, backed by policymakers from the Global North, have only intervened diplomatically when Lebanon's elite pact appeared to be at risk of collapse amid internal tensions, rather than when those outside of the pact challenged it. This understanding of stability based on direct violence, whether vertical or horizontal, mirrors that of policymakers from the Global North. Often, Global North governments approach elites in Lebanon as the country's legitimate interlocutors, which the Lebanese elites in turn regard as a sign of Western acceptance of the status quo. In some cases, Lebanese elite figures even perceive themselves as clients of Western patrons like France or the US.<sup>57</sup>

When international policymakers have intervened in Lebanon, such as when potential International Monetary Fund (IMF) assistance was offered post-2019, the elite pact has shown itself to be resistant to change. The IMF insisted that economic reforms be undertaken before it gave any loan to help alleviate Lebanon's severe financial crisis. But the country's elites have not rushed to act – and have shown no willingness to reform a system in which they are beneficiaries. In other words,

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<sup>54</sup> Face-to-face (in Beirut, London and Washington, DC) and online interviews by the authors with British, EU and US policymakers between 2019 and 2022.

<sup>55</sup> Ibid.

<sup>56</sup> Worth, R. and Bakri, N. (2008), 'Deal for Lebanese Factions Leaves Hezbollah Stronger', *New York Times*, 22 May 2008, <https://www.nytimes.com/2008/05/22/world/middleeast/22lebanon.html?smid=nytcore-ios-share&referringSource=articleShare>.

<sup>57</sup> Cobban, H. (1986), *The Making of Modern Lebanon*, London: Routledge.



the ruling elite do not have the political will to enact such a reform.<sup>58</sup> That ordinary people will continue to suffer without reforms such as those demanded by the IMF has not changed the minds of those invested in the elite pact.

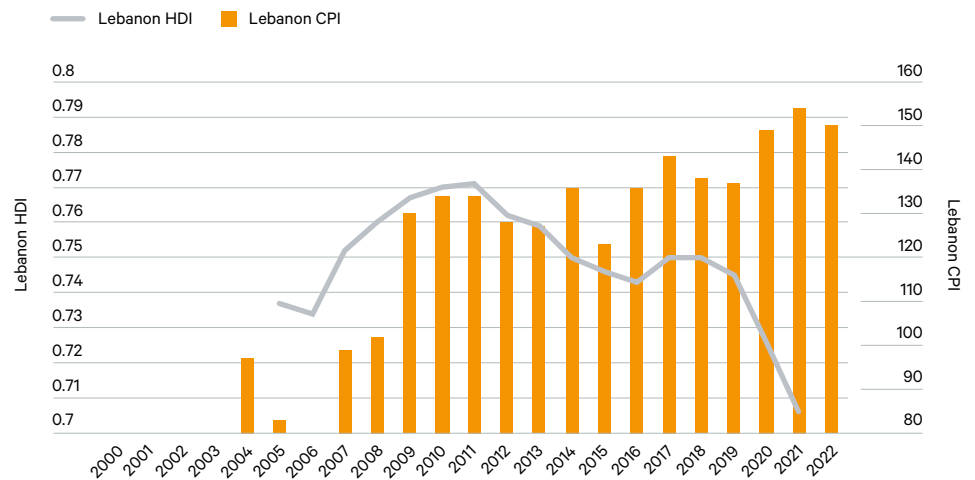
Figure 4 shows that direct violence in Lebanon has not reached the levels seen in Iraq or Libya since 2000. Yet periods of ‘stability’ have also failed to deliver improvements in terms of human development.

**Figure 4.** Human development and conflict-related deaths in Lebanon, 2000–21



Source: See Figure 2.

**Figure 5.** Human development and perceptions of corruption in Lebanon, 2000–21



Source: See Figure 3.

<sup>58</sup> Bogaards, M. (2019), ‘Formal and informal consociational institutions: A comparison of the National Pact and the Taif Agreement in Lebanon’, *Nationalism and Ethnic Politics*, 25(1), pp. 27–42, <https://doi.org/10.1080/13537113.2019.1565176>.

## Libya

### The formation of the elite bargain

There have been two broad phases of international engagement with Libya's political process. The first, during 2011–14, saw military intervention to support those opposing the regime of Muammar Gaddafi and then democratic transition through elections and a constitution-building process. The second, since 2014, has primarily focused on reaching a political settlement to reunite divided rival authorities, agree on a roadmap towards a constitutional framework and elect a new government. In this second phase, international attempts to manage the conflict have been at odds with the stated, democratic goals of the transition. The elite bargain has failed to prevent the outbreak of large-scale conflicts between rival elites (direct-horizontal violence), but it is enduring and presiding over the state's decline.

Following the overthrow of Gaddafi in 2011, the international community – led by the UN – supported attempts to forge a new political settlement among Libyans. Elections were held in 2012 for a new parliament and, in February 2014, a constitutional drafting assembly was also elected. Yet, the democratic transition never materialized, and by 2015 two rival governments had emerged.

### **The collapse of the election cycle, and the subsequent elite recapture of the political process, both highlight the self-interest of individuals sometimes known as the 'status quo' actors.**

Further internationally mediated political processes sought to end the governance divide through use of elite bargains. The first, in 2015, was the UN-brokered Libyan Political Agreement that brought together Libyan elites to reach a deal over the formation of a new Government of National Accord (GNA). Yet key figures opposed the final agreement and it had limited societal support. In particular, Khalifa Haftar, a prominent armed group commander, was excluded. As a result, authorities based in the east of the country – which territory was increasingly under Haftar's direct influence – declined to recognize the GNA, leaving divisions over the governance of the country unresolved.

A second attempt to form an elite bargain emerged in the aftermath of a further outbreak of horizontal-direct violence. In April 2019, Haftar's forces attacked the capital, Tripoli, with support from international backers and foreign mercenaries. After an agreed ceasefire, UN-mediated dialogue resulted in the formation of a Government of National Unity (GNU) in late 2020. The GNU was ratified in March 2021, becoming the first unified government in Libya since 2014. It was intended to deliver the limited mandate of reunifying the state's institutions and readying the country for elections mooted for December that year. However, the election process would soon also be derailed.

The collapse of the election cycle, and the subsequent elite recapture of the political process, both highlight the self-interest of individuals sometimes known as the ‘status quo actors’ – i.e. those figures who have been in post for a decade (or more, in many cases), and who lack legitimacy in the view of the Libyan population. The House of Representatives (the chronically divided legislature); the High State Council (the consultative body created by the Libyan Political Agreement); and the GNU are all currently operating despite their mandates having expired. The terms of leaders of key state institutions such as the Audit Bureau have also expired. Yet these leaders leverage the political power gained through control of the institutions to retain their positions. Leaders of armed groups then bargain with those political leaders for power, influence and funding from the state in return for their allegiance.

The primary goal of this dynamic bargaining is to sustain the system itself. While these elites appear on the surface to be enemies, the continuing balance of power among them is critical to their survival. Alliances therefore form between competing institutional leaders, armed factions and technocrats, who trade control of parcels of the state in return for ‘stability’.

The only meaningful political progress achieved since 2016 has taken place when the monopoly of these elites over the political process has been broken. The formulation of a Libyan Political Dialogue Forum – which added new stakeholders, including civil society figures, to dilute the hold of existing institutions – led to the selection of the GNU via UN mediation in 2021. Notwithstanding this development, international commitment to broader engagement has been questionable. In 2019, the UN planned to host a so-called ‘national conference’ to bring together Libyan parties to agree on a political roadmap. Yet, in reality, this conference was not the critical venue for negotiations – in the months leading up to the national conference, talks had already been taking place in Abu Dhabi between Haftar and the then GNA prime minister Fayeze al-Serraj.

### **The structural violence of the elite bargain**

Libya’s developing settlement has failed to prevent the outbreak of direct violence, although the death toll has been considerably lower than elsewhere in the MENA region. The Armed Conflict Location & Event Data Project calculated that more than 4,500 Iraqis died in 2022 from incidents of political violence, compared with 147 Libyans.<sup>59</sup> The scale of structural violence in Libya is, however, notable and growing. Despite Libya’s massive oil wealth and its relatively small population, in 2022 the UN assessed that 24 per cent of women and 30 per cent of children in Libya required targeted humanitarian assistance.<sup>60</sup>

Libyans must contend with practically non-existent public services. As in Iraq, the health sector illustrates how the population suffers from the effects of structural violence. The Central Bank of Libya reported that LD 1.8 billion (\$376 million) was

<sup>59</sup> The Armed Conflict Location & Event Data Project (2023), ‘ACLED Dashboard’, <https://acleddata.com/dashboard/#/dashboard> (accessed on 14 July 2023).

<sup>60</sup> OCHA (2022), *Humanitarian Overview 2023: Libya*, report, *ReliefWeb*, December 2022, p. 3, <https://reliefweb.int/report/libya/libya-humanitarian-overview-2023-december-2022>.

allocated to the medical supply department of the Ministry of Health in 2022.<sup>61</sup> However, in February 2023, the administration office of Tripoli Central Hospital – one of Libya’s largest public hospitals – issued a circular instructing staff that no further patients could be admitted because the hospital had run out of oxygen.<sup>62</sup> In March 2023, Tripoli’s blood bank warned that it could no longer receive blood donations because it had been unable to obtain the necessary blood bags and equipment through the authorities.<sup>63</sup>

A doctor working at the hospital told Chatham House that patients are given prescriptions to buy their own saline solution for intravenous drips, even if they are admitted to the intensive care unit. The doctor had no doubt that these failings increased patients’ suffering.<sup>64</sup> The lack of services is more pronounced beyond Tripoli. A resident of the border town of Ghadames told Chatham House that women in need of maternity services must travel over five hours by car for treatment at hospitals in the capital.<sup>65</sup>

These shortcomings are not simply due to institutional failings. Corruption is a major cause of the health ministry’s challenges. In March 2019, the Libyan health minister stated that the mismanagement and rampant corruption in the medical supply system in Tripoli were causing great harm to citizens.<sup>66</sup> In January 2022, Libyan officials were arrested on suspicion of importing oxygen at 10 times the market value amid the government’s attempts to tackle the COVID-19 pandemic.<sup>67</sup> This is worth noting given the failures of the oxygen supply chain noted at the Tripoli hospital the following year.

Libyans asked about the poor state of the health sector said that the cooperation between the public and private sectors over corruption was to blame, with corrupt officials and armed groups at the centre of these developments.<sup>68</sup> The doctor working at Tripoli Central Hospital noted that a militia leader was authorizing payment orders through the hospital, and that the director of the hospital could do little without that militia leader’s agreement.<sup>69</sup> Well-placed sources note that the Libyan health ministry’s medical supply department has been under the influence of armed actors since at least 2012.<sup>70</sup> Given its importance to citizens’ health, the department’s budget has functioned and continued to be spent without interruption, unlike the budgets of most other state-funded entities. This has made the medical supply budget a prime target for both import/export fraud

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<sup>61</sup> Central Bank of Libya (2023), ‘Revenue and Expenditure Statement from 01/01/2022 to 31/12/2022’, <https://cbl.gov.ly/en/wp-content/uploads/sites/2/2023/01/Official-Statement-Dec-2022.pdf>.

<sup>62</sup> Unpublished Tripoli Central Hospital circular, 18 March 2023, seen by Chatham House.

<sup>63</sup> Facebook (2023), ‘Central Blood Bank – Tripoli’, 10 March 2023, [https://www.facebook.com/CBB.Tripoli?locale=ar\\_AR](https://www.facebook.com/CBB.Tripoli?locale=ar_AR).

<sup>64</sup> Interview with doctor working at Tripoli Central Hospital, March 2023.

<sup>65</sup> Chatham House interview with resident of Ghadames, March 2023.

<sup>66</sup> Libyan Al Hadath, ‘Minister of Health: 7 billion dinars were spent on the medical supply system, and hospitals still lack the most basic needs’, 19 March 2023, <https://www.libyaakhbar.com/libya-news/2110587.html>.

<sup>67</sup> Arab Weekly (2022), ‘Libya health minister arrested over graft probe into COVID oxygen imports’, 27 January 2022, <https://theArabweekly.com/libya-health-minister-arrested-over-graft-probe-covid-oxygen-imports>.

<sup>68</sup> Chatham House roundtable with 12 Libyan civil society figures, March 2023.

<sup>69</sup> Interview with doctor working at Tripoli Central Hospital, March 2023.

<sup>70</sup> Chatham House interviews with Libyan state officials and security sources, June 2023.

and profiteering. Locals report being forced to buy medicines in the private sector at exorbitant prices, despite subsidies for these medicines being in place. Insulin is a particularly notable example.<sup>71</sup>

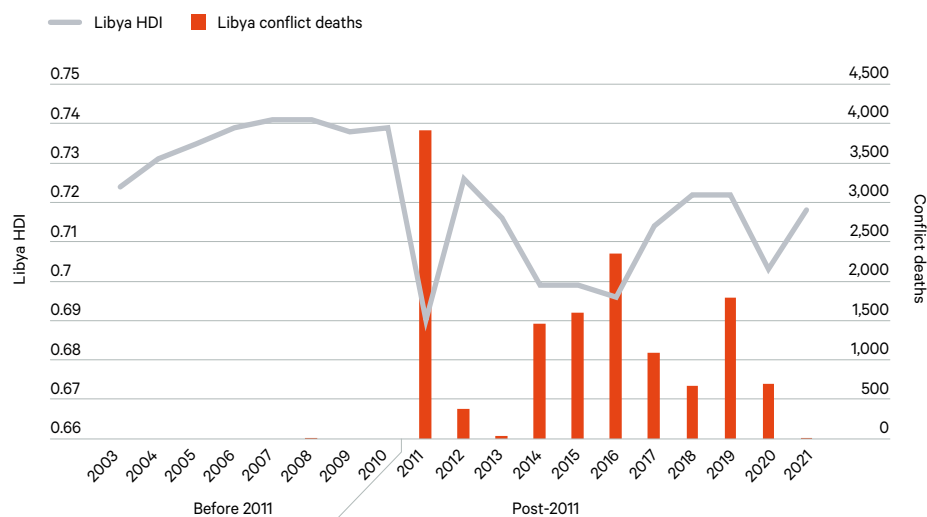
Chatham House interviews indicate that medical professionals believe shortages of some goods to be artificial, noting that officials in the Ministry of Health have formed their own companies to profit from the situation by fulfilling privately needs that are no longer served by the public sector.<sup>72</sup> Medicines subsidized by the government are on sale in shops for exorbitant prices, mirroring some of the developments described in Iraq.

### Policy implications

In Libya, as in Iraq and Lebanon, the primary concern of policymakers from the Global North has been to avert direct violence, particularly since 2016 as a policy of conflict transformation transitioned to a policy of conflict management. This approach has not worked on its own terms, as a major outbreak of violence occurred in 2019–20 and skirmishes continue, while structural violence has spiralled.

Comparing the number of deaths caused by direct violence with Libya’s score on the Human Development Index offers a means of exploring the correlation between the impact of direct violence on citizens’ lives. As Figure 6 illustrates, there is an indisputable correlation between outbreaks of direct violence and negative impacts on the lives of the Libyan population – as the visible spikes in violence in 2011, 2014–16 and 2019 show.

**Figure 6.** Human development and conflict-related deaths in Libya, 2003–21



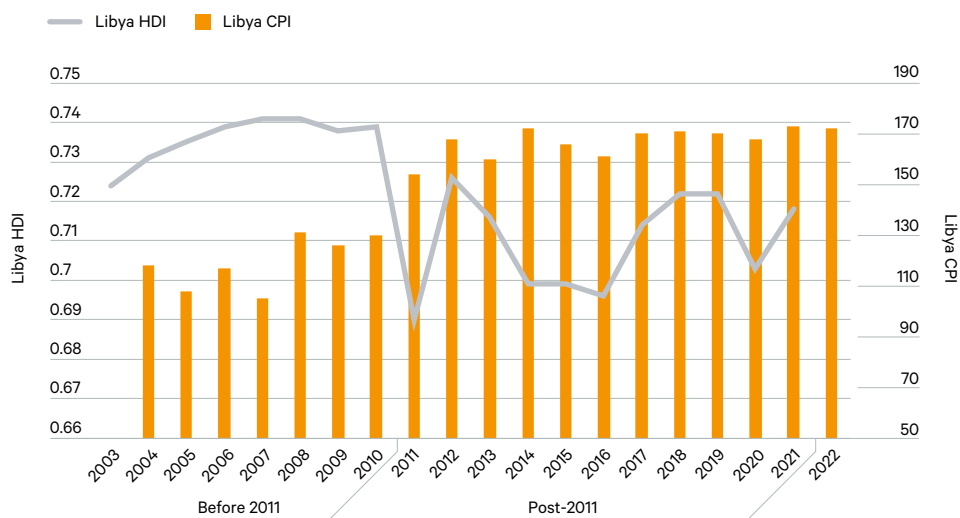
Source: See Figure 2.

<sup>71</sup> REACH Initiative (2017) ‘Market Systems in Libya: Assessment of the Wheat Flour, Insulin, Tomato and Soap Supply Chains’, report, *ReliefWeb*, October 2017, <https://reliefweb.int/report/libya/market-systems-libya-assessment-wheat-flour-insulin-tomato-and-soap-supply-chains>.

<sup>72</sup> Interviews with state officials, March 2023.

However, as Figure 7 illustrates, perceptions of corruption have spiked in the years following each of those outbreaks of direct violence. Despite the reduced levels of direct violence since then, perceptions of corruption remain high, with Libya ranking 171st out of 180 countries in Transparency International’s Corruption Perceptions Index.<sup>73</sup> These findings indicate that increasing levels of corruption can also function as a hindrance to human development.

**Figure 7.** Human development and perceptions of corruption in Libya, 2003–21



Source: See Figure 3.

With no meaningful political process in place, there is currently no route by which Libyans can replace their corrupt elite or even hold them to account. Meanwhile, Western officials have continued to prioritize stabilization over calling out the abuses of citizens. Elements of the Libyan state such as the Department for Countering Illegal Migration continue to be treated by Western governments and institutions as partners, despite widespread allegations of human rights violations and illicit activity.<sup>74</sup> Others are deemed too sensitive to target.<sup>75</sup>

There is also a question of the appropriate level of aspiration. One of the paper’s authors asked a prominent Western policymaker how they reflected on their time working on their country’s Libya file. The policymaker spoke of their success, noting that many larger crises had been averted during their tenure.<sup>76</sup> Yet, this measure of success would not be recognized as such by the Libyan population. For them, ‘stabilization’ in Libya is just papering over the cracks of national decline.

<sup>73</sup> Transparency International (2023), ‘Corruption Perceptions Index 2022 > Libya’, <https://www.transparency.org/en/cpi/2022/index/lby>.

<sup>74</sup> OHCHR (2023), ‘Report of the Independent Fact-Finding Mission on Libya’, 3 March 2023, <https://www.ohchr.org/en/hr-bodies/hrc/libya/index>, p. 4.

<sup>75</sup> Conversations with Western policymakers and enforcement officials, February and March 2023.

<sup>76</sup> Conversation with Western policymaker, July 2022.

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# 05 Addressing structural violence in political systems

**A series of practical steps can be taken for which the capacity already exists. Stabilization policies must be revised to give greater voice to the population within negotiations. Moreover, stronger connections between reformists across government and society can help foster accountability.**

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This paper has illustrated that the means via which peace is negotiated will shape the ways in which a state evolves. External actors have played different roles in the development of the current Iraqi, Lebanese and Libyan political systems. In Iraq, Western intervention directly removed the Saddam Hussein regime, while in Libya, rebels drew critical support from a coalition of Western and Gulf Arab states to oust Gaddafi. In Lebanon, inter-elite and sectarian disputes were arbitrated by regional actors, with extensive intervention and interference on the part of Syria.

Despite the varying roles of external actors in securing the elite bargain in each context, support for political settlements among policymakers from the Global North has remained consistent and rarely questioned. This is because their primary objective is to avoid further outbreaks of direct violence. In both Iraq and Libya, stabilization policies continue to support elite bargains that reduce the likelihood of direct violence, even when doing so means overlooking anti-democratic and violent behaviours. In Lebanon, where Western states did not intervene, stabilization policies nonetheless continue to tacitly support the power-sharing system in place, despite the structural violence it has wrought on the everyday lives of people.

These elite bargains have often been celebrated by policymakers and some policy-oriented academics, who argue that a peace settlement is better than continued civil war. However, international statebuilders have struggled to reconcile their dual priorities of maintaining immediate stability, which a political settlement delivers, and promoting genuine democratic reform, which could minimize future violence stemming from corrupt political systems. Many of these policymakers are, of course, not oblivious to the challenges of corruption and the absence of a functional social contract in those countries. Indeed, they offer significant development aid, capacity-building support and technical cooperation aimed at addressing those very challenges. Too often, though, their political approaches work at cross-purposes to these efforts. For example, the provision of technical support to state institutions is not compatible with attempts to broker deals that split resources among rival elites.

### **International statebuilders have struggled to reconcile their dual priorities of maintaining immediate stability and promoting genuine democratic reform.**

Even with a revised approach by external policymakers, the transformation of existing elite-focused settlements into accountable, democratic political systems would be highly challenging. The cumulative effects of structural violence caused by elite capture are more difficult to isolate and demand longer-term policies with less visible immediate outcomes than the cessation of direct violence that can result from elite bargains. Here, capacity challenges and institutionalized constraints within Western states make it more difficult for those states to pursue such policies. The attention of senior Western politicians often moves from one conflict to the next and is fundamentally reactive. Longer-term policies with less visibility also offer less to the short-term and results-oriented policymaker, keen to make an impact during a short period in post. Moreover, there is an understandable desire among policymakers from the Global North to exercise caution. For these reasons, they often end up supporting the status quo out of fear that political change will create further unrest. For instance, at critical junctures like election periods in Iraq, those policymakers have supported status quo administrations despite being aware that these allies are committing human rights abuses against their population.<sup>77</sup>

Nonetheless, a series of practical steps can be taken for which the requisite capacity already exists. The most obvious point of entry is to seek to revise stabilization approaches to consider how an inter-elite power-sharing system affects local populations, and to give greater voice to those populations within negotiations, rather than assuming that a chosen elite will represent the interests of their social support network. However, in contexts where those systems are entrenched – such as those in Iraq, Lebanon and Libya – support should be aimed at increasing accountability within the political system.

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<sup>77</sup> Loveluck and Salim (2022), 'A U.S. ally in Iraq vowed to tackle corruption. Torture and extortion followed'.



### **Explore how people's everyday lives are impacted by the political system**

A better understanding of the causes and consequences of vertical-structural violence, and its links to the political system, can help policymakers to understand the practical, population-level effects of elite bargains. This must begin by actively collecting data on the structural effects of that system on society and including that data – on key elements such as corruption, transparency and social economic indicators – in assessments of the degree of stability that the political system possesses. This does not constitute a return to the former orthodoxy of the liberal peace model – which involves the simultaneous pursuit of conflict resolution, liberal democracy and market sovereignty – but instead would seek to correct the current policy bias manifested in the sole focus on direct forms of violence. Only through such a prism can a realistic basis for the development of complementary policymaking and programming be provided to support incremental reforms that can benefit the population.

Second, in Iraq, Lebanon and Libya, the networks of elites connected to the political system are not always in formal government positions. Sometimes, powerful brokers outside government or diplomatic channels still act as pivotal decision-makers in systems of corruption. In such cases, the key is to explore how networks of actors have captured government institutions that could otherwise protect citizens. At times, these networks will include parties that purport to be allies, who may promise democracy to international policymakers but may also engage in systemic corruption.<sup>78</sup> There is an inherent tension between the perceived need for policymakers to engage with these political elites to pursue political ends and the funding programmes that seek to counter corruption. For policymakers, therefore, understanding the connectivity of these networks of power and applying greater leverage on allies within a particular system can be important steps to navigating the structural barriers to governance reform.

### **Develop networks of like-minded reformists to counter vested interests among the elites**

Given the complex environment for institution-building in captured states, international policymakers should support a broader strategy for accountability. In Iraq, Lebanon and Libya, the judiciary and other accountability mechanisms have either been captured by the elite who sit inside and outside the government, or they lack the ability to hold key power-brokers accountable. As a result, simply working in a technical capacity with those judges or civil servants currently in post is counterproductive.

In all three of the reference countries, reform-oriented individuals still exist in each layer of the state – the executive, judiciary and legislature – and in society more widely. These are individuals who have proven to be technically capable and therefore indispensable in their roles. They also share a genuine willingness to pursue accountability and reduce corruption. But the nature of elite capture means that these individuals often work in silos, reducing the potential impact of their work, and leaving them feeling isolated and less able to effect change.

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<sup>78</sup> For more on this, see Mansour, R. and Salisbury, P. (2019), *Between Order and Chaos: A New Approach to Stalled State Transformations in Iraq and Yemen*, Research Paper, London: Royal Institute of International Affairs, <https://www.chathamhouse.org/2019/09/between-order-and-chaos>.

Efforts to identify these individuals and to increase connectivity and collaboration between them and powerful societal actors, such as journalists, academics and civil society activists, will increase their capacity to contribute to positive change from within the system. The main goal of this strategy of increasing accountability is to support the development of a sustainable network of reformists across state and non-state institutions. Therefore, it should ideally be led by local convening organizations, rather than by international actors directly.

**Support short-term, discrete initiatives that work towards long-term goals**

The end goal of policymakers' support for political settlements and the ensuing political systems should be the presence of strong accountability mechanisms. This would, of course, take decades to achieve. The process therefore requires discrete shorter-term policies that strive towards that long-term goal, and that can be championed by diplomats over the course of their short stints in the country. For instance, in Iraq, Lebanon and Libya, targeted support for efforts to increase the state's transparency, via an access-to-information law or enhanced requirements on public disclosure of budgetary spending, would be of significant benefit and could enhance civil society's ability to hold state institutions accountable. This could be achieved, for example, through an online initiative that tracks annual budgetary spending to check where state resources are going – to the benefit of the population or that of the governing elites. In any of these initiatives, it is crucial to link them to a broader strategy that seeks to hold to account the elite bargain and, as such, limit its potential to wreak structural violence in people's everyday lives. The role of international actors in this strategy would be to push their political networks – across the legislature and executive – to support such initiatives and call them out when they block them. Such initiatives should be seen as key aspects of any peace settlement, which otherwise may not seem peaceful to the people who live in it. Where such initiatives are not deemed to be politically possible, such as supporting a political deal that reinforces corruption as the price of alleviating armed contestation, policymakers should explicitly acknowledge the trade-offs of their approach in terms of the medium- and long-term costs likely to be borne by the population.

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