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The Role of External Actors in Shaping Political Stability in Countries of Consociational Democracy: The Case of Iraq

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Abstract

Objectives: The study examines the impact of domestic actors in consociational countries on external actors' role in shaping stability in these countries, taking Iraq as a case study. This role is typically studied from a top-down perspective, neglecting domestic actors' vital impact in shaping that role and stability in return.

Methods: The study employs a qualitative approach, interviewing top Iraqi decision-makers, senior diplomats, and specialised academics. Secondary sources were also used to integrate diverse perspectives for a deeper understanding of this complex trajectory.

Results: Although external actors, often powerful, play a greater role in shaping stability in typically weak consociational states, domestic actors significantly impact this role by designing either cooperative or confrontational platforms for external actors to operate in, fundamentally shaping stability there.

Conclusions: The consociational democracy theory has a structural flaw that encourages domestic actors to create a confrontational platform for external actors by freezing societal conflict and transferring it to the political arena through politicising sub-identities rather than resolving it. Thus, conflict becomes an attractive tool for elites to mobilise and garner societal and political support, leading to conflicting domestic politics that extend to foreign policy, reducing it to a mere instrument for appealing to contending communal groups, threatening stability, regardless of the effectiveness of the theory's domestic stabilisation mechanisms. Moreover, efforts to establish a cooperative platform usually arise only during crises, driven by survival needs, rendering the resulting stability temporary. Therefore, developing mechanisms to separate foreign policy from conflicting domestic politics is essential for sustainable stability.

Keywords: Consociationalism, Democracy, Identity, Iraq, Political Stability, and Sectarianism.

دور القوى الخارجية في رسم مسار الاستقرار السياسي للدول ذات الديمقراطية التو افقية: العراق أُنموذجاً

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مركز التاريخ والسياسة والشؤون الدوليَّة، كليَّة العلوم الاجتماعيَّة والإنسانيَّة في جامعة كيبانغسان، سيلانغور، ماليزيا.

ملخّص

الأهداف: تهدف الدراسة إلى بيان تأثير القوى الداخلية في الدول التوافقية على دور القوى الخارجية في تشكيل الاستقرار فيها، متخذةً العراق أنموذجًا للتحليل. غالبا ما يُدرس هذا الدور من منظور فوقي، دون إيلاء اهتمام كافٍ لتأثير القوى الداخلية الجوهري بصيرورة هذا الدور، وانعكاس ذلك على استقرار تلك الدول.

المنهجية: اعتمدت الدراسة المنهج النوعي عبر إجراء مقابلات مع كبار صناع القرار والدبلوماسيين العراقيين، وأكاديميين متخصصين، إلى جانب الاستعانة بمصادر ثانوية؛ وذلك لتحقيق فهم معمّق لهذه الديناميكيات المعقدة.

النتائج: على الرغم من أن القوى الخارجية، التي غالبا ما تكون قوية، تؤدي دورًا محوريًا يفوق دور القوى الداخلية بتشكيل مسار الاستقرار بالدول التوافقية التي عادة ما تكون ضعيفة، فإنَّ للقوى الداخلية دورًا حاسمًا في تحديد طبيعة هذا التأثير. فعبرَ تبني إطار تعاوني أو تصادمي ترسم القوى الداخلية الفضاء الذي تتفاعل ضمنه القوى الخارجية؛ مما يؤثّر جوهريًا في الاستقرار.

الخلاصة: تعاني نظرية الديمقراطية التوافقية من ثغرة هيكلية تتمثل في تشجيع القوى الداخلية على تشكيل إطار تصادمي للقوى الخارجية، وذلك بتجميد الصراع المجتمعي ونقله إلى الساحة السياسية عبر تسييس الهُويّات الفرعية بدلًا من معالجته؛ حيث يكون ذلك الصراع أداة جذابة للنخب السياسية للتعبئة واستقطاب الدعم المجتمعي والسياسي؛ مما يخلق سياسات محلية متصارعة، وهذا يمتد للسياسة الخارجية باختزالها إلى وسيلة لاستمالة المكونات المجتمعية المتصارعة، مهدّدًا الاستقرار الداخلي بغض النظر عن مدى فاعلية اليات الاستقرار المحلية للنظرية. لا تنشأ الجهود الرامية إلى بناء إطار تعاوني مع القوى الخارجية عادةً إلّا في أثناء الأزمات، مدفوعةً بحاجات البقاء؛ مما يجعل الاستقرار الناتج مؤقّتًا؛ لذا من الضروري إجراء دراسات لتطوير آليات تفصل السياسة الخارجية عن السياسات المحلية المتصارعة لضمان استقرار مستدام.

الكلمات الدالَّة: التوافقيَّة، الديمقراطيَّة، الهُويَّة، العراق، الاستقرار السياسي، الطائفيَّة.

1. Introduction

Consociationalism is often applied in weak countries, where the social fabric is divided, which creates a broader ground for instability. This trajectory necessitates consociationalism to stabilise the country by ensuring that each communal group (ethnic, sectarian, racial, etc.) is involved politically to safeguard its identity instead of pursuing violence.

This context indicates that countries adopting consociationalism remain relatively weak even after adopting such a governance model because it doesn't solve the social conflict; it freezes this conflict by politicising identity, which transfers the conflict into the political sphere. Such a conflicting socio-political trajectory often opens the door for external actors to significantly shape stability there in a way that often exceeds that of domestic actors.

Iraq, as a country of divided society, adopted consociationalism after being invaded by the US in 2003, and since then, external actors have significantly shaped stability there. This study covers the period of two consecutive prime ministers, Nouri Maliki's second term (2010-2014) and Haider Abadi (2014-2018). There are three reasons for such a scope: It is largely agreed that Iraq's decision-making under occupation from 2003 to 2011 was limited; it exercised full sovereignty only after the withdrawal of the US forces from Iraq. So, Maliki's first term (2006-2010) was under occupation. The two prime ministers governed Iraq in turn; they belonged to the same political party; they governed almost under the same circumstances but pursued different approaches towards external actors, which produced fundamentally different outcomes in terms of stability, revealing how significant the impact of domestic actors in shaping the role of external actors in countries like Iraq. Al-Maliki and Abadi's full terms clearly show the interaction between domestic and external actors in shaping Iraq's stability. In contrast, other prime ministers who ruled Iraq before the withdrawal of the US troops could not exercise full sovereignty. Also, after 2018, the reigns of the prime ministers were short-term: Adel Abdulmahdi governed Iraq for around a year (2018-2019), Mustafa Kadhimi continued for less than two years, leading a caretaker government (2020-2022), then Mohammed Sudani assumed office in October 2022 up to the present.

1.1 *Problem Statement*

The role of external actors in shaping stability in consociational countries is almost overlooked in the classical theory of consociational democracy; the second generation of this theory's advocates recognise it, but the theoretical gap lies in viewing this role as a one-way process, whereby this role is studied as a group of often two countries, shaping stability in consociational countries often positively, while the latter is viewed as a subject or recipient to such role, without addressing the picture as a two-way process whereby the domestic actors significantly impact the way external actors operate in these countries, making that role either positive or negative. This problem is significant, especially in countries beyond the European sphere, such as Iraq, Lebanon, and Cyprus, before its breakup in 1974, where many conflicting external actors significantly shaped stability there.

1.2 *Hypothesis*

This study hypothesises that the more domestic actors in consociational countries fail to dislodge foreign policy from conflicting domestic politics, the more they indirectly encourage external actors to destabilise these countries. This renders domestic stability mechanisms derived from consociational theory ineffective, irrespective of how robust they are, making the theory paradoxically conducive to instability beyond the European sphere.

1.3 *Question*

The study's question is: How do domestic actors in consociational countries affect the role of external actors in shaping stability in these countries?

1.4 *Purpose and Significance of the Study*

The study aims to investigate the impact of domestic actors in consociational countries on the external actors' role in shaping stability in these countries, taking Iraq as a case study.

The study is significant for revealing a structural flaw in the consociational theory when applied in countries beyond the European sphere, which indirectly facilitates instability by encouraging the domestic actors to create confrontational platforms for external actors that spur instability, irrespective of how efficient the theory's domestic stability mechanisms are. This flaw paradoxically makes embracing the theory of itself a recipe for instability. So, by focusing on Iraq as a fresh

case, the study empirically highlights a new testing field that may open up a new area in the consociationalism literature that needs to be addressed in pursuit of durable stability in countries like Iraq.

1.5 ***Theoretical Framework***

The study employs McCulloh and McEvoy's perspective that power-sharing is based on the interactive relations between adoptability and functionality, making the inability to adopt any of the key elements of consociationalism (grand coalition, mutual veto, proportionality and autonomy) contribute to the system to malfunction and produce instability (McCulloh & McEvoy, 2020). This study tries to broaden this perspective and argues that failure to approach external actors appropriately turns these actors into a significant driver for instability. Importantly, although Lijphart contends that embracing the above elements leads to communal segregation, which yields stability (Lijphart, 1977; 1999), practically and paradoxically, these elements encourage contending elites, for political reasons, to create a confrontational platform for external actors, incentivising them to clash in these countries by interacting mostly informally and secretly, primarily through supporting domestic actors that seek radical change versus status quo actors, which spurs instability. Ideally, detaching tense domestic politics from foreign policy by providing a cooperative platform that allows external actors to compete fairly in a state-to-state manner encourages them to contribute positively to stability, as the case of Iraq will demonstrate later.

2. Literature Review

Consociationalism is a mechanism of conflict management aimed at democratically remedying the governance crisis in divided societies by realising stability through power-sharing. It autonomously recognises the special status of communal groups and accommodates them within government on proportional grounds. Theoretically, consociationalism was developed mainly by Arend Lijphart through his initial works critiquing Gabriel Almond's argument that fragmented cultures lead to institutional instability. Lijphart contends that the Dutch democracy demonstrates that democratic institutions survive even in divided societies, concluding that the missing variable in Almond's above analysis was the 'elite cooperation' that could counteract societal fragmentation and produce stability (Lijphart, 1969; 1977; 1999). Such a focus on the elite led many scholars to label the theory as an elitist one (McGarry & O'Leary, 2009).

To realise stability in countries marked with, among other things, divided societies and foreign meddling, consociationalism needs four elements to function appropriately: 'government by a grand coalition', which states that all significant communal groups should participate in the government; Mutual veto', which grants minority groups the right to veto decisions that could damage their vital interests; 'proportionality' emphasises that communal groups should be represented proportionately to their numerical weight; 'autonomy' or communal segregation favours granting communal groups rights to run affairs that only concern them (Lijphart, 1969; 1977; 1999; Dodge, 2020; Dodge & Mansour, 2020), and reduces inter-communal group contact as O'Leary (2005:11) puts it: "Good fences make good neighbours.

Consociational theory entrenches communal divisions and conflict; it does not resolve that conflict; instead, it freezes the conflict (Jarstad, 2008: 125; Anderson, 2012: 70; Bourhrous et al., 2021), and neither does it seek to abolish segmental cleavages. This is well expressed by Lijphart himself, who argues that: "consociational democracy… make plural societies more thoroughly plural. Its approach is not to abolish or weaken segmental cleavages but to recognize them explicitly…" (Lijphart, 1977: 42). As such, Lijphart (1969: 216) defines consociationalism as "government by elite cartel designed to turn democracy with a fragmented political culture into a stable democracy".

As for the literature on the role of external actors in shaping stability in consociational countries, we may distinguish between two groups: first, the classical view embedded in the works of Lijphart, who believes that the existence of the 'external threats' serves mainly as a favourable factor for the adoption and maintenance of consociationalism, and more specifically by incentivising inter-elite cooperation (Lijphart, 1974). Secondly, the modern view advanced by the second generation of consociationalism advocates. Although this group broadly agree that the weakness and conflicting nature of domestic politics in consociational countries provide an opening for external actors to meddle in domestic affairs (McGarry, 2019; Jarstad, 2008; O'Leary, 2005; Baizidi, 2024), they disagree on the nature of that role and fall primarily into two parties: the first views the external role from a positive perspective, citing the need for the external role in adopting and

maintaining consociationalism (Walsh, 2017; McGarry & O'Leary, 2006). This party derived its findings primarily from the role of the UK and the Republic of Ireland in facilitating peace in Northern Ireland (McGarry & O'Leary, 2006; O'Leary, 2019). However, although this party recognises the role of external actors in shaping politics in consociational countries, it argues that consociationalism needs fewer roles for external actors, given the stability that it brings about internally (McGarry, 2019; O'Leary, 2013: 34). Conversely, another party raises doubts about the sustainability of consociationalism that relies on external actors, focusing on two main negative aspects: facilitating a culture of dependence, incapacitating domestic elite from playing an active role (Merdzanovic, 2017: 23; McEvoy & Abulatif, 2020). In line with this thinking, Jarstad and others referred to the crisis of legitimacy, saying that external actors are not held accountable by citizens of countries where they intervene, which may risk alienating citizens from democracy broadly (Jarstad, 2008; McCulloch & McEvoy, 2020). Also, consociationalism becomes less effective when the preferences of the external actors clash with those of the domestic ones (Jarstad, 2008; Dodge, 2023)

In reviewing the above studies, we may critique them from two angels: narrowly, most of these studies assume that the external actors follow similar agendas towards consociational countries-be it positive or negative roles- neglecting that there could be many external actors involved in these countries and these actors, especially in the Middle East, tend to clash with each other inside these countries given the latter weakness and more importantly, many of these countries such as Iraq have social fabric (ethnic, religious, sectarian, linguistic, etc., groups) with extensions beyond their borders, such as the Kurds living in Iraq, Syria, Iran, and Turkey, which easily justifies the intervention of external actors in domestic affairs under the pretext of protecting their fellow group, legitimising in a way or another the acts of these actors. Significantly, this trajectory runs against Lijphart's above argument that external threat serves as a factor unifying the elite, as the external actors, by contrast, help further divide the society under such circumstances since the already divisive nature of the latter amid weak overarching identity does not provide a context to view the external actors as a threat as much as they are viewed as partners based on communal affiliations of each group. Relatedly, the relations between communal groups are often antagonistic, which induces external actors to support one group against another. This is indirectly acknowledged by Pirsoul (2019), who employs the theory of recognition in his analysis of the nexus between identity and politics, which leads him to conclude that when a communal group seeks recognition from other groups, it places itself in a vulnerable position, susceptible to be manipulated by external actors.

Broadly, almost all existing literature views the role of external actors through a one-way process, whereby this role is studied as a group of relatively similar agendas shaping stability in consociational countries, without viewing it as a two-way process whereby the domestic actors significantly impact the way these actors operate in these countries, making that role either positive or negative in terms of stability, as this study will demonstrate.

3. Methodology and Data

The study employs the 'explanatory approach' as a research design because it provides a causal analysis of the study's variables. As for the research method, the study utilises the qualitative method, conducting semi-structured interviews between March and August of 2024 with 16 individuals, divided into three categories: firstly, three Iraqi decision-makers, selected based on their knowledge of the topic, involved in shaping critical aspects that this research covers and ensuring the representativeness of the Iraqi three communal groups: Sunni Saleem Jburi, former parliament speaker, Shiite Hakim Zamili, former parliament deputy speaker, and Kurdish Zian Rasheed, former parliamentarian. Secondly, ten high-ranking officials at the Iraqi Ministry of Foreign Affairs (MOFA). Thirdly, three academics were selected based on their knowledge of the topic: Dr Taha Al-Anbki, Dr Mohammed Adnan, and Dr Yasser Abdulhussain. The motive for such a choice is to facilitate an in-depth understanding by combining decision-makers and diplomats' perspectives, which are derived directly from the field relating to the study, in addition to the academic perspective that holistically and critically investigates the scene. Additionally, the study reviews relevant official documents and the literature on broader consociationalism, mainly external actors' role in shaping stability.

4. Results

As Table One demonstrates, Iraq, in post-2003, was a weak country plagued by severe socio-political tension. Such context, along with Iraq's special geostrategic location, surrounded by various powerful and conflicting neighbouring countries, who mostly have religious and ethnic ties with Iraq's communal groups, opened the door for external actors to be heavily involved in Iraq's domestic affairs. Critically, the role of external actors in shaping stability in Iraq was more evident, with differing implications during the second term of the Al-Maliki (2010-2014) and Abadi governments (2014-2018), as will be shown.

Table 1. Chronology of key turns in the post-2003 Iraq

Year	Events	Notes
2003	Invasion of Iraq by the US-led Coalition.	On March 20, 2003, the war was launched against Iraq, and after three weeks, the Baathist regime fell.
2003	The US-led coalition disbanded the Baath party, the Iraqi army and all security agencies.	
2003	De-Bathification	The campaign of de-Baathification, initiated by the US and the Iraqi elite, eliminated senior members of the Baathist regime from the new state institutions, firing over 40,000 senior members of the civil service.
2003	Adoption of consociationalism.	The US and the Iraqi elite, who were in exile before 2003, introduced consociationalism as a system of governance, distributing posts based on each communal group's numerical weight. As such, the Shiites gained the post of prime minister, the Sunnis held the parliament's speaker, and the Kurds got the president. Accordingly, the atmosphere of ethno-sectarian politics swept fast into almost all aspects of life, turning ethno-sectarian identity into a new currency of political dealings and deeply dividing society along identity lines.
2003-2005	The Sunnis boycotted the new political system.	Some of the Sunnis resorted to military means to overthrow the new political system.
2005	Iraqi permanent constitution	The overwhelming majority in both Shiite and Kurdish areas voted for the 2005 constitution in a national referendum, while the Sunni areas largely boycotted it.
2005-2007	Civil war	The war broke out between the Shiites and the Sunnis. It ended primarily when the Sunnis engaged in the government and mobilised against Al-Qaeda.
2011	Withdrawal of US troops from Iraq.	This came, among other things, as a result of heavy Iraqi armed resistance that imposed substantial financial burdens on the US, besides the thousands of American causalities.
2014	Rise of ISIS in Iraq after occupying a third of Iraq's territory and collapse of the Iraqi military.	This led Ayatollah Sistani, Iraq's prominent Shiite cleric, to issue a fatwa to resist ISIS. So, the Popular Mobilization Forces (PMF) were established as a parallel body to the regular army.
July 2017	Defeating ISIS and liberating Iraqi cities.	The Iraqi armed forces, along with the Popular Mobilization and assistance from numerous international actors, chiefly Iran and the United States, enabled Iraq to defeat ISIS militarily.
September 2017	The Kurds held a referendum to secede from Iraq.	The Iraqi government rejected the referendum, and most international actors did not support it, resulting in its failure.

Sources: (Al-Imarah and Abadi, 2024).

4.1 ***Al-Maliki 2010-2014 Government***

During his first term (2006-2010), Al-Maliki, assisted by the US, had notable successes, especially on the security front, which had the most significant priority given the severe instability plaguing Iraq in the aftermath of 2003. Following the success of involving the Sunnis in government, Al-Maliki and the US launched several military campaigns that defeated Al-Qaeda in Iraq, which ended the civil war (2005-2007) (McEvoy & Aboultaif, 2020). After that, Al-Maliki initiated a military campaign against the Shiite Sadrists, who were controlling many cities; he managed to defeat them, reestablishing government control in 2008. Overall, these triumphs, which reduced violence and ensured relative stability, marked a significant juncture in Iraq and abroad, presenting Al-Maliki as an Iraqi nationalist and the country's saviour (Dodge, 2013; Al-Qarawee, 2014; 2016; Mansour, 2017).

The above successes encouraged Al-Maliki to pursue a relatively nationalistic agenda, hoping that such a pursuit may give him further electoral support beyond the Shiite sphere, ultimately facilitating his bid for a second term, given the fact that he assumed the premiership in 2006 for being a weak compromise candidate assisted by the elite with no electoral support (Adnan, personal communication, 5 May 2024).

The participation of all significant communal groups marked the 2010 election; according to the Iraq High Electoral Commission, 297 political parties vied for 325 seats, and voter turnout was 60.67%. Notably, despite the participation of numerous political parties, only four blocs representing the ethno-sectarian lines gained 90.1% of the seats: the Iraqiya bloc, led by Allawi, representing mostly the Sunnis, won the highest number of votes, earning 91 seats. Just behind Iraqiya was the Shiite State of Law bloc, led by Al-Maliki, which secured 89 seats. Another Shiite bloc, the Iraqi National Alliance, secured 70 seats, while the Kurdistan Alliance received 43 seats (Katzman, 2011).

The 2010 election, as shown, did not result in a specific bloc winning the absolute majority. Thus, intense contest among the political parties for the senior posts erupted, especially over the premiership between Maliki and Allawi. The former asserts his right to a second term, and the latter insists on the election results that gave him the highest seats. During his interview, Al-Anbki (personal communication, 30 April 2024) said that such an electoral outcome was shocking for Al-Maliki, who had thought he would secure the premiership easily, given the successes he had made.

Moreover, this surprising electoral outcome dramatically transformed Al-Maliki's agenda from nationalist to sectarian after realising that inter-communal tension does not significantly support nationalistic trends (Adnan, personal communication 5 May 2024). So, in his pursuit to obtain a second term, Al-Maliki followed a two-dimension strategy: domestically, he heavily mobilised the Shiites to support him, triggering fears that Iraqiya would bring back the Baathists to power and marginalise the Shiites again. Such a move embarrassed other Shiite parties in the eyes of their social bases, especially the Sadrists who had opposed the second term (Al-Qarawee, 2014; Mansour, 2017). Externally, Al-Maliki reached out to Iran, which had its influence in Iraq increased significantly in parallel with the US troop's gradual withdrawal from Iraq concluded in 2011; its image was appealing to the Shiites, who perceived it as a protector of the Shiites around the world (MOFA officials, personal communications, 27 March 2024). Iran seized such an endeavour to advance its ideology and interests in Iraq further. Thus, Iran played a crucial role in supporting Al-Maliki by unifying Shiite parties, bridging the gap between Kurdish and Shiite parties, and weakening the Sunni parties that opposed Al-Maliki, which would culminate later with the fragmentation of the Allawi-led Iraqiya bloc (Katzman, 2010; Al-Qarawee, 2014; Mansour, 2017; Loft, 2022).

Al-Maliki's above strategy, the protracted stalemate of government formation, and the risk of further violence, besides the US pressures on Iraq's elite to break the long stalemate and its implicit support for Al-Maliki (MOFA officials, personal communication, 17 June 2024, and Zamili, 3 August 2024) led the Iraqi elite to accept Al-Maliki's nomination in November 2010 within the so-called 'Erbil agreement', whereby the elite reiterated their commitment to consociationalism and distributing senior positions among the communal groups (Al-Qarawee, 2014; Fantappie, 2013). So, on 21 December 2010, after nine months and 14 days of the political stalemate, the Parliament unanimously approved Maliki's cabinet (Charles & Julie, 2011; Stewart-Jolley, 2021; Katzman, 2011).

After forming a consensus government involving all significant communal groups, Al-Maliki started working against its principles by monopolising power, marginalising other groups, and further intensifying his sectarian rhetoric; this was

to maintain the political support that granted him a second term after realising that such support was crucial in offsetting his electoral defeat (Jburi, personal communication, 8 May 2024, and Rasheed, 10 July 2024). Critically, Al-Maliki's moves were mainly facilitated by the US troop's withdrawal from Iraq in December 2011, which used to act as a check against the abuse of power (Rowan, 2015; McEvoy & Abulatif, 2020).

Thus, Al-Maliki followed a divide-and-rule strategy against his opponents. In 2011, he charged the Sunni Tariq Hashimi, who was vice-president, with terrorism, forcing him to flee the country. Also, in 2012, there was a raid on the Sunni Minister of Finance Rafaa al-Esawi's ministry, house and office, arresting his guards and accusing them of terrorism-related offences. Besides, Al-Maliki utilised De-Bathification to undermine his opponents further (Dodge & Wasser, 2014; McEvoy & Aboultaif, 2020; Al-Qarawee, 2014).

As for foreign relations, given the tense inter-communal relations driven largely by politicising ethno-sectarian identity under consociationalism and Al-Maliki attempting to utilise that for political gains, especially by creating an external threat, he strained diplomatic ties with most Sunni Gulf countries and Turkey while simultaneously moving further toward Iran. Such a discourse peaked later when Al-Maliki severed diplomatic relations with Iraq's neighbours in the Gulf, whom he accused of funding terrorism in Iraq (Al-Qarawee, 2016; IRIS, 2018; Fantappie, 2023).

The reaction to Al-Maliki's policies took two main forms: domestically, the Sunnis, Kurds and Sadristis initiated a vote of no confidence in 2012. They collected signatures from MPs who pledged their backing before the vote. An absolute majority was attained. However, this step was not realised as some MPs withdrew their signatures at the last minute due to a counter-strategy initiated by Iran and Al-Maliki (Abdul-Zahra, 2012; Mansour, 2017). Forming a Sunni region also endeavoured to counter Al-Maliki's monopolising policies in October 2011. This move triggered strong opposition from Al-Maliki, who blocked any attempt to devolve power that may undermine his authority (O'Driscoll, 2018; O'Driscoll & Costantini, 2023; Abulatif, 2020; Al-Qarawee, 2014).

Externally, the Gulf countries and Turkey, to some extent, were driven by Iraqi Sunni grievances, which embarrassed them domestically, besides the growing influence of Iran inside Iraq, which narrowed their influence in return and pushed them to exercise their role in Iraq mostly informally by supporting contending communal groups, the Sunnis in particular through various means. They acted to isolate Iraq internationally, chiefly by labelling the Iraqi government and the army as being dominated by the Shiites committing horrible crimes against other groups. This further damaged Iraq's image and deprived it of foreign investment and international interaction. Also, these countries were hosting some extremist Sunni figures and providing them with financial and powerful media platforms directed against the Shiites and the new political system in Iraq; at the same time, Iran was disseminating a counter-Sunni narrative, utilising its vast formal and informal network inside Iraq. Overall, such a trajectory further galvanised sectarianism in Iraq and led thousands of recruits from the Sunni world to join Al-Qaeda and other militant groups fighting the Shiites, which would later facilitate the rise of ISIS and turn Iraq into an international battlefield (MOFA officials, personal communication, 11 June 2024). What is more, the spillover of such tense situations extended abroad by driving Iraqis with the backing of external actors and based on sectarian grounds to join conflicting militant groups in Syria and fight each other there (Al-Qarawee, 2014).

Overall, this tense political situation marked the Al-Maliki government's performance with two contradictory outcomes: paying much attention to the security institutions and almost overlooking the service provision. So, by 2011, $24.49 billion had been utilised to reconstruct Iraq's military (Dodge, 2013). Simultaneously, in 2011, in the oil-rich Basra governorate, for instance, over 10 per cent of the residents were not connected to the sewage system, and 99 per cent had no access to improved water networks (Yahya, 2017). According to the Iraq Knowledge Network, only 38% of Iraqi households had access to drinking water (cited in Dodge and Wasser, 2014: 25). Corruption was endemic at this stage in almost all Iraqi institutions, which heavily undermined their performance. According to some estimates, Iraq lost to corruption $551 billion only during the two terms of Al-Maliki (2006- 2014) (Mansour, 2022). Such contradictory outcomes may be attributed to two reasons: utilising the military for political manoeuvring and people's extreme concern over identity with less attention to poor services, which encouraged the elite to galvanise identity politics further to cement their position.

Table 2 Iraq's ranking according to the Corruption Perceptions Index

Year	2003	2005	2007	2009	2011	2013	2015	2017
Iraq's ranking	113	137	178	176	175	169	161	169
Total	133	158	179	180	182	174	167	180

(**Source**: Transparency International)

Overall, Al-Maliki's policies forged a weak state, further foreign intervention, endemic corruption, entrenching communal identities, and rising violence, which opened the door to terror groups to draw some Sunni extremists. This would lead later to the fall of one-third of Iraq's territory to ISIS in June 2014 and an economic collapse that left the state penniless (Jabar, 2018; Al-Qarawee, 2014; O'Driscoll, 2018; Dodge and Wasser, 2014: Yahya, 2017; Dodge, 2018).

Furthermore, Iraq's foreign policy under Al-Maliki was largely used to serve domestic political agendas that appealed to the contending communal groups. In other words, Al-Maliki provided a platform for external actors to interact confrontationally inside Iraq, creating in one way or another two types of external actors: conservative ones such as the US, which was seeking to preserve the fragile balance it had installed before withdrawal amid its dwindling influence in the face of rising regional actors; radical ones such as Iran on the one hand and Gulf countries led by Saudi Arabia on the other. The radical actors were engaged in a zero-sum game, each side seeking to turn the table in its favour following the vacuum left by the US, heavily destabilising Iraq. Overall, such a landscape increased the number of external actors and gave them a role exceeding that of the domestic actors in shaping Iraq's politics, to the point that led Mansour to argue that external actors became a 'legitimising factors' whereby the elite would visit foreign capitals to gain support for their rule in Iraq (Mansour, 2019: 23-24).

4.2 ***Abadi 2014-2018 Government***

Parliamentary elections of April 2014 were held at a time when the ethno-sectarian mobilisation hit record levels. Hence, the elite broadly worked to mobilise their respective communal groups antagonistically (Al-Qarawee, 2014). The political contest was tense: around 276 parties vied for the 328 parliament seats. Naturally, such a socio-political context encourages people to participate in the elections and vote mostly for extreme identity-based parties versus moderate ones; the turnout was 62% (Colleau, 2014). The election results showed that Al-Maliki's bloc was the largest this time, securing 92 of the 328 parliamentary seats, while the Sadrists, who were the closest rival to Al-Maliki within the Shiite realm, won only 34 seats, and Hakim won 29 seats. Overall, the Shiites obtained 155 seats. The Sunnis won 76 seats, and the Kurdish parties got 62 seats (Mansour, 2017; 2018; Sowell, 2014).

As was the case with the 2010 elections, Al-Maliki, in his pursuit of a third term, used sectarian rhetoric and Iran's support to attract rival Shiites, especially the Sadrists, to support him and weaken his opponents from other communal groups (Abdulhussain, personal communication, 9 May 2024). During this process, a dramatic incident turned the tide against Al-Maliki, which was the loss of a third of Iraq's territory to ISIS in June 2014, bringing the country to the brink of a civil war. Dodge and Wasser (2014: 13-14) believe that such a loss did not reflect that ISIS had planned it well; it revealed the horrible extent of social alienation driven by discriminatory policies. Critically, amid the rapid advance of ISIS into Iraq's territory, the Iraqi government was desperately calling for international action to stop further disasters, but, except for Iran, such calls were largely unmet, which reflected the extent of Iraq's isolation as a result of Al-Maliki policies (MOFA officials, 5 June 2024).

Despite the severe turmoil that threatened Iraq's unity and was caused primarily by Al-Maliki, he strongly insisted on his right to a third term, citing his electoral victory. Iran was still a major backer of Al-Maliki (Al-Qarawee, 2016). Meanwhile, the elite largely opposed Al-Maliki's bid for a third term (Colleau, 2014). Crucially, a major actor reappeared here and undermined Al-Mliki's chances for a third term: the US, which was explicitly against a third term, believing that Al-Maliki's policies created a supportive environment for ISIS. Notably, the strength of the US at this stage stemmed from Iraq's urgent need for the US military to halt ISIS's advances. The US hinted that there would be no support for Iraq unless Al-Maliki left office (the Guardian, 2014; Al-Qarawee, 2016). As such, Al-Maliki was forced to step down (Al-Qarawee, 2016; Loft, 2022).

The Dawa Party nominated Haider Abadi, a colleague of Al-Maliki, for the premiership. The elite perceived Abadi as a non-threatening figure; the Dawa Party speculated that he would be well-received by the US. Furthermore, in September 2014, Al-Abadi obtained parliament's confidence for his 'national unity' government that involved all significant communal groups, promising to govern in a consociational mode, undertaking national reconciliation, reforming state institutions, and improving Iraq's international standing (Fantappie, 2023; Dodge & Wasser, 2014; Al-Qarawee, 2016; Hameed & Tahir, 2016).

Arguably, the failure of Al-Maliki to secure a third term reveals two main outcomes: the role of external actors in shaping Iraq's politics exceeds that of domestic ones, especially in times of crisis, as Al-Maliki failed electorally in 2010 but managed to get a second term largely due to the support of external actors: Iran and to some extent the US; whereas in 2014 Al-Maliki won electorally but failed to secure a third term, largely because almost all external actors stood against him. Also, although Al-Maliki succeeded in galvanising ethno-sectarian identity, which gave him an electoral victory, it paradoxically contributed to antagonising foreign actors, which denied him the premiership.

Moreover, from the beginning, Abadi sought to distance himself from Al-Maliki's legacy by pursuing a different path characterised by inter-communal group reconciliation, reforming state institutions, and international opening or what he dubbed 'cooperative diplomacy' to usher in a new era of foreign relations (Al-Qarawee, 2016; IRIS, 2018; Mansour, 2019).

Most of Abadi's reforms were dedicated to communal reconciliation with a prime focus on appeasing the Sunnis (Jabar, 2018). He supported the path of decentralisation by transferring some of the federal authority to the governorates (O'Driscoll, 2018; Al-Qarawee, 2016), reforming the de-Baathification and anti-terrorism laws, speeding up the processing of the detainees' cases (Al-Qarawee, 2016), limiting the military role of the PMF in Sunni areas (Parigi, 2017), gave the defence ministry to the Sunnis (Abulatif, 2015), establishing a cabinet by-rule to avoid power concentration in the hands of the prime minister as was the case with Al-Maliki (Al-Qarawee, 2016), prioritising human rights observation during the fight against ISIS in Sunni areas (Center for Cilivins in conflicts, 2018), facilitated the return of IDPs and the rebuilding of cities liberated from ISIS (Rohde, 2017). Externally, Abadi rebalanced Iraq's foreign relations by gradually reducing dependence on Iran in order not to provoke it and simultaneously giving the US a good space for influence; as such, the US agreed to conduct airstrikes against ISIS in March 2015, which was a turning point in the fight against ISIS (Al-Qarawee, 2017; Mansour, 2017). Also, Abadi normalised relations with non-Shiite countries such as Gulf countries, especially Saudi Arabia and Turkey (Fantappie, 2023; Jiyad, 2017).

Critically, over time, as Abadi proved his good faith in pursuing reconciliation and involving Sunnis in decision-making, his endeavours to normalise relations with external actors, especially Gulf countries, were met positively. This is well expressed in two main fronts: a closing statement issued by the supreme council of the Gulf Cooperation Council in 2014, whereby Gulf countries welcomed the policies of the Abadi government and called for further promoting inter-communal group reconciliation (cited in Hameed and Tahir, 2016); the growing number of high-ranking officials' visits to Iraq during Abadi's reign despite the security concerns amid the tense fight against ISIS (as Table 2 shows). Notably, Saudi Arabia made historic diplomatic moves at this stage: the reopening of the Saudi Embassy in Baghdad in 2015, the establishment of the Saudi-Iraqi Coordination Council in 2017, and the Saudi Foreign Minister visiting Iraq in 2017, which was the first of its kind since the establishment of the political system in 2003 (Haddad, 2019; Kathem, 2018; Hameed & Tahir, 2016). Relatedly, following the reopening of the Saudi Embassy in Baghdad, other Gulf countries followed suit: Qatar reopened its Embassy in 2015, and Oman did so in 2019 (Iraq's Ministry of Foreign Affairs website). Overall, Abadi's opening to the Iraqi Sunnis undermined a domestic social barrier within Gulf countries that used to hinder positive interaction with Iraq. Importantly, these countries significantly supported Iraq in humanitarian, economic, and military fields, helping the state's apparatus to continue functioning amid a devasting war and crumbling economy (MOFA officials, personal communication, 11 June 2024). Relatedly, such a reset with the Gulf encouraged other countries to reengage with Iraq (Jiyad, 2017).

Table 3 The number of public visits of high-ranking officials from Middle Eastern countries to Iraq during Al-Maliki's and Abadi's reigns.

	Al-Maliki reign (2010-September 2014)		Abadi reign (September 2014-2018)
1	Emir Sheikh Sabah Al-Ahmad Al-Sabah of Kuwait (2012)- King.	1	Ahmed Uglo of Turkey (2014)- prime minister
		2	Binali Yıldırım of Turkey (2017)- prime minister.
2	Recep Tayyip Erdoğan of Turkey (2011)- prime minister.	3	Saad Hariri of Lebanon (2017)- prime minister.
3	Sheikh Sabah Khaled Al-Sabah of Kuwait (2012)- foreign affairs minister.	4	Javad Zarif of Iran (2015-2017)- foreign affairs minister, visited Iraq twice.
4	Ali Akbar Salehi of Iran (2011)- foreign affairs minister.	5	Sheikh Sabah Khaled Al-Hamad Al-Sabah of Kuwait (2014-2015)-foreign affairs minister, visited Iraq twice.
		6	Khalid Itayaa of Qatar (2015)- foreign affairs minister.
		7	Nasser Judeh of Jordan (2017)- foreign affairs minister.
		8	Saudi's Adel Al-Jubeir of Saudi Arabi (2017)- foreign affairs minister.
		9	Riyadh Al-Maliki of Palestine (2017)- foreign affairs minister.
		10	Khalid Al-Khalifah of Bahrain (2017)- foreign affairs minister.

Source: Iraqi Ministry of Foreign Affairs, official website.

Importantly, as Abadi continued on his reconciliatory path, there was a remarkable nationalist surge versus communal identities. This trend was mainly fed by the Abadi path of reconciliation and opening to various countries, which encouraged them to act normally and stabilise Iraq (MOFA officials, personal communication, 23 June 2024).

Such a rising nationalist trend was reflected clearly in the 2015 mass protests, as the first of its kind, which started in the Shiite oil-rich city of Barsa and spread to Baghdad and other Shiite-majority cities. These protests were driven by the government's failure to provide jobs, electricity and water during hot summers (Ddoge, 2019). The protests lasted for months, moving from the service provision to rejecting foreign meddling in Iraq's domestic affairs (Mansour, 2019; Haddad, 2019; Al-Qarawee, 2016; Yahya, 2017). Importantly, the war against ISIS did not stop protesters from holding their government accountable. This starkly contrasts with the reign of Al-Maliki, where Iraqis, especially the Shiites, used to ignore the service provision relatively; their prime concern was identity safety, which led them to support Al-Maliki despite the latter's poor service record, as shown.

Furthermore, such a societal paradigm shift was reflected broadly by narrowing the channels the external actors used to support specific communal groups against others. Instead, these actors were pushed to interact normally and formally with Iraq in a state-to-state manner, further spurring positive contributions to stabilising Iraq.

Another critical turn was the 2017 independence referendum held by the Kurds to secede from Iraq, which was driven by two main factors: the Kurds' alleged grievances with consecutive federal governments, especially during Al-Maliki's reign; the Kurds' control over oilfields in disputed areas in Kirkuk following the withdrawal of the Iraqi military in the face of ISIS's 2014 onslaught. In response, such a move was foiled easily by the federal government's forces that recaptured the disputed areas, driven by significant international support for Iraq's unity (Loft, 2022; Jiyad, 2017; Colleau, 2014; McCulloch & McEvoy, 2019). This again reflects the power of external actors in shaping critical moments in Iraq's politics.

So, the implications of Abadi's approach, which international actors backed, continued to bear fruit in various fields. Besides preserving Iraq's unity and reducing violence to its lowest rate since 2003 (Jiyad, 2017; Mansour, 2019), Abadi managed to defeat ISIS in 2017 and recapture Iraqi cities. Following the 2017 victory, Abadi utilised his international acceptability to hold a big conference hosted by Kuwait in 2018 to support Iraq in rebuilding its liberated cities. Such a conference witnessed high international participation, reaching more than 60 states and numerous international organisations, reflecting the success of Abadi's approach in bringing Iraq back to the international scene. The conference brought around $30 billion to Iraq through loans, grants, and investments (MOFA officials, personal communication, 17 June 2024).

Table 4. Rating the largest pledges made during the Kuwait International Conference for the Reconstruction of Iraq:

Country	Contribution	Details
UAE	$ 5.5. billion	In the form of private-sector investments in Iraq.
Turkey	$ 5 billion	in the form of credit lines.
Kuwait	$ 2 billion	Kuwait allocated $1 billion in loans and another $1 billion as investments.
Saudi Arabia	$ 1.5 billion	Saudi Arabia provided $1 billion through its Saudi Fund for Development and $500 million in export credit.
Qatar	$ 1 billion	In the form of loans and investments.
Germany	$ 617 million	
European Union	$ 494 million	

Sources: Chmaytelli and Hagagy, 2018; Alarabiya News, 2018.

Table 5. Number of civilian deaths from violence

2003	2006	2007	2009	2012	2013	2014	2015	2016	2017	2018
12.153	29.526	26.112	5.382	4.622	9.852	20.281	17.578	16.393	13.183	3. 319

Source: Iraq body count.

Furthermore, the domestic legitimacy that Abadi obtained gave him international respect, which encouraged external actors to support Iraq's fight against ISIS, mitigate its economic hardship, block the breakup of Iraq, and contribute to rebuilding Iraq's destroyed cities. Namely, Abadi's approach towards external actors encouraged them to interact constructively with Iraq, as he involved all significant communal groups in power, denying these actors the pretext to interfere negatively by supporting one communal group against another. Simultaneously, through cooperative diplomacy, Abadi opened a fair platform for competition, mainly in economic fields, allowing states to engage peacefully to have a foothold in Iraq's rich market instead of reserving it exclusively for Iran, as was the case during Al-Maliki's reign. Such a policy, along with rising nationalist trends, helped further narrow channels through which external actors used to manoeuvre, making confrontational policy no longer appealing; instead, spurring them to normally interact with Iraq, which contributed to stabilising it.

5. Discussion:

Arguably, in consociational countries, there are often two critical centres of power: external actors and local identity-based groups, which weaken, in return, the role of central authorities and make the trajectory of stability there primarily shaped by these two centres based on their numerous conflicting agendas, rendering stability thereby fragile. External actors often play a more significant role than domestic actors in shaping stability in consociational countries; Importantly, how domestic actors approach them significantly impacts the role of external actors. Although such an argument seems unrealistic initially, as small countries whose social fabric is badly fragmented cannot affect the conduct of powerful external actors, the experiment of Iraq has shown that the strength of weak states lies paradoxically in their weakness.

Namely, when these countries face severe challenges, they set a platform for external actors that encourages them to operate in a way that serves stability.

This finding raises a structural theoretical gap relating to the consociational theory: The underpinnings of the theory, especially the 'social segregation', appeal at least theoretically in realising stability by reducing contact among contending communal groups but preserving inter-communal tension, which encourages the contending elite to adopt a confrontational platform that downgrades the value of foreign policy to be approached with a set of random actions and reactions designed primarily to appeal politically to the communal groups, turning these countries into a battlefield that keeps external actors clashing there, and rendering mechanisms of domestic stability useless irrespective of how efficient they are.

Put differently, although domestic actors in consociational countries have a reasonable leeway to pursue either a conformational platform that favours, as stated, some external actors, primarily for political reasons, and alienates others, which incentivises them to clash and act informally, destabilising these countries ultimately, or setting cooperative platform, that spurs external actors to compete fairly in a state-to-state manner, encouraging them to contribute positively to stability, as shown in the case of Iraq- the theory's underpinnings push mostly towards confrontation. This gap can be arguably attributed to the theory's origins, being derived from successful experiments in advanced countries (Switzerland, the Netherlands, Austria, and Belgium) where external actors had almost no role; the theory with such philosophy that focuses primarily on domestic actors in realising stability, with little to no attention to external actors- was later prescribed for developing countries plagued by conflicts and surrounded by numerous conflicting external actors. Then, the second generation of the theory's advocates, driven by the positive experiments of external actors in Northern Ireland, Bosnia, and Macedonia, viewed this role from one side or in a top-down manner, as these experiments mostly of two external actors with relatively similar positive agendas. So, they underestimated the vital role of external actors and the impact of domestic actors in shaping that role in different atmospheres. This causes embracing the theory in countries like Iraq, surrounded by numerous clashing external actors, to be theoretically appealing in realizing stability. Still, it paradoxically creates a platform of conflicting external actors, destabilizing the country no matter how much effort is put into engineering domestic stability.

Such a trajectory was reflected clearly in Iraq when Al-Maliki (2010-2014) replaced his nationalist agenda following the 2010 electoral defeat with a sectarian one to go along with the tide of consociationalism that further fuelled inter-communal group tension, antagonised almost all Sunni external actors, and drove Iraq enormously towards Iran, which won him premiership and bolstered his political standing. Such an orientation opened the door for external actors to clash heavily in Iraq and turn it into a battlefield, which peaked later with the rise of ISIS, threatening Iraq's unity. Nevertheless, such an orientation for a society heavily mobilized along ethno-sectarian identity appealed remarkably, leading to Al-Maliki's electoral victory in 2014.

Conversely, Abadi involved all significant communal groups in decision-making and challenged conflicting domestic politics by forging good relations with all countries and providing a fair formal platform to pursue their interests in Iraq. Such a policy pushed external actors to engage formally and ultimately contribute to stabilising Iraq. Although such a policy significantly stabilised Iraq, it did not appeal to a society that largely prioritises ethno-sectarian agendas, which are channelled directly through consociationalism, where whoever skillfully mobilises such an identity secures political gains, especially in times of elections when the elite heavily galvanise voters along such identity, which downgrades the moderate elite in favour of the hardline (IRIS, 2018; Jarstad, 2008). This led to Abadi's electoral failure in 2018, placing him third even within the Shiite parties' realm, and fifth in his governorate, Baghdad, despite winning considerable seats in Sunni areas, denying him, moreover, a second term (Epic, 2017; Haddad, 2019; Mansour, 2019).

So, although Al-Maliki won electorally, he lost the foreign backing of almost all countries except Iran, which significantly contributed to denying him a third term. In contrast, Abadi lost electorally and enjoyed the support of nearly all countries, which did not help him get a second term. This primarily indicates a structural flaw in the consociational theory in that its philosophy tends to transfer the open direct conflict from the social into the political sphere while keeping it attractive as a mobilisation tool electorally. Such a prospect may serve stability in countries not surrounded by powerful external actors, or these actors may share the goal of stabilising these countries, as in the case of Serbia and Croatia towards

Bosnia, the UK and Ireland towards Northern Ireland. Still, it does not work for countries like Iraq, located in an area with multiple conflicting powerful actors that care much about their domestic ethno-sectarian identity and seek to derive legitimacy, accordingly, from abroad. As such, foreign policy under existing consociationalism is difficult to dislodge from conflicting domestic policy, making the push of moderation for forging inclusivity and good relations with external actors temporarily occur almost only in times of existential crisis merely to survive. After that, the path of extremism expressed by electoral behaviour drives the resumption of antagonism, which keeps the country in a vicious cycle of instability.

Overall, obtaining premiership in countries like Iraq and Lebanon, to some extent (Russel & Shehadi, 2005; Yahya, 2017), seemingly requires both external backing and electoral victory, which is challenging to secure, as communal groups politically encourage creating a confrontational platform; this platform undermines the election results' value, especially at times of crisis. Simultaneously, external backing is insufficient to gain a premiership if it's not accompanied by electoral victory, especially at normal times. Such a contradictory equation keeps generating instability with short periods of relative stability after severe crises.

6. Conclusions

This study aimed to explore the impact of domestic actors in consociational countries on the role of external actors in shaping stability in these countries, arguing that the existing literature focuses on the external role chiefly from one side or in a top-down manner without considering the impact of domestic actors in shaping that role, which is vital in setting either a cooperative or confrontational platform that significantly shapes stability. The finding is that despite domestic actors ultimately opting for either platform, the theory's underpinnings encourage a confrontational platform, downgrading foreign policy's value by turning it into an extension for conflicting domestic politics or a means to serve domestic political agendas. This makes the theory's mechanisms for achieving domestic stability useless as long as a confrontational platform is yielded naturally and the role of external actors exceeds that of domestic actors. This structural flaw paradoxically makes embracing the theory itself a recipe for instability in countries beyond the European cases.

Moreover, the impact of domestic actors on the role of external actors in shaping stability in consociational countries is neglected. Hence, further research is needed to develop a solid mechanism separating conflicting domestic politics from foreign policy and the latter to be approached through a cooperative platform; otherwise, efforts to realise stability through domestic vehicles alone are insufficient and may backfire. So, advocates of consociationalism that seek desperately to advance their theory universally need to answer the question: Do they want their theory to be universal by ensuring stability in countries beyond the European sphere, or are they only interested in applying it beyond that sphere irrespective of realising stability?

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