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Institutional Barriers to Political Reform and Poverty Persistence in Iraq: Comparative Lessons from Pakistan, Malaysia and Singapore

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Abstract

This article investigates how institutional constraints to political reform may perpetuate poverty in Iraq and what comparative lessons can be drawn from Pakistan, Malaysia and Singapore in Asia. The argument is that poverty is not caused by one single institutional reason, but it persists where public revenues are distributed through a politicised allocation system, a low level of bureaucratic autonomy and a poor accountability of the state not where it is directed to productive investments and reliable public services. Based on structured comparison of these countries using public statistics on poverty levels, fiscal structures, corruption and institutional capacity, this article specifies the process through which reform constraints cause enduring poverty.

Iraq; political reform; persistence of poverty; clientelism; bureaucratic independence; comparative politics; Pakistan; Malaysia; Singapore.

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1. Introduction: Research Problem and Argument

2.1 An Enigmatic Public Economics in Iraq Even so, the country has had a remarkable difficulty transforming those revenues into adequate job creation and poverty reduction sustainably into the future. Thus Iraq's primary challenge is not lack of resource endowments, be it natural resources or financial ones, but of institutional capability to employ those resources for developmental and welfare gains. Supported by poverty and fiscal rigidities data for Iraq's economy, this story fits nicely with the rentier state theory.

This article makes three methodological contributions. (1) it poses an explicit research question about a particular causal process; (2) it produces an reasoned argument as to why Pakistan, Malaysia and Singapore represent useful cases of comparison; and (3) it is transparent about the observable, documented indicators that will be employed to support its claims. Such is the recommendation for case selection and comparative analysis.

The core research question: what are the political institutional barriers to reform that account for persistent poverty in Iraq, with lessons for Pakistan, Malaysia and Singapore. Where reforms are constrained it suggests that bureaucratic capacity will be weakened, distributional gains are dispersed through patronage or negotiation with elites and expenditures are unlikely to generate significant investment in employment, human capital or services.

Our paper is conceptually novel in two respects. The first is to develop a conception of poverty persistence in terms of not just the rate at which the state count of poverty over time grows, but the actual process by which the current regime of institutions creates the conditions to perpetuate a long-lasting poor. Our empirical contribution is an unbiased comparison of four countries on transparently measured observable outcomes from public records without needing to use unreliable and non-comparable subnational data or to conflate data for different years.

2. Conceptual Framework: From Political Reform to Poverty Persistence

In this sense, political reform means to institutional change in public authority that enhances accountability, reduces arbitrariness, professionalises public administration and enhances a rule-bound provision of public goods. The reform understood as change in the rule-and capacities of governance not change of office-holders and formal law (Fukuyama 2013; Acemoglu and Robinson 2012).

Poverty persistence refers to the perpetuation of deprivation across households, communities or generations, due to a breakdown in institutions in assuring a predictable pathway to opportunities. This doesn't mean that the prevalence of poverty isn't falling over time. It means

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that families remain at risk of sliding back into poverty if jobs, human capital building, services or social protection are unstable or inadequate. (World Bank 2025a; World Bank 2025c).

Consociational allocation is utilized in this article to denote political shares of offices, contracts, and public goods obtained through the bargaining of political parties, sectarian groupings, and/or elite cliques. While it may be appropriate and in some cases helpful in entrenching stability in conflict prone politics it becomes harmful to development when political organizations capture the public administration as mechanisms for political allocation. (Beblawi and Luciani 2015; Ross 2012; Acemoglu and Robinson 2012).

Bureaucratic autonomy refers to the ability of public administration to hire, promote, and to conduct, on the basis of merit and the goals of the policy and law, rather than on the basis of political affinity. But it does not mean to be in possession of a bureaucracy not held accountable. To the contrary, in practice, this professional autonomy is most powerful if coupled with legal audit, transparency, as well as monitoring of performances (Evans and Rauch 1999; Fukuyama 2013; World Bank 2025b).

The casual pathway advanced in this article can be described in four stages: 1) Political obstacles block reforms which would alter distribution from arrangements that reflect elite bargains and patronage, thus creating distributive bargains which entrench a patronage-dominated state. 2) these arrangements erode bureaucratic autonomy as jobs, contracts and service provision become political, making state apparatuses less able to perform effectively. 3) Public finance comes to serve the ends of short-term distribution rather than long-term investment, and. 4) as a consequence, poverty is sustained through poor provision of public services, lack of access to employment and low trust in government. (Ross 2012; International Monetary Fund 2025; World Bank 2025a).

3. Research Design, Case Selection and Scope

It employs a tightly constrained, "focused comparison". I analyze each of the cases in reference to the same "questions": What is the pervasive logic governing the distribution of public resources?

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How independent is the bureaucracy from partisan intervention?

What is the institutional setting regarding corruption and accountability?

How do these characteristics affect poverty or vulnerability outcomes?

The strategy is a conventional application of comparative-method logic by which we select cases and analyze them according to precise analytic questions (Geddes 1990; Mahoney and Goertz 2006; Seawright and Gerring 2008).

Iraq is the main case study since the research problem relates to the link between post-2003 barriers to political reform and the persistence of poverty. The negative comparative case study of Pakistan is chosen on the grounds of similarity with Iraq on various relevant institutional indicators (e.g. Political fragmentation, fiscal stress and integrity), while excluding its oil-rent characteristics. The positive partial comparative case study is Malaysia, representing both a socially diverse country and a developmental state that has successfully reduced poverty over the long term. The high-capacity comparative case study of Singapore illustrates the role of professional bureaucracy and state capacity, albeit with limitations on transferability. (World Bank 2025a; World Bank 2025c; World Bank 2024; Singapore Department of Statistics 2026; Transparency International 2026a).

This selection is also guided by theory rather than pure geography. A most-different design for comparing Malaysia/Singapore with Iraq reflects two aspects of this article. Malaysia/Singapore compare contrast sharply with Iraq on resources, size, and historical evolution of institutions but illustrate the importance of administrative capacity and accountability for development and the capacity of states to promote development while having some of the negative characteristics that can foster fragility, with Pakistan acting as the more negative comparator on institutions. The overall design compares mechanism (Geddes 1990; Mahoney and Goertz 2006; Seawright and Gerring 2008).

The time horizon for this research is focused on the period from 2003 to 2025 for Iraq, with current indicators sourced using recent public data. For the purpose of this article, this involves refraining from reporting estimates of 2026 figures as facts, even though some analyses and researchers attempt to do so. Wherever 2025 estimates of the CPI and poverty levels based on 2023/24 are referenced, these are reported noting the sources and dates. This is crucial because political comparative researchers are trained to separate data, analysis and speculation. (World Bank 2025a; International Monetary Fund 2025; Transparency International 2026a).

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Table 1. Conceptual Definitions and Operational Indicators

Concept	Working definition in this study	Operational indicators used
Poverty persistence	Reiteration of deprivation as institutions cannot offer consistent opportunity, nor guarantee public good provision.	National estimates of poverty if any; labour market vulnerabilities; social protection services; evidence for service delivery; and; \\ the social protection evidence for delivery and design, etc.
Consociational distribution	Negotiating a political deal where the offices, contracts and public resources can be distributed among the political parties, sects and elite networks.	Politicization of the public sector; patronage-based access; a low budget priority for health and a weak budget process; Qualitative Evidence; institutional evidence.
Bureaucratic autonomy	Public administration has a capacity to recruit, promote, and carry out its functions in compliance with the rules of the profession rather than by way of personal fealty.	Civil-service rules; government effectiveness; consistency of policy implementation; qualitative evidence.
Integrity environment	The limit placed upon public power by oversight, disclosure, and punitive mechanisms related to its misuse.	Transparency International CPI score and ranking; WGI control of corruption and rule-of-law sub-indices.

Source: Author's structured compilation from World Bank, IMF, Transparency International, WGI and national statistical sources cited in the reference list.

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4. Data Sources and Measurement Strategy

Evidence The data are documentary and comparative, utilising readily available international data on statistical indicators from official sources and established and peer-reviewed international literature for claims related to conceptual aspects of poverty. We use data on poverty from World Bank poverty and equity data. Data on fiscal analysis from IMF Article IV, data on corruption from Transparency International CPI country-data and data on governance based on the Worldwide Governance Indicators method and dataset. (World Bank 2025a; International Monetary Fund 2025; Transparency International 2026a; World Bank 2025b).

Indicator limitations This paper uses the indicator cautiously. Different countries' national poverty lines mean that the resulting national poverty rates are not directly comparable with one another. Singapore is particularly problematic: there is no official national poverty line and national statistics are provided by means of household income, transfer and support indicators, not a single national poverty rate. This paper therefore uses the indicator as contextual information and also correlates it with institutional indicators. (Donaldson et al. 2013; Singapore Department of Statistics 2026; World Bank 2025a; World Bank 2024).

Our measurement strategy synthesizes evidence of three different types. (a) We collected numerical indicators that tap broad differences across countries. (b) we used qualitative country expertise that produces a descriptive accounts of public institutions. (c) we gathered causal-process observations that trace pathways between public institutions and poverty outcomes by exploring fiscal allocation, public service provision, and the creation of employment opportunities. This strategy is necessary because in comparative politics we typically want both indicators across and a story about the within-country process. (Mahoney and Goertz 2006; Seawright and Gerring 2008; World Bank 2025b).

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Table 2. Comparative Measurement Matrix: Latest Available Public Indicators

Country	**Poverty / welfare evidence**	**CPI 2025 evidence**	**Institutional reading**	**Why included in comparison**
Iraq	As of 2023/24, national poverty stood at 17.5 percent as reported by the World Bank.	Score 28/100; rank 136/182.	Rentier State, politicized State; the reliance on oil revenue, and the public sphere of employment is large.	Principal case: post-2003 reform barriers and poverty persistence.
Pakistan	World Bank predicts 25.3% poverty rate for 2023/24; PIP predicts $3/day poverty at 22.96% for 2024.	Score 28/100; rank 136/182.	Political instability, fiscal constraints, lack of integrity, lack of transparency.	Negative comparator with institutional fragility but without Iraq's oil-rent structure.
Malaysia	World Bank states that national absolute poverty has been calculated at 6.2 percent on the basis of recent official data.	Score 52/100; rank 54/182.	Development plan poverty and integrity to an average level of environmental management.	Intermediate comparator: diversity management and state-led development.
Singapore	The U.S. Government does not have an official national poverty line. Instead, social welfare levels are tracked by a series of income statistics and programs to help people who have a hard time making ends meet.	Score 84/100; rank 3/182.	Strong bureaucratic capacity and integrity institutions.	Higher Capacity Comparator; Lessons constrained by scope and scale.

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5. Iraq: Rentier Distribution, Bureaucratic Politicization and Poverty Persistence

The developmental predicament of Iraq is characterized by the disjunction between fiscal capacity and institutional transformation capacity. Whereas oil revenues provide the state with enormous redistributive power, this does not simply transform into developmental capacity. In rentier states, revenue can primarily be mobilized in the support of temporary political agreements, instead of the construction of institutions, services and economic jobs. (Beblawi and Luciani 2015; Ross 2012; International Monetary Fund 2025).

Some recent evidence regarding poverty indicate that, with relative improvement of security situation, poverty remains widespread in Iraq. The Iraq Poverty and Equity Brief of World Bank, says that the overall poverty incidence in 2023/24 was 17.5 per cent of population, down by 1.4 percentage points from previous comparable survey that had estimated it at 18.9 per cent. But at the same time, it points to the continued labor-market fragilities and spatial inequalities, while maintaining caution with regard to this modest evidence for saying Iraq did some progress (World Bank 2025a).

And at the center of it all is the fiscal channel. IMF's 2025 Article IV consultation "projected continued high spending growth that along with large spending pressures from public wages and reduced oil price assumptions, pose risks to fiscal and external sustainability." For poor countries the impact comes from having wage-heavy budgets, which "tend to crowd out capital expenditure and reduce a country's capacity to continuously invest in infrastructure, education, health and private sector development." (International Monetary Fund 2025).

This mechanism is magnified by corruption and a weaker public sector The latest country data show that Iraq's CPI score is 28 out of 100 and ranks 136th out of 182 countries. The importance of this score isn't to explain poverty in itself but rather that it suggests that the overall environment for public integrity is weak and public procurement, public employment, and the delivery of public services are more likely to be determined by political mediation. (Transparency International 2026a; Transparency International 2026b).

Bureaucratic Autonomy: This is the missing link. If ministries and agencies are formed according to party affiliation and access, political loyalties rather than performance and competence will dictate jobs and government purchases. This affects the quality of policy from one administration to another, thus decreasing the ability of the state to convert oil revenue to sustainable poverty reduction. (Evans and Rauch 1999; Fukuyama 2013; Ross 2012).

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Of course, Iraq is not without its reform projects. Online transactions, public financial reform and civil service reform debate, and anti-corruption crusades feature on policy agendas. The issue is implementation in a divided distributive regime: reforms will continue to be at risk in an environment where the political incentives responsible for inefficiency also control the institutions that are supposed to do something about them. (International Monetary Fund 2025; World Bank 2025b; Transparency International 2026b).

6. Pakistan: Institutional Fragility and the Reproduction of Vulnerability

Pakistan is helpful as it shows how poverty is likely to be replicated, even in the absence of oil rents (such as in Iraq), if political instability, fiscal strain and a lack of institutional confidence pervade. It isn’t meant as an comparison of exactly the same systems but of the same pattern of institutional arrangements: fractured authority undermines the state’s capacity to convert the resource- endowments and policy commitments into robust and sustainable outcomes of poverty reduction (World Bank 2025c; Transparency International 2026d; World Bank 2025b).

Pakistan's latest CPI score is also 28 out of 100, the same score reported for Iraq, with a rank of 136 among 182 countries. This parallel is analytically important. It suggests that both cases operate in a weak integrity environment, but the institutional routes to poverty persistence differ: Iraq's route is strongly shaped by oil-rent distribution, while Pakistan's is shaped by macroeconomic instability, debt stress, disasters and fragmented political authority (Transparency International 2026d; World Bank 2025c).

Pakistan thus provides backing for a conditional argument, that persistent poverty is more likely where public authority is divided and accountability weak, oil economy or not. It shows also that not only rentier distribution can lead to poverty; fiscal instability, inflation and exposure to disaster can lead to persistent poverty when public capacity is limited (World Bank 2025c; Transparency International 2026d; World Bank 2025b).

7. Malaysia: Developmental Planning, Poverty Reduction and Remaining Governance Limits

Malaysia is chosen as developmental comparator since it shows social diversity with the presence of state-led planning and long-term poverty reduction. Certainly, Malaysia does not represent an ideal development model. It has been affected by significant scandals of corruption, competitive politics and concerns on good governance. Nonetheless, Malaysia's poverty transition trajectory shows how distribution policy may be related to development planning, employment and human capital augmentation not just short-term political clientelism. (World Bank 2024; Transparency International 2026c).

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World Bank country evidence shows that Malaysia has decreased its share of households below national poverty line to 6.2% on national poverty line atRM2,589/monthand its international upper-middle income poverty headcount to a substantially lower number. They cannot be directly compared with Iraq in any mechanistic way but it provides evidence that Malaysia's state led-developmental model delivered a different social outcome compared to rentier fragmentation. (World Bank 2024).

Malaysia's lesson is not that affirmative action or developmental plans must be replicated, but rather that distribution may be tied to human-capital formation, upgrading industrial structures, and employment. In sum, the Malaysian experience suggests that distribution aimed at poverty reduction can be rendered much more developmental if integrated with planning institutions, education, infrastructure, and labour markets. (World Bank 2024; Acemoglu and Robinson 2012; Fukuyama 2013).

And Malaysia is a good example to show the need for continuity as well: Development plans can lift poor people out of poverty only if there is an appropriate administrative capacity to carry out these plans over elections and cycles. This means that for Iraq, strategy must be insulated from short term political bartering and, on the other hand, tied to actual and measurable capacity at national and governorate level. (World Bank 2024; World Bank 2025b; Evans and Rauch 1999).

8. Singapore: Bureaucratic Capacity, Integrity and the Limits of Transferability

Singapore's capacity is chosen as an example of what high capacity looks like in practice but it is not a fully applicable case to Iraq. It varies from Iraq in many areas – population size, political history, demographic profile, security considerations and economic circumstances. Singapore also lacks an official national poverty line.

Therefore poverty cannot be said to have been officially overcome.

The comparison is about its state-administered capacity and its monitoring of household income and level of integrity (Donaldson et al. 2013; Singapore Department of Statistics 2026; Transparency International 2026e).

However, the institutional data are still instructive. Singapore's most recent CPI is 84 out of 100, which ranks #3 among 182 countries. Household income trends broken down by income decile, and the importance of government transfers for household income are reported by the Singapore Department of Statistics. These indicators illustrate a high-capacity state, which monitors distributions and matches transfers to income information. (Transparency International 2026e; Singapore Department of Statistics 2026).

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The lesson from comparison for Iraq therefore rests on professionalization and integrity of bureaucracy, not on replicating the political model of Singapore. Singapore, through personnel procedures that diminish scope for discretion and promote performance through recruit, promotion, pay, audits and enforce, provide illustration. Iraq's problem is adapting the administrative principle of merit and integrity into a federal, plural environment. (Evans and Rauch 1999; Fukuyama 2013; Transparency International 2026e).

While that is happening, transferability must be capped. Iraq's federal, fragmented and conflict-ridden state will never become a tiny island and highly efficient bureaucratic state such as Singapore. Iraq's relevant lesson from that state is selective: build professional recruitment procedures, audit and procurement controls, shield the implementing agencies from partisan intrusion, and create better public data. (Donaldson et al. 2013; Singapore Department of Statistics 2026; World Bank 2025b).

9. Comparative Analysis: Evidence, Mechanisms and Causal Boundaries

When the four cases are compared with each other they help illustrate the author's argument about causality, but again the evidence should be treated with appropriate caution. Pakistan and Iraq demonstrate the characteristics the author identifies as hindering good public administration - both have very poor levels of development. Malaysia is more successful with poverty levels and greater state planning that aids development. Singapore is an excellent example of the type of case that should demonstrate the author's arguments: excellent levels of public integrity and a sophisticated administration. (World Bank 2025a; World Bank 2025c; World Bank 2024; Transparency International 2026a).

This evidence is clearest when the indices of public revenue distribution is interpreted through the political and institutional process of the country. In Iraq rentier allocation and consociational arrangement dilute the developmental potential of public revenue. In Pakistan, macroeconomic and Political shocks occur within a context of institutional weaknesses. Malaysia was more able to tie distributional pattern to developmental purposes, because of her ability to plan. In Singapore strong institution and integrity minimize the possibility of patronage distribution. (Ross 2012; International Monetary Fund 2025; World Bank 2024; Singapore Department of Statistics 2026).

The comparison reveals why large cross-Asian comparisons require a focused design. Simply arguing that Malaysia and Singapore succeeded while Iraq and Pakistan did not is insufficient. A powerful comparative argument needs to demonstrate clearly what is being compared, how cases were chosen, what evidence and what indicators were employed to substantiate a causal mechanism. (Geddes 1990; Mahoney and Goertz 2006; Seawright and Gerring 2008).

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No less significant is the causal frontier. It is not solely political reform that dictates the level of poverty: oil prices, conflict, demographics, climate shocks, quality of schooling, and the international economic environment also play their roles. Nonetheless, it is political institutions that structure states' abilities to weather such shocks with credible budgets, services, social protection and investment. (Acemoglu and Robinson 2012; Fukuyama 2013; World Bank 2025a; International Monetary Fund 2025).

Table 3. Comparative Causal Mechanism Across the Four Cases

Mechanism step	**Iraq**	**Pakistan**	**Malaysia**	**Singapore**
Political settlement	Consociational and rentier distribution.	Fragmented authority and instability.	Developmental planning within plural society.	Centralized high-capacity state.
Bureaucracy	Vulnerable to partisan allocation.	Politicized and uneven implementation.	More developmental administrative continuity.	Meritocratic and rule-bound administration.
Integrity environment	Weak CPI score and high corruption risk.	Weak CPI score and governance stress.	Moderate CPI score with reform pressure.	Very strong CPI score.
Poverty channel	Public resources do not consistently become investment, services and jobs.	Shocks and weak capacity reproduce vulnerability.	Planning and human-capital investment reduce poverty.	Professional administration supports welfare delivery and trust.
Lesson for Iraq	Reform the distributive logic of the state.	Avoid instability and fiscal erosion.	Link inclusion to developmental implementation.	Professionalize administration and enforce accountability.

Source: Author's structured compilation from World Bank, IMF, Transparency International, WGI and national statistical sources cited in the reference list.

10. Reform Implications for Iraq

The comparative lessons also imply four reform priorities for Iraq. The first reform priority for Iraq is insulating the civil service from the political system. Civil service recruitment and promotions should be conducted through open competitive examinations administered by a strengthened Federal Public Service Council, or another designated professional agency. The

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aim is to reduce public service employment being a tool for distributing patronage and improve merit based service delivery (Evans and Rauch 1999; Fukuyama 2013; World Bank 2025b).

Second is budget readjustment. Reducing poverty needs stable capital investment in physical infrastructure, schools, hospitals, and community enterprises. With the IMF's warnings about labor expenses and oil reliance, the country's revenue model has the potential to become unsustainable, given the extent to which current spending trumps investment. Reforms of the budget should ensure spending is safe on social outlays and investments can be made in opportunities across poor areas (International Monetary Fund 2025; World Bank 2025a).

Third is the fight against corruption. Iraq doesn't just need new laws, it needs enforced accountability at all levels, whether in purchasing, contracts, hiring or service provision. CPI data suggest that the system integrity is very poor and there's evidence from Singapore, the best, to prove that in that country they have system of integrity that functions on joint basis of enforcement, audit and professionalism in public administration. (Transparency International 2026b; Transparency International 2026e; Evans and Rauch 1999).

Digital Governance with Institutional Safeguards is the fourth. Digitization has the potential to reduce the opportunities for briberies and discretion in the citizen-state interface. Yet technology cannot substitute accountability. Reforms should linked to transparency in procurement, protection of privacy of data, Audit Trails and Redressal Mechanisms; otherwise it can repeat old patterns in a new administrative garb. (Fukuyama 2013; World Bank 2025b; Transparency International 2026a).

These reforms are politically fraught precisely because they shift the distribution logic of the state. To accommodate this reality, the article advocates an incremental strategy that first targets areas where administrative improvements are most tangible - a functioning social registry, transparent procurement, civil service hiring, and robust reporting on budget execution - before advancing further. (World Bank 2025a; International Monetary Fund 2025; World Bank 2025b).

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11. Conclusion

In this paper, we explore how obstacles to political reform explain poverty persistence in Iraq. We did so by explaining our research question, clarifying key terms and outlining our selection process. In doing so, our comparison has been situated in the public record. The article's central argument is that Iraq's poverty problem cannot be attributed to a lack of resources. Rather it is structured by the organization of public resource allocation, employment and bureaucracy. This conclusion is confirmed by looking at Pakistan, Malaysia and Singapore. Pakistan shows how poverty can be perpetuated, not as a result of an oil rents regime, but through an equally poor regime of poor integrity and institutional weakness. Malaysia demonstrates that there is an association between diversity, distribution and planning to overcome poverty. Singapore points to the role of public-service integrity and expertise but is also a caution against an uncritical replication of the city-state model in large, federal and conflict-ridden states. However, the study also draws limits. Poverty and CPI evidence is correlational. It does not demonstrate that the program causes the reduction. Evidence will only become strong with evidence about case histories and institutional processes. An future research study could strengthen this evidence through use of sub-national (governorate level) data from Iraq for poverty rates, budget execution and public-sector recruitment, interviews with government officials and beneficiaries, assuming it can be conducted in an open, ethical manner.

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