Iraq is about to celebrate its centennial of statehood established on August 23, 1921, when Faisal I bin Al-Hussein, son of the Grand Sharif of Mecca, was proclaimed king of the newly artificially created kingdom. After World War I, Britain took the future king from the Hejaz (now a region in the west of Saudi Arabia). Faisal had been chosen by British colonial officials five months earlier at the Cairo Conference on the advice of T.E. Lawrence as a reward for his family’s role in helping the allied powers defeat the Turkish forces. This event was marked as the founding date of the Kingdom of Iraq under the British mandate with partial sovereignty.

In other circumstances, the centennial of the founding of modern Iraq would have been celebrated as a major national event and an appropriate moment to encourage Iraqis to be proud of their recent history. But crowds in
colorful clothing are not expected to gather in Baghdad’s main squares to celebrate the founding anniversary, nor are numerous military brass bands expected to play or choirs to sing at the festivities. The ruling political factions in Iraq have even proposed declaring October 3, rather than August 23, as Iraq’s national day, marking the date the country was admitted to the League of Nations as an independent state in 1932.

As Iraq turns 100 years old and remains trapped in numerous difficulties, many professionals, experts, and ordinary people have an urgent question: is Iraq really a unified state, and if so, has it achieved anything as a country worthy of celebrating its centennial? This controversy about the Iraqi state did not arise from its undermining of statehood by the sectarian oligarchs. They took over the government after the bold invasion of the country by the “democratic” United States in 2003. Instead, it has its roots in a precarious political structure built by post-independence elites, shaped by the British for themselves and under British occupation. Instead of participating in state and nation-building and spreading democracy, the country’s colonial rulers were more interested in maintaining British power and raising a political class subordinate to their rule that had utterly lost Iraqi confidence in them.

Part of the problem was Faisal himself. He was elected king of Iraq by the British colonial authorities, reorganizing the management of British Middle Eastern interests after World War I. Faisal, the third son of Hussein bin Ali, the Grand Emir and Sharif of Mecca, belonging to the Hashemite family, had no kinship or historical roots in the newly created Iraq of the three vilayets (provinces) that were part of the Ottoman Empire. The Iraqis did not know their king and did not love the man they considered a British puppet. This alliance organized by the British between the newly created elites and the monarchy was blatant foreign interference. London conceived the autocratic structure of a supposedly independent Iraq, and it remained a difficult obstacle to its evolution as a functioning entity as a state.

Getting out into the world, the new Iraqi state faced enormous difficulties when it turned out that its founding fathers had not bothered too much to put their multi-faith and multi-ethnic groups together into a unified national identity. The critical problem was that the British colonial authority favored Sunni Arabs, then only about 20% of the population, over and above the Shiite majority and ethnic Kurds who constantly rebelled against British colonial rule. “Political engineering” that Britain applied in Iraq not only failed to create a modern democratic state for the nation but also influenced the postcolonial system and the behavior of the ruling elite, which for a period was closely tied to London.

The Iraqi puppets, to whom their British colonial masters handed political power, did not choose democracy. Instead, they turned the proclaimed constitutional system into an autocracy that sometimes seemed little more than the rule of a small bunch of family servants. Over the next four decades, the political and bureaucratic classes became increasingly corrupt and inefficient, struggling to maintain an autocratic state in the face of growing resistance from many in Iraqi society, which favored a democratic government to replace the postcolonial order imposed by the British.

In 1958, senior Iraqi army officers overthrew the monarchy, brutally murdered the young king, grandson of Faisal I, many other members of the former royal family, and top political leaders, and replaced the previous government with a rule of the military coup led by Abd al-Karim Qasim. Regardless of the revolutionary and nationalist expectations it raised, the coup undermined the transition to democracy in Iraq and thus became political dynamite that disrupted modernization and democratization of the country. Between 1958 and 1968, the country was ruled almost continuously by a factional and fragmented military caste, which created a stagnant political landscape characterized by political instability and prone to authoritarianism. It was another lost decade in the Iraqis’ pursuit to take charge of their own history and create a viable, prosperous state.

The 1968 coup of the Iraqi Ba’ath Party was the milestone when the Iraqi political evolutionary clock completely stopped, and the state began to slide toward one-party rule, intertwined with an ideological dictatorship. The new regime made pan-Arab nationalism the central ideology of the state, thereby deepening Iraq’s identity crisis. When Saddam Hussein seized power in a palace coup in 1979, the party became a vital tool to instill loyalty to his brutal authoritarian rule and help control the state apparatus and the military and pervasive security services. Copying the regime of his Ba’ath Party counterpart in Syria, former Syrian President Hafez al-Assad, Saddam made efforts to personalize his rule, training his two sons Uday and Qusay to be his successors in what many have called “the Saddam dynasty” or “hereditary republic,” turning Iraq’s political clock back to 1921.

The US aggression against Iraq in 2003 left an unhealed, bloody mark on the country’s history, completely destroying the machinery of government. The “great democracy” track record includes the Mukaradeeb massacre, the Haditha massacre, the use of white phosphorus banned by the UN convention during the storming of Fallujah
over 1,500 civilians were killed), and, of course, the inhuman torture of Iraqis in Abu Ghraib prison. At the same time, all of these events underscored that more than 80 years after its founding, the Iraqi state had rotted to the core because it could not repel a foreign invasion and subsequent occupation, sinking into a state of national humiliation. Iraqi soldiers and people did not fight against the American invaders because they wanted to get rid of Saddam and his regime, which had taken over the state and turned it into a family business. The state collapsed because it was too weak and exhausted to withstand the divisions and violence caused by the American invasion, a process that continues to reverberate to this day.

With the centennial of the Iraqi state and whether it is worthy of celebration, the question remains: Do Iraqis still believe in their state? Indeed, the country has not been sold out or disintegrated, but whether it can survive the current many storms and adversities remains a matter of speculation. Looking at the series of sociopolitical changes the Iraqi state has been subjected to, it is hard not to conclude that sectarianism, ethnicity, and tribalism have become norms that have undermined the national identity and cohesion of the people in a unified state. Despite its enormous oil wealth, Iraq is also mired in economic failure, inefficiency, corruption, and political turmoil.

Today, any euphoria over the celebration of the 100th anniversary of the Iraqi state has been replaced by apathy, reflected in the commonly used phrase “Ladaula,” or “non-state,” used by Iraqis who view their state as non-existent. Throughout Iraq, lack of state authority, violence, and disorder are the norm; and various people, groups, and religious institutions are themselves involved in protecting people’s daily lives and the spaces in which they live. At best, these non-state actors can still imitate the state’s symbols, materials, and responsibilities to strengthen their claims to state power. At worst, the Iraqi state may have already exhausted its resources and spent the space needed to begin the reconstruction process.

Still, the author would like to wish Iraqis to recreate a powerful state where the people would feel free and independent and enjoy their vast oil wealth.

*Viktor Mikhin, corresponding member of RANS, exclusively for the online magazine “New Eastern Outlook”.*