

THE FORMATION OF POLITICAL IDENTITIES IN ETHNICALLY DIVIDED SOCIETIES: IMPLICATIONS FOR A DEMOCRATIC TRANSITION IN IRAQ

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Under what conditions can ethnically divided societies emerging from authoritarian rule make a transition to democracy? Despite optimism in 2003 that it would make such a successful transition, Iraq has instead experienced extensive sectarian-based violence. Sectarianism represents a new phenomenon and constitutes a major departure from twentieth century Iraqi political culture. While often characterized by sectarianism at the elite level, pre-Ba'athist Iraq was known for its secular and pluralistic character. Sectarian violence notwithstanding, an extensive network of civil society organizations — one of the cornerstones of democracy — has been re-established in the Arab areas of Iraq since 2003, complementing the large number of civil society organizations already extant in Iraqi Kurdistan since the 1990s.² How do we reconcile these two developments, namely the Iraqi populace's desire to establish a democratic society on the one hand, and the rise of sectarian identities on the other?

The civil society organizations which exist in Iraq include many professional associations, including those organized by university faculty, university administrators (e.g., the deans of the faculties of law and political science at Iraqi universities), judges, physicians, and journalists, just to mention some of the more prominent groups. Iraqi labor unions, once a very powerful component of the Iraqi nationalist movement, have also reorganized despite restrictions placed on their activity by the former U.S. Coalition Provisional Authority (CPA), attacks by members of the former regime and sectarian forces, and assassinations of their leaders. Since 2003, a number of very active student organizations have engaged in conflict resolution activities, often in some of the most dangerous areas of Iraq. Because their work is so politically sensitive and they often receive funding from non-Iraqi NGOs, these groups prefer to work underground.

In the wake of the Ba'athist regime's overthrow, there was a flurry of new as-

sociational activity and artistic creation. However, by late 2003, insurgent attacks had already begun to threaten such activity. University academics were among some of the first — but not the only — victims of insurgent attacks. As the political environment became increasingly less conducive to the development of civil society organizations, my Iraqi colleague and I restructured our research. Although the creation of a new Ministry of Civil Society Affairs after the fall of the Ba'ath seemed to augur well for democratic change, it became clear that the situation had not improved. As Iraqi informants indicated, the Ministry was more concerned with controlling civil society organizations than with facilitating their formation and activities.

Why have civil society organizations been viewed in such threatening terms since the overthrow of the Ba'athist regime? This question led to still another: why have sectarian organizations become so powerful since 2003? Our research indicates that civil society organizations are viewed as threatening by insurgent organizations and militias because sectarianism does not constitute the dominant political culture in Iraq. Sectarian organizations do not reflect the views of the vast majority of the Iraqi population, especially in light of Saddam's manipulation of sectarian identities during the last two decades of his rule to divide and conquer the populace. Despite considerable hostility to the U.S. occupation of Iraq, public opinion polls in Arab areas demonstrate an increase in the number of Iraqis who support a national, rather than sectarian, political identity and a strong desire for the Iraqi government to suppress sectarian militias, while all Iraqis, Sunni Arabs, Shi'i Arabs, and Kurds continue to show strong support for democracy.³ Because academics, journalists, writers, and artists overwhelmingly articulate views that support political and cultural pluralism and tolerance, they express the views of the majority of Iraqis and call attention to the deviant activities

of sectarian groups. Consequently, they often subject themselves to attack.

What our research demonstrates is that much more attention needs to be devoted to the economic and social devastation that Iraq experienced during the 1990s. During this period the state was weakened under the impact of the bombing of the 1991 Gulf War, the subsequent February–March uprising (*al-Intifada*), and the United Nations sanctions regime that only ended in 2003. With the withdrawal of the state from the international economy and the collapse of the extensive welfare state that had been created during the oil boom of the 1970s and early 1980s, Iraqis were forced to turn to local institutions to meet their needs. Groups hostile to the Ba'athist regime, especially Islamist organizations, used the instability of the 1990s to mobilize political support, often under the guise of engaging in charitable activities. Sensing these trends, the regime itself began enacting policies that promoted a conservative and distorted view of Islam. With Saddam and the Ba'ath having liquidated all forms of national leadership, it is not surprising that local, sectarian, and parochial political movements emerged after 2003, assisted by an incompetent occupation administration which was, with a few exceptions, thoroughly not attuned to Iraqi culture and society.

Analysis of the period following the 1991 Gulf War speaks to the question of why, given the lack of a sectarian and radical Islamic tradition in modern Iraq, sectarian and anti-democratic Islamist movements have gained political power since 2003. Our argument is that these organizations' mobilization during the 1990s provided only the necessary, but by no means sufficient, condition for them to achieve their objectives. It was the lack of well-developed state and national institutions which provided the appropriate environment for sectarian organizations, such as Muqtada al-Sadr's Mahdi Army (*Jaysh al-Mahdi*), to gain power and advance their political agendas. In keeping

with a body of political science literature that demonstrates that cooperation, rather than conflict, is the norm in ethnically divided societies, and that ethnic conflict is most prevalent in societies with weak or non-functional states, the Iraqi case suggests that the emphasis on rigid and static identities, which so often characterizes studies of Iraq, needs to be reconceptualized in more dynamic and nuanced terms.

The CPA's use of ethnic criteria as the basis for appointment to government posts and the encouragement of ethnically, rather than nationally based, political parties, sent a message to would-be leaders that ethnic politics were the order of the day. The CPA's failure to implement a serious economic reconstruction program — one which would have reduced the 50–60% unemployment rate, particularly among Iraqi youth, thereby undermining the recruitment base for

sectarian organizations — along with its decommissioning of the 385,000 man Iraqi army, closure of large numbers of state owned factories, and failure to combat the spread of corruption, likewise set the stage for post-Ba'athist sectarian politics. This social, economic, and political environment was thoroughly unsupportive of the development of a strong and effective state. If we realize that Saddam had either eliminated all potential challengers to his rule, or forced them into exile, we see that finding an effective leadership cadre after 2003 was difficult enough without the political and economic disorder which followed the collapse of the Ba'athist regime. The great tragedy of post-2003 Iraq remains the contradiction between the commitment of large numbers of Iraqis to democracy and tolerance in the face of a political leadership that continues to allow, if not actively promote, the spread of

sectarianism, corruption, and politically inspired violence.

¹ This research is being conducted with an Iraqi colleague who remains anonymous for security reasons.

² In our collaborative research to date, my Iraqi colleague and I have identified 313 active civil society organizations. This figure does not encompass a large number of civil society organizations, many with funding from Western sources, which are active but hide their activities from public view for fear of physical retribution.

³ See, for example, the World Values Survey conducted by the Institute for Social Research of the University of Michigan, April 2006; the Independent Republican Institute's poll of July 19, 2006; and the Program on International Policy Attitudes poll of September 1–4, 2006, for further details on these findings.

EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR'S REPORT

Dr. Stephanie Platz

In this issue, it grieves us to report that one of last year's TAARII Fellows was assassinated in Baghdad in December 2006. As our readers may recall, TAARII's policy is to keep the names of its Iraqi Fellows confidential, for their security. Now, posthumously, with the permission of his widow, we sadly announce the loss of Dr. Alharith Abdulhameed Hassan, a 2005–2006 TAARII Fellow.

Dr. Alharith received funding for a project entitled "The Prevalence of Substance Abuse in Baghdad City with a New Prevention Program." His first goal for the project was to collect epidemiological data, then to establish a database and develop a prevention program. Substance abuse patterns are known to increase in environments affected by war and disaster. Dr. Alharith's project addressed this important problem in a setting where other misfortunes have often eclipsed it.

Please read the obituary for Dr. Alharith, authored by his widow, Maysa H. Jaber, and a summary of his accomplishments. We hope our readers will join us in offering our condolences to her and to all of Dr. Alharith's family, friends, and colleagues. We wish to commemorate his distinguished career, and we lament the loss of this member of the TAARII community, who offered so much to scholarship, to Iraq, and to the world.

Through its fellowships for Iraqi citizens, TAARII aims to enable Iraqi scholars to continue their work in a climate that has grown increasingly inhospitable to research. We recognize the extraordinary hardships entailed in working in Iraq at this time and welcome suggestions from all members of the TAARII community as to how we can better serve our Iraqi members.