

Iraq



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WHAT ARE THE CORE QUESTIONS that need to be asked and which concepts offer the best insights for the study of Iraqi politics and society? When does the historical narrative of modern Iraq begin and in what ways does this narrative help explain Iraqi politics during the first decade of the twenty-first century? Are Iraqis, as is often asserted, more loyal to tribes, ethnic groups, and religious sects than to Iraq as a nation-state? Why did a country known for its love of culture and the arts succumb to the authoritarian rule and the extensive political violence that characterized the rule of Saddam Hussein and the Arab Socialist Baath (Renaissance) Party? Answering these questions in a systematic manner is key for an understanding of Iraqi politics.

Because no political process can be understood in any meaningful sense without situating it in a historical context, my analysis emphasizes *historical periodization*. Further, I argue that all political analysis needs to be viewed from multiple conceptual perspectives. This requires transcending the narrow focus on political elites that dominates much analysis of Middle Eastern politics by incorporating the larger social, economic, and cultural environment that has shaped Iraqi politics. Methodologically, this essay brackets key periods of time in Iraq's political development. It then analyzes the political processes that were operative within these time periods and the manner in

which they interacted with social, economic, and cultural developments.

Beginnings: Conceptualizing Iraqi Politics

The core concept for understanding Iraqi politics (or the politics of any nation-state for that matter) is that of *identity*. If subgroups within a nation-state fail to identify with its boundaries and political culture, then the nation-state will experience political instability and possibly even fragmentation. A strong national political identity alone, however, will not ensure a country's political stability. Without strong and legitimate *political institutions*, the problems of security, infrastructure, and social services that all societies face cannot be effectively addressed. Unfortunately, the combination of a strong political identity and weak political institutions has bedeviled many nation-states, including Iraq.

Some Prevalent Misconceptions

A major impediment to understanding Iraqi politics has been the tendency of Western analysts to argue that the political instability Iraq has experienced is a function of a weak national identity. Despite limited study of Iraq in the West, especially prior to the U.S. invasion of 2003, the prevailing assumption has been that Iraqis are more loyal to subnational identities, particularly



key facts on IRAQ

AREA	168,754 square miles (437,072 square kilometers)
CAPITAL	Baghdad
POPULATION	28,945,657 (2009); an estimated 2 million have fled the ongoing conflict
ETHNIC GROUPS	Arab, 75–80 percent; Kurdish, 15–20 percent; Turkoman, Assyrian, or other, 5 percent
RELIGION	Muslim, 97 percent (Shiite, 60–65 percent; Sunni, 32–37 percent); Christian or other, 3 percent
OFFICIAL LANGUAGE	Arabic, Kurdish (official in Kurdish regions), Assyrian, Armenian
TYPE OF GOVERNMENT	Parliamentary
GDP	\$93.8 billion; \$4,000 per capita (2008)

Source: Central Intelligence Agency, *CIA World Factbook*, 2009.

to one of the country's three main ethnic groups—the Sunni Arabs, Shiite Arabs, and the Kurds—than they are to the country as a whole.¹ This “ethnoconfessional” model has dominated Western views of Iraqi politics and society since the modern state was established by Great Britain in 1921. Two groups of analysts—colonial officials and minority expatriates—helped promote this understanding of Iraqi politics throughout most of the twentieth century.² Unfortunately, this model has informed much of the analysis of Iraqi politics since Saddam Hussein's regime was overthrown in 2003.³

The ethnosectarian model's validity is belied by the events of the past thirty years. During this period, Iraq was engaged in three major wars that did not cause it to fragment, despite severe human losses and material deprivation. The Iran-Iraq War of 1980–1988 was among the most brutal of the twentieth century and led to an estimated 250,000–500,000 Iraqi and 1 million Iranian casualties.⁴ Because the infantries of both the Iraqi and Iranian armies were primarily made up of Shiites, this was the first war in modern times in which Shiite fought Shiite. Despite Western predictions, Iraqi troops did not defect to the Iranian side, but fought doggedly, especially after Iranian forces entered Iraqi soil.⁵ The January 1991 Gulf War destroyed much of Iraq's armed forces, while

U.S. and allied bombing reduced Iraq to industrial levels of the early 1960s.⁶ The February–March 1991 uprising (intifada), which followed the war, resulted in several hundred thousand casualties and the creation of an autonomous Kurdish zone in Iraq's three northern provinces after the United States imposed a no-fly zone above the thirty-sixth parallel in 1991.⁷ During the United Nations (UN) sanctions regime that lasted from 1991 to 2003, Iraqis struggled to sustain themselves and their families as large segments of the population experienced economic deprivation, loss of social services such as education, and declining health conditions.⁸

The U.S. invasion of March 2003 not only destroyed Iraq's armed forces but also its governmental infrastructure when U.S. forces allowed extensive looting to occur in Baghdad in April 2003.⁹ Between the fall of 2003 and the summer of 2007, Iraq was characterized by a period of extensive sectarian violence and ethnic cleansing of many urban neighborhoods, especially in Baghdad. Thousands of Iraqi families were displaced. Nevertheless, residents of many neighborhoods worked to protect ethnic groups that were the target of ethnic violence. In others, neighbors guarded the homes of members of different ethnic groups until the residents could safely

return to reoccupy them. Despite this lengthy period of conflict, which began in 1980 and has continued until the present, Iraq has not fragmented into sectarian mini states. Sectarian forces, such as the Supreme Iraqi Islamic Council (ISCI), which sought to create a Shiite mini state comprising Iraq's nine southern, Shiite-majority provinces, has lost support among Iraq's Shiites.¹⁰ In the north, the Kurdish Regional Government (KRG), increasingly unpopular as a result of its repressive tactics, nepotism, and corruption, especially its appropriation of the KRG's oil wealth, has encountered rising opposition to its policies that seek to promote and exploit a sectarian definition of Kurdish identity.

Several recent events indicate that the Iraqi populace largely rejects sectarianism. In Iraq's January 2009 provincial legislature elections that took place in the Arab south, political parties and candidates who ran on secular and service-oriented platforms did well in the elections, winning a substantial percentage of the votes that were cast. Traditional sectarian political parties such as ISCI that used ethnic and confessional symbolism to win votes did poorly. When Iraq's Kurds voted in the Kurdish regional parliamentary elections in July 2009, a new political movement, Gorran (Change), mounted a vigorous campaign and won twenty-five seats in the Kurdish regional parliament.¹¹ The Gorran List, and its coalition partner, the Services and Reform List, won 40 of 110 seats, dealing a major blow to the Kurdish political elite dominated by the two traditional power centers, the Kurdish Democratic Party (KDP) and the Patriotic Union of Kurdistan (PUK).

Prior to the March 2010 elections for the national parliament—called the Council of Representatives—an Internet poll found that only 3 percent of probable voters indicated that they would vote in the March 7, 2010, elections according to a candidate's religious sect, while a large percentage indicated they would vote for secular, independent, or nationalist candidates.¹²



In another indication of the dissatisfaction of Iraqi voters with sectarian-based politics, fully 62 percent of the sitting members of parliament lost their seats in the March elections. In a striking and unexpected outcome, the secular al-Iraqiya List, headed by Iyad Allawi, a Shiite and prime minister in 2004–2005, won ninety-one seats in the Iraqi parliament, exceeding that of the next highest total of eighty-nine, garnered by the State of Law Coalition headed by Prime Minister Nuri Kamal al-Maliki.¹³ The Iraqi National Alliance, which was organized by ISCI, the most powerful political party to emerge from the December 2005 national parliamentary elections, only won seventy seats, of which forty belonged to the Sadrist Trend, that is, the followers of Muqtada al-Sadr, a further indicator of its continuing decline.

These electoral results, which reflect the development of a new politics of nationalism in post-Baathist Iraq, are reinforced by other indicators that likewise suggest a strong national identity. A massive outpouring of support for Iraq's national soccer team, celebrated by all of Iraq's ethnic groups, occurred following its unanticipated victory over Saudi Arabia

in the Asia Cup in July 2007.¹⁴ In interviews I conducted in Iraq and with Iraqi expatriates in Jordan, in late 2007, respondents expressed a strong desire for the Iraqi government and political parties to focus on improving services such as security, employment, health care, and municipal services. Likewise they indicated an equally strong desire for politicians to stop promoting sectarian identities that they saw as designed to promote individual political interests rather than the country's welfare.

Numerous public opinion polls since 2003 have pointed to a decline in support for sectarianism. A BBC-ABC-NHK poll in March 2009 found that 64 percent of Iraqis thought democracy was the best form of government, while only 14 percent supported an "Islamic" form of government and 19 percent desired a "strong ruler." In the poll, 55 percent of Arabs said that Sunni-Shiite relations had improved during the previous year, an increase of 11 percent over a 2008 poll.¹⁵ The secular and cross-ethnic civil society organizations that preceded Baathist rule have also made a comeback.¹⁶

At the same time, the condition of Iraqi women, estimated at perhaps as high as 60 percent of the Iraqi populace, has not improved as significantly as that of males during the period following 2003. Women suffered disproportionately during the UN sanctions regime between 1991 and 2003. The many gains made by Iraqi women during the 1940s and 1950s, and then again during the 1970s and early 1980s, were lost as women were forced back into the household and private sphere, their education levels dropped, and the number of "honor crimes" increased. These considerations point to the problem that women frequently are not integrated into the analysis of Middle East politics. That women of all ethnoconfessional groups have suffered serious economic deprivation and have been subject to honor crimes offers another perspective on sectarianism, namely that women are repressed regardless of their ethnic or confessional heritage. Put differently, gender discrimination is blind to ethnoconfessional identities.

Hypotheses

The preceding arguments suggest the following hypotheses about Iraqi politics. First, sectarian identities exist in Iraq, as they do in all ethnically and racially divided societies. In Iraq, however, we need to distinguish between *ethnic hostility*, *ethnic tensions*, and *ethnic violence*. Ethnic diversity alone is a necessary but not sufficient condition for ethnically based violence. Many societies, including India, South Africa, Malaysia, Canada, and Indonesia, are ethnically diverse but not characterized by ethnic violence. Iraq's ethnic diversity alone cannot explain the sectarian violence that has existed at times in Iraq, especially after 2003, nor can it explain other periods where such violence did not exist to any significant degree.

Second, where ethnic tensions do exist, they are invariably connected to disputes over scarce economic resources and political power. In other words, sectarianism cannot be understood in *abstract* terms, but must be socially and politically *contextualized*. Sectarian identities can only be explained in a causal sense once they have been integrated into a larger conceptual and empirical framework. Standing alone, they tell us little if nothing about Iraqi politics.¹⁷

Third, when analyzing sectarianism, we need to differentiate between mass publics and political elites. In the past, Iraqis have referred to politicians who seek to use sectarian divide-and-conquer tactics for corrupt ends, as the "merchants of politics" (*tujjar al-siyasa*). I prefer a broader concept, that of *sectarian entrepreneurs*. This term encompasses not only elected politicians and members of political parties but also political actors who head mass-based political movements outside the state and who frequently resort to sectarian identities for ideological or criminal ends. Examples include the Mahdi Army (Jaysh al-Mahdi), al-Qaida in the Land of the Two Rivers (al-Qa'ida fi Wadi al-Rafidayn), and the Islamic State of Iraq (Dawlat al-'Iraq al-Islamiya).

Fourth, sectarian identities are strongly affected by variables based in social class, gender, education,

ethnicity, and political experiences. Sometimes these variables reinforce sectarian identities, but more often than not they crosscut them, thereby diminishing their salience. Sectarianism tends not to characterize members of Iraq's small upper class, particularly those who are educated. Likewise, one does not find widespread support for sectarianism among peasants and urban workers. Sectarian identities are correlated with two types of groups: young rural-to-urban migrants who have low levels of education and are often unemployed or underemployed, and members of the large lower-middle class who seek upward mobility. In both of these groups, the key variables in promoting sectarian identities are significant *social change* and the accompanying *social psychological insecurity* that characterizes groups whose position in the social order has been made tenuous by such rapid and unpredictable change. Thus we can hypothesize that sectarian identities are strongly correlated with social class.

Although some predominantly Sunni tribes who benefited from a close association with Saddam Hussein's Baathist regime have demonstrated anti-Shiite and anti-Kurdish attitudes, almost all of Iraq's tribes include Sunni as well as Shiite clans. The paramount shaykh of Iraq's largest tribal confederation, the Muntafiq, is drawn from the Saduns, who are Sunni, while all the confederation's clans are Shiite.¹⁸ If sectarian identities were fixed and deeply rooted, it would be difficult to explain why so many tribes include members from the Arab community's two dominant sects. Among tribes, the tribal code of behavior and law (*al-'urf*) often takes precedence over Islamic law (*sharia*), even though most members of tribes are nominally Muslim. Thus, tribal identities often crosscut sectarianism.

Political experiences also play an important role in influencing sectarian identities. When the Arab and Kurdish populations rose against Saddam Hussein's regime in late February and March 1991, Saddam began promoting sectarianism even though this new policy went against the official ideology of the Arab socialist Baath Party, which he headed. The

Baath Party—founded in the Levant in the 1940s by Michel Aflaq, an Orthodox Christian, and Salah al-Din al-Bitar, a Sunni Muslim—was specifically nonsectarian and emphasized that party membership did not depend on ethnoconfessional background. When it was founded in Iraq in 1952, the Baath Party's first leadership was Shiite, until it was deposed in 1961. The second leadership cadre that took control of the party was headed by a Fayli (Shiite) Kurd, Ali Salih al-Sa'di, who led the first successful Baathist coup d'état in February 1963.

Certainly, state-sponsored sectarianism, such as Saddam's notorious Anfal campaign that displaced and killed hundreds of thousands of Kurds during the 1980s and the infamous gassing of Kurds in the city of Halabja in 1988, created strong hostility toward Iraq's Arab population on the part of many Kurds. Nevertheless, it was Kurds who destroyed the monument to the victims of Halabja in 2006 when expressing deep-seated anger at the KRG leadership's authoritarianism and corruption. My own interviews of Kurds in Iraq in 2005 and 2007 did not indicate widespread hostility toward the Arabs of the south. More than 200,000 Iraqis who moved to the north to escape the violence that dominated the Arab south between 2003 and 2007 were welcomed by Kurds, to the extent that special Arabic language schools were established by the KRG to teach children from the south in Arabic.¹⁹

These considerations underscore the contextual and fluid dimensions of sectarian politics in Iraq. Much of the sectarianism that emerged after the U.S. invasion of 2003 had already developed during the 1990s in response to economic deprivation and Saddam's self-conscious efforts to follow a divide-and-conquer policy in pitting Iraq's ethnoconfessional groups against one another. The collapse of the economy and the education system and the turning inward of Iraqis to traditional organizations based in tribe and religion only intensified the policies deployed by the Baathist state. Another factor that promoted sectarian identities was U.S. policy in Iraq. A third factor was the violence that Iraq experienced between 2003

and 2007 in which ethnic cleansing occurred in parts of the country as Sunni Islamist radicals in al-Qaida and the Islamist State of Iraq targeted Shiites in an effort to fan the flames of sectarian violence.

Finally, exogenous factors have played a key role in encouraging sectarianism throughout Iraq's modern history. The Ottomans purposefully favored Iraq's minority Sunni Arab elite as junior officers in the army, policemen, and lower-level bureaucrats during their rule of Iraq which lasted from the seventeenth century until 1918. The Ottoman elite felt that Iraq's Sunni Arabs, apart from being co-confessionals, were more trustworthy than the Shiites of the south, many of whom had ties to the empire's traditional archenemy, Persia (Iran).²⁰ After the collapse of the Ottoman Empire in 1918, the British continued the Ottoman policy when they created the Hashimite monarchy in 1921, headed by Faisal ibn Hussein, the son of the Sharif of Mecca. The monarchy was dominated by a Sunni Arab elite until it was overthrown in 1958. Except for a brief interregnum between 1958 and 1963, Iraq was largely ruled by a political elite dominated by Sunni Arabs until the U.S. invasion of 2003.

The Making of the Modern State: Historical Periodization

What insight can be gained from a historical analysis of modern Iraq? First, what criteria should we use when bracketing or delineating a historical period? How do we organize the study of time? Identity, institutions, and political participation (inclusion) are key concepts in structuring our historical analysis. When did an explicitly *political* identity develop among Iraqis and what institutional forms did it take? Why have certain groups been privileged politically, socially, and economically in the modern Iraqi state while others have been excluded from such privileges? In what ways did new institutions, both informal and governmental, give shape to political identities in Iraq?

The question of political identity is closely linked to the distinction we need to make between elite and

mass politics. As we shall see, Iraqi politics at the elite level has not contributed to the national interest. For the most part, political elites have promoted narrow economic and sectarian agendas. However, the Iraqi nationalist movement that developed in the late nineteenth century and grew in strength until it was suppressed by the first Baathist regime in February 1963 developed in a much more civic manner. Cross-ethnic in composition, the nationalist movement sought to improve living conditions for Iraq's citizenry and to force the state to become more democratic and culturally pluralistic. From an elite perspective, which is the focal point of most political analysis of modern Iraq, the post-1921 period was characterized by instability, sectarianism, corruption, and varying forms of repression. However, from the perspective of the contributions of the nationalist movement, there were many positive developments that established precedents, a *historical memory* if you will, for civil society and democracy activists who began to organize following the overthrow of Saddam Hussein's regime in 2003. Thus, in studying Iraq's modern political development, it is critical to distinguish between elite and mass-based politics.

The Young Turk Revolt and the Rise of Iraqi Nationalism

Iraq was one of the Ottoman Empire's last surviving provinces. Its subjects had become increasingly unsettled by the Ottomans' inability to stave off European colonialism and their successive loss of territory as the nineteenth century progressed. Iraqi poets, who represented the dominant cultural and political form of discourse during the late nineteenth century, had historically written poetry in praise of the Ottoman sultan. It was telling that this form of praise began to change to criticism as poets expressed their loss of confidence in Ottoman rule. Poetry then was an important indicator of changing attitudes toward the Ottomans among politically conscious Iraqis as the nineteenth century came to an end. Certainly, the expansion of traditional literary salons (*majalis al-adab*) in Baghdad

and other urban areas helped bring educated Iraqis, notables, and merchants together where they began formulating the idea of a specifically Iraq identity.²¹

A formative development in the crystallization of an explicitly Iraqi identity was the 1908 Young Turk revolt in Istanbul. The young officers of the Committee of Union and Progress (CUP) that ruled the Ottoman Empire in its final decade were highly nationalistic and keen to structure the empire according to a European model of political and social organization. Because they believed that Europe's success in building strong nation-states resided in the creation of a unitary culture and political identity, they instituted "Turkification" policies that emphasized the use of Turkish throughout the empire's remaining provinces in the Levant and Iraq. The Young Turks also pushed for a strong central government that would unite the empire's many ethnic and confessional elements around an explicit Turkish identity.

The new emphasis on a Turkish nationalism represented a break with the traditional focus on Islam that had been used as the "social cement" to link the vast majority of Ottoman subjects—whether Turkish, Arab, or Kurd—and the more decentralized *millet* system, where each ethnic group ruled itself according to its customs and traditions. The new CUP's political and social policies created consternation among Arab Iraqis who had already developed the beginnings of an Arabic language education system during the reign of the Ottoman *wali*, Midhat Pasha (1870–1872). Efforts by the CUP to have Iraq adapt to its new policies, including changing the language of instruction in government schools from Arabic to Turkish, helped promote an Iraqi identity by creating resentment at what were viewed as the CUP's heavy-handed policies.

During the same period, pressures to develop a new specific Iraqi identity were emanating from Europe itself. Great Britain's interest in Iraq stemmed from its strategic geographical location on the route to India, the crown jewel of its empire, and from Iraq's agricultural wealth, particularly grains, dates, and jute. By the turn of the twentieth century, British

steamers were plying the southern Tigris River, and Britain controlled much of Iraq's foreign trade, which was now linked to Europe. By 1900, Great Britain was Iraq's main trading partner.

In response to these developments, a group of Iraqi merchants, both Sunni and Shiite, after the 1908 Young Turk revolt began organizing a new educational system that was designed to create a class of educated Iraqis who could serve as clerks in a modernized Iraqi economy that would compete with British commercial interests. Beyond demonstrating that ethnoconfessional identities did not preclude the urban merchant class from cooperating to improve Iraqi society, these efforts demonstrated that European colonial penetration of the Iraqi economy was key in promoting new forms of Iraqi identity.²²

If the Young Turk revolt stimulated Iraqis to rethink their Ottoman identity and form new covert political organizations to challenge Ottoman rule, the onset of World War I and the British invasion of November 1914 accelerated that process. After British troops landed in southern Iraq, Shiite clerics issued religious decrees (known as a *fatwa*) that called on Iraqis to oppose the invasion and declared protection for all of Iraq's ethnic groups, not just Shiites, from British forces.

Peaceful efforts by Iraqis from diverse ethnic groups, such as the Guardians of Independence (Haras al-Istiqlal), and the Delegates (al-Mandubun) that sought to pressure the British to implement the promises of independence and democracy they had made when they entered Baghdad in March 1917, were unsuccessful. Finally, in June 1920, a large-scale revolt flared throughout much of Iraq; it was not suppressed until the following October. The June–October uprising set the stage for the cross-ethnic cooperation that was to characterize the majority wing of the Iraqi nationalist movement until it was suppressed following the first Baathist coup in February 1963. During the revolt, Sunnis and Shiites prayed in each others' mosques and celebrated their respective religious festivals and holidays. Jews

and Christians were encouraged by Muslims to join in protest demonstrations against British rule based on the idea that all these ethnic groups—Muslims, Christians, and Jews—were Iraqi citizens.²³

The suppression of the 1920 revolt and the exile and imprisonment of many Shiite clerics and tribal leaders, who were assumed to be the uprising's prime movers, began a long process of political decay at the level of the state and political elites. Iraq would have to wait until 1948 until it had its first Shiite prime minister, despite the fact that the population was well over 50 percent Shiite when the state was founded in August 1921. Nevertheless, at the level of mass politics, the events between 1918 and 1920 indicated a level of political maturity among Iraqis that augured well for the creation of new political system now that Ottoman rule had ended. However, the Sharifian officers, who had fought with Faisal when he led the Arab Revolt in the Hijaz and the Levant between 1916 and 1918 and then supported him during the short-lived Syrian Arab state between 1918 and 1920, were not open to sharing power with other ethnic groups. The Sharifians sought to retain their hold on power once the Hashimite monarchy was established through a referendum that the British rigged in August 1921. The combined power of the British and the Sharifian elite would prevent any meaningful political or economic reforms from being implemented between 1921 and the July 1958 revolution that toppled the Hashimite monarchy.

Monarchical Iraq, 1921–1958

From the perspective of cross-ethnic cooperation, the period of the monarchy was one that offered great promise in terms of the growing Iraqi nationalist movement. Members of all ethnic and confessional groups, Muslims, Christians, Jews, Kurds, Turkmen, and others, took great offense at the British occupation of Iraq and opposed it. During the late 1920s and after, there was also a rise in associational behavior as

urban Iraqis formed professional associations encompassing lawyers, physicians, engineers, and teachers; literary salons for writers and artists; organizations for women and students; labor unions; and programmatic political parties and movements. Clearly, a vibrant civil society was in the process of formation.

Despite the overwhelming cross-ethnic nature of the Iraqi nationalist movement, there was a competing model for Iraq's political identity based on the ideology of pan-Arabism. This minority wing of the nationalist movement was largely confined to Sunni Arab army officers and members of the Sharifian political elite. Thus, one of the major political tensions that existed after the founding of Iraq in 1921 was the struggle over Iraq's political identity between two wings of the Iraqi nationalist movement; I have referred to this elsewhere as local or "Iraqist" nationalism and pan-Arabism. Iraqist or local nationalists sought to promote a cross-ethnic, pluralistic, and culturally tolerant form of nationalism. Pan-Arabism sought to privilege the minority Sunni Arab community that comprises 15–20 percent of the Iraqi society. This form of identity was not compelling either to the majority Shiite population, which would have become a minority in a pan-Arab state in which Sunni Muslims were the majority, or to the Kurdish population that was 20 percent of the populace, or to the Jews, Christians, and numerous other minorities.²⁴

Unlike the positive developments promoted by the Iraqist nationalist movement, Iraqi politics viewed from the vantage point of the monarchy, the parliament, and the Sharifian political elite suggested considerable political decay. The monarchical period entailed repressive policies that were accompanied by great differentials of income distribution and inequities in political power. Paradoxically, the period between 1921 and 1958 was formative of all that is progressive about modern Iraqi politics, but it also produced those negative factors, such as weak political institutions and sectarian identities, that have prevented Iraq from achieving its potential to become a prosperous and stable democracy.

The British occupation of Iraq, which took the form of a League of Nations mandate between 1920 and 1932 and then informal behind-the-scene influence until the 1958 revolution, provoked a strong nationalist repose on the part of urban Iraqis who were angered by the suppression of the 1920 revolt; the arrest and exile of many of its leaders, especially Shiite clerics; the imposition of the Hashimite monarchy in 1921; the drawing of Iraq's boundaries by colonial fiat; and the imposition of a constitution (the Organic Law) in 1925, all with limited or no Iraqi participation.

During the time period that they dominated Iraqi politics, the British had numerous opportunities to promote democratization, such as condemning the monarchy's manipulation of parliamentary elections and fostering the opening of the political system to Shiites and Kurds. Instead, they pursued the typical colonial policy of divide and conquer and within the state tacitly supported traditional Sunni Arab interests that largely excluded Shiites and Kurds. In Iraq's tribal regions in 1933 they established a special legal system, the Tribal Criminal and Civil Disputes Regulation, that made tribal shaykhs masters of rural Iraq. The tribal legal code effectively divided Iraq, administratively and judicially, into separate urban and rural zones. The state could not enter the tribal domain (*al-dira*) without the permission of the paramount shaykh, neither could it recruit members of the armed forces in these areas nor could it prosecute tribal members who had committed crimes. The strategy was intended to use the rural tribes to balance the power of urban nationalists. The outcome was a fragmentation of political authority that undermined the central state's ability to rule, much less implement any far-reaching social reforms.

In light of British efforts to manipulate Iraqi politics, King Faisal I's efforts to act as a statesman and reconciler were much more extensive than many historians of modern Iraq are willing to admit. He did reach out to the Shiite clergy and larger community by arguing that his own Hashimite family in the Hijaz

contained Zaydi (Shiite) elements, which thus gave him much in common with Iraq's majority population. However, British mandate policy and its Tribal Civil and Criminal Disputes Regulations prevented Faisal from establishing a conscript army and recruiting armed forces personnel from tribal areas. As a result, Iraq was unable to adequately defend its southern borders from attacks by Wahhabi forces during the late 1920s. Only after the mandate ended in 1932 could Iraq develop the army as a national institution.

Faisal's premature death in 1933 was a great setback for Iraq. His young son, Ghazi I, was inexperienced and unable to rule the country effectively. In 1936, Iraq experienced the first military coup d'état in the Arab world. It was led by General Bakir Sidqi al-Askari, a Kurd who had commanded the Iraqi army during its massacre of Assyrians in northern Iraq in 1933. The Assyrians, who had been expelled from Turkey after World War I for having assisted the British in their fight against the forces of Mustafa Kemal (Atatürk), were viewed by the Iraqi government as a fifth column that was seeking to establish an independent state in the oil-rich area of the Nineveh plains. Having been organized as levies by the British, the Assyrians were known for their military prowess. After attacking and massacring more than 300 the Assyrians, ostensibly to disarm them (although many were unarmed civilians), Sidqi was welcomed as a great "Arab" nationalist as the Iraqi government had him parade his troops through the center of Baghdad. Yet, when Sidqi seized power in 1936, he expressed admiration not for pan-Arabism, but for the leader of Republican Turkey, Mustafa Kemal Atatürk, and especially Reza Shah in neighboring Iran. Angered that he would not promote pan-Arab policies, army officers assassinated him in October 1937, less than a year after he seized power.

Between 1937 and 1941, pan-Arab army officers ruled Iraq, with Ghazi serving as a figurehead until his suspicious death in an automobile accident in 1939. Ghazi's son, the infant Faisal II, was placed under the tutelage of the regent, Abd al-Ilah, who

tried to sustain the Hashimite monarchy's close ties to the British despite strong nationalist and military hostility to this policy. During this period, sympathy developed among pan-Arabists, both inside and outside the military, for fascist Germany and Italy. The German ambassador in Baghdad, Dr. Fritz Grobba, used anti-British hostility to further Nazi aims in Iraq and the Middle East and to promote anti-Jewish sentiment, in part because significant numbers of educated Jews in Iraq were sympathetic to leftist causes and many Jews maintained close cultural and commercial ties with Great Britain.

The pro-Axis government of Prime Minister Rashid Ali al-Gaylani, which staged a coup d'état on April 1, 1941, was deposed after the British defeated the Iraqi army during a month-long war in May 1941. Great bitterness developed among pan-Arabist officers who were angered not only by the defeat but by the forced retirement of many officers and the reduction in the army's size after 1941. When the army was called upon to fight in the Arab-Israeli war that broke out after Israel declared itself an independent state in May 1948, it was ill-equipped to pursue combat beyond Iraq's borders. Paralleling the Egyptian army's experience, the Iraqi army's poor performance in Palestine created deep resentment within the officer corps and was a key factor in promoting the idea of overthrowing the Iraqi monarchy. Another key element in the preparations for the July 1958 revolution was the ease with which civilian demonstrators during the 1948 Wathba (Great Leap) were able to force the prime minister at the time, Salih Jabr, to leave office and flee the country in fear for his safety.²⁵

The strength of the Iraqist nationalist movement was its cross-ethnic composition. While it was certainly dominated by Arabs, it included members of all of Iraq's ethnic and confessional groups. As early as 1925 there were demonstrations against British efforts to mold the new Iraqi constitution without Iraqi participation that led to demonstrations across ethnic lines. Arguing for the right of freedom of speech, Sunni and Shiite youth joined to protest the

dismissal in 1927 of Anis Nusuli, a Syrian teaching in Iraqi schools, who had written a book favorable to the Umayyad caliphate that the Shiite minister of education had found offensive.²⁶

In 1931, a general strike brought together artisans and nascent labor unions to protest British efforts to raise electricity rates in Iraqi cities and towns. As the 1930s progressed, labor unions, especially oil workers, railway workers, and port workers in the southern port city of Basra, began to demonstrate and strike to achieve better wages and working conditions. In 1934, the Iraqi Communist Party (ICP) was formed, bringing together three different Marxist currents. The party quickly gained support, with less owed to its Marxist ideology than to its message of social justice and anti-sectarian policies that attracted members from many minorities in addition to Iraq's three main ethnic groups. During World War II, when Great Britain reduced its suppression of the labor movement in deference to its ostensible ally, the Soviet Union, the ICP and the labor movement experienced rapid growth.²⁷

The Post-1945 Period and the Intensification of Nationalist Opposition

Following the war, the Iraqi government again cracked down on the nationalist and labor movements. The ICP experienced particular repression. In 1949, its leader, Yusif Salman Yusif (also known as Comrade Fahd), and top party leaders were hanged in public in Baghdad as a result of their roles in organizing opposition to the monarchy, which was especially threatened by the Wathba, perhaps Iraq's largest uprising apart from the post-Gulf War intifada in 1991. The 1948 Wathba uprising reflected the tremendous outpouring of opposition at British efforts to have the Iraqi parliament ratify the Portsmouth Treaty that had been signed in England, which would have renewed British rights to air bases in Iraq. The Wathba was followed by another intifada in 1952 and massive demonstrations in 1955 against the Baghdad Pact signed by Iraq that year, and

then against the invasion of Egypt in October 1956 by Great Britain, France, and Israel after Egyptian president Gamal Abdel Nasser nationalized the Suez Canal.

The period after World War II saw not only increased violence in Iraq but increased tensions between supporters of Iqbalist ideas and pan-Arab nationalism. The November 1947 partition plan in Palestine and the ensuing Arab-Israeli war of 1948–1949 sharpened cleavages between the Iqbalist nationalist movement, which included many members of Iraq's sizable Jewish population, and those who sought to promote a new pan-Arab nation drawn from the former British and French colonies in the Arab world. Pan-Arabists exploited Israel's founding in 1948 to impugn the loyalty of Iqbalist nationalists by claiming that its Jewish members were actually Zionists and disloyal to Iraq. The monarchy supported this ideological perspective as it sought to deflect criticism of the Iraqi army's poor showing in the 1948 Arab-Israeli war by blaming the defeat on the pro-Soviet ICP and Iraq's Jewish population.²⁸

The 1950s are considered by many Iraqis to be modern Iraq's golden age. Literature and the arts flourished. The Free Verse Movement in poetry was one of the most creative innovations in Arab culture in the twentieth century.²⁹ Painting developed under the auspices of such artists, sculptors, and architects as Jawad Salim, Faik Hassan, Ismail al-Shakhly, and many others. A diverse, coffeehouse culture spread in Baghdad and other Iraqi cities, which promoted cultural pluralism, aesthetic diversity—Mesopotamian, Western, Arab, Islamic, folkloric—and a synthesis of ancient and modern traditions.³⁰

The 1950s also witnessed rising nationalist protest and state repression. A great injustice occurred after the 1948 Arab-Israeli war as thousands of Iraqi Jews were stripped of their citizenship and property and forced to leave the country. That the vast majority of Iraqi Jews were loyal to Iraq and did not seek to emigrate to Israel was beyond doubt. Political violence continued during the intifada of 1952 as well as the demonstrations against the signing of the

Baghdad Pact in 1955 and the invasion of Egypt by Britain, France, and Israel in 1956. Tensions mounted between the powerful ICP and the pan-Arab nationalists in the lower echelons of the officer corps and in the Baath Party, established in 1952. Parliamentary elections continued to be manipulated by the monarchy, especially the perennial prime minister, Nuri al-Said, and its supporters among the aging Sharifian elite, large landowners, and wealthy merchants.

Then, in an idiosyncratic turn of events, relatively open elections were held in June 1954, and democratic and reformist candidates were elected to the national parliament in Iraq's major cities. When Nuri al-Said annulled the elections, the monarchy's legitimacy was further undermined. When the monarchy insisted on maintaining close ties to Great Britain and, subsequently, to the United States through signing the Baghdad Pact in 1955, its fate was effectively sealed.³¹

The Republican Period, 1958–1968

The decade that followed the July 1958 revolution in Iraq was one of the most formative in Iraq's modern history. Paralleling the period between 1921 and 1958, it was a period of great promise but great turmoil as well. The main political cleavage, which greatly intensified, was the tension between two forms of nationalism, Iqbalist nationalism on the one hand, and pan-Arabism on the other. This struggle reflected the continuing conflict over the definition of Iraq's political identity, a problem that is only now beginning to be addressed in the post-2003 era. At a deeper level, this form of identity politics reflected the struggle of competing political elites over who would have power and control the post-revolution state.

Because the coalition of army officers that toppled the Hashimite monarchy was ideologically diverse, internal fissures soon developed. Many officers demanded immediate political unity (*al-wahda al-fawriya*) with the United Arab Republic (UAR), composed of Egypt and Syria and headed by Gamal Abdel Nasser, that had been formed earlier in 1958.

Another group of army officers and civilian Iraqi nationalists rejected the idea of joining the UAR because it would promote sectarianism by transforming Iraq's Sunni Arab minority into a majority in the new pan-Arab state, creating resentment among Shiites and Kurds. These officers felt that Iraq faced such a large number of social and economic problems that it did not need to complicate them further by becoming involved in pan-Arab politics. These issues were not openly discussed or confronted, however, during the period following the overthrow of the monarchy. Only today are they beginning to enter Iraqi political discourse.

Although the leader of the new revolutionary regime, Staff Brigadier Abd al-Karim Qasim, was committed to implementing a program of widespread social reforms, he proved to be an ineffectual leader. He was antisectarian, and he appointed many government officials based on merit rather than ethnic or confessional background. Still, by appointing officials on merit, his policies perforce increased the numbers of Shiites in the state apparatus, given their majority status in the Iraqi populace. For Sunni Arabs, especially those from rural and tribal backgrounds, this change in state recruitment policies was viewed as threatening. First, it challenged their traditional monopoly over access to positions within the state. Second, many of the Shiites who entered the state apparatus were left of center or even members of the ICP. Thus, there was a sense that the Qasim regime was opening Iraq to greater Soviet influence, further challenging the political status of the minority Sunni Arabs in Iraq, relatively few of whom were associated with the left.

Qasim's great mistake was not using his popularity in 1958 to build a political foundation for his regime. Instead of reaching out to the nationalist political parties, Qasim soon declared that he was the "sole leader" (*al-za'im al-awhad*) and that he was "above all (political) trends" (*fawq al-tayyrrarat*). Shortly after the revolution, Qasim assembled a cabinet representing all the disparate nationalist elements,

apart from the Baathists. This cabinet could have provided the basis for developing a truly representative regime and slowly moving toward a more open system of government. Instead, Qasim established a dictatorship and a corporatist system of governance that eliminated political parties, controlled the press, and demobilized civil society. Qasim set in motion a process that was later perfected by the Baathist regime under Ahmad Hassan al-Bakr and Saddam Hussein after it seized power in July 1968.

The corporatist form of governance that Qasim established was not unique to Iraq. It was the logical outcome of the rule that military dictatorships that came to power in several Arab countries during the late 1940s and 1950s put in place in, especially, Syria, Egypt, and Iraq. In each instance, the army intervened to restore order under the banner of "revolution." Using the argument that the army represented the "will" of a culturally and ideologically unified "nation," any form of dissent was viewed as "anti-revolutionary." This form of governance differed from the types of quasi-liberal regimes that existed during the interwar period that followed the collapse of the Ottoman Empire. While governments in Syria, Egypt, and Iraq were by no means democratic, they did allow a form of pluralism and individual rights, reflected in multiple political parties, a relatively independent judicial system, and a diverse press.

In pursuing an antisectarian and reformist political agenda, Qasim acquired great popularity, especially among the poor and the less fortunate, but his reforms came at the cost of the suppression of civil society. Labor unions were placed under the control of state bureaucrats, and the press was subject to censorship. Rather than try to build a broad-based political coalition, Qasim sought to play off the two main political movements, the communists and the pan-Arabists, against each other. After coming to power in July 1958, Qasim favored the Iraqi wing of the nationalist movement, especially the ICP. By the summer of 1959, when Qasim felt that the ICP had acquired too much power, he moved to the right,

favoring Arab nationalists and attempting to create a rival communist party under Daud Sayigh.

Despite Qasim's efforts to reach out to the Kurds and his invitation to Kurdish leader and head of the KDP, Mustafa Barzani, to return to Iraq from the Soviet Union, a dispute developed between the two leaders in 1961. When Barzani and the Kurdish leadership made what Qasim considered excessive demands for autonomy and an Iraqi army column was attacked in May 1961, the Iraqi army invaded the north. The military campaign was very unpopular, especially when the conflict quickly became a stalemate. By 1963, Qasim's popularity and political support had dropped significantly. On February 6, 1963, Baathists, under the leadership of Ali Salih al-Sadi, with support from Mustafa Barzani and the KDP and the U.S. Central Intelligence Agency staged a putsch against Qasim, who was captured the following day and summarily executed. Ironically, Qasim's imposition of authoritarian rule and his refusal to allow any significant political participation undercut the very groups that might have enabled him to retain his hold on power.

Between 1963 and 1968, a number of regimes held power, undermining the development of political institutions. Although Qasim had introduced land reform, pressed for the nationalization of Iraqi oil, expanded the secondary and higher education systems, and built public housing in Baghdad for rural migrants, neither the first Baathist regime nor the regimes that followed after the Baath was removed from power by the army in November 1968 implemented additional social reforms. The Iraqi army's ineffectual showing in the 1967 Arab-Israeli war paved the way for the second Baathist regime that, with Nasserist supporters, took power in a virtually bloodless putsch in July 1968.

Corporatism and Baathist Authoritarianism, 1968–2003

The seizure of power by the Baath Party in 1968 was the result of a long process of nationalist protest that

had produced significant social disorder. Due in large part to the Hashimite monarchy's refusal to restructure the political system and enact social reforms, namely cede real power to moderate nationalists, the political protest that intensified after World War II had no place to turn other than violence. Thus, the often violent political protests of the late 1940s and 1950s set the stage for the July 1958 revolution that overthrew the monarchy. The coming to power of the Iraqi military was the outcome of weak political institutions and the support for a rapacious monarchical political elite by Western powers, first Great Britain and then the United States, during the 1950s.

The efforts of Abd al-Karim Qasim to demobilize the extensive civil society that had developed within the crucible of the Iraqi nationalist movement between 1920 and 1958 laid the foundation for the lengthy period of authoritarian rule that would last until the overthrow of Saddam Hussein's Baathist regime in 2003. The idea that the military embodied the will of the nation was part of a vague and abstract ideology that was *corporatist* in nature. The nation was conceived as an organic entity that was indivisible in terms of its historical mission. Interests were defined in unitary and collective terms. Consequently, the notion of the individual and individual interests, a concept that had maintained some currency during the quasi-liberal order under the Hashimite monarchy, was thoroughly suppressed. A complement to the suppression of the concept of the individual was the elimination of the judicial system and the rule of law generally seen, for example, in the creation of a system of revolutionary courts, whether under Qasim in Iraq or under Nasser in Egypt. The ideas of citizenship and individual rights were subordinated to those of the nation and the need to sacrifice on its behalf.

The corporatist ideology that developed under military regimes was based on another core concept, namely that the nation-state was subject to constant threat and conspiracies. This ideological modality provided further justification for the suppression of dissent. With the cold war at its apex during the 1960s

and 1970s, both the United States and the West and the Soviet Union and its allies sought to manipulate states in the Middle East, providing further support for the idea of plots and conspiracies as the order of the day. The key outcome was the creation of a social structure that atomized Iraqi society and increasingly characterized political dissent as treasonous.

The overthrow of Abd al-Karim Qasim created yet another impediment to promoting a liberal and open society because pan-Arabism was in ascendancy during the 1950s and 1960s. Pan-Arabism, following “pan” movements elsewhere, for example, pan-Germanism, pan-Slavism, and pan-Turanism, strengthened the corporatist model of political organization still further. Pan-Arabism had the impact of marginalizing the majority of the Iraqi populace because, aside from the relatively small numbers of Iraqi Shiites who supported pan-Arabism, most Shiites and Kurds felt little affection for the idea of Iraq becoming part of a larger Arab nation, particularly if that nation was dominated by an authoritarian, Nasserist Egypt.

Saddam Hussein’s seizure of the presidency in the summer of 1979 accentuated Iraq’s problems. Saddam’s immediate motivation was the effort of Ahmad Hassan al-Bakr and Syrian president Hafiz al-Asad to create a unified Baathist state that would exclude him from power. Saddam had been placing family and tribal members and close allies in positions of power ever since the Baath seized power in 1968; thus, it was only a matter of time until he seized power outright by proclaiming himself president.

The negative impact of the corporatist authoritarianism that shaped political discourse and political institutions in Iraq after 1958 became apparent in the crisis that developed with Iran after the success of the Islamic Revolution in 1978–1979. Saddam’s invasion of Iran in September of 1980 was a decision that set in motion a series of events that ultimately led to the collapse of his regime. Saddam justified the invasion as a response to the purported effort of the new Khomeini regime to overthrow his government. Certainly this was the message of the new Islamic republic’s

propaganda apparatus that broadcast vituperative attacks on Saddam Hussein’s regime. Iran not only condemned the Baathist regime as being both secular and antireligious but also accused it of being an agent of Western imperialist interests in the Middle East that needed to be eliminated. The attempted assassination of several top Baathist officials, such as Foreign Minister Tariq Aziz, during 1979 and 1980 and the increasing restiveness of large parts of Iraq’s Shiite population gave some credence to Saddam’s accusations of Iranian interference in Iraq’s domestic affairs.

Still, the invasion of Iran was as much motivated by Saddam’s efforts to take advantage of Iran’s internal instability and military weakness and to achieve his objective of becoming the hegemon of the Persian Gulf as it was to topple the Khomeini regime for ideological reasons. Saddam calculated that the Iraqi army would quickly defeat Iran. Defeating the new Islamic republic would strengthen Saddam’s position in the Gulf and also establish him as the premier Arab nationalist leader who was defending the Arab world against Iran and radical Islamism and working to expand the cause of pan-Arabism.

The Gulf War, 1991 Intifada, and UN sanctions, 1991–2003

Iraq’s seizure of Kuwait in August 1990 should be viewed as an extension of the Iran-Iraq War. Saddam had promised Iraqis that the social welfare benefits they had enjoyed during the 1970s and early 1980s would be reinstated after the war ended, but Saudi Arabia and Kuwait refused to cancel the debts that Iraq had contracted during the war. Fearful of Iraq’s million-man, battle-tested army, they increased oil production after the 1988 truce, driving down global prices and preventing Iraq from rebuilding its infrastructure and economy, which had been badly damaged during the war. Saddam’s inability to return Iraq to the prosperity of the status quo ante led to political unrest, including an attempted coup by 178 army officers in 1989. Infuriated by what he viewed as Kuwaiti and Saudi attempts

to undermine his regime, Saddam ordered the invasion of Kuwait on August 20, 1990, which resulted in a brutal occupation of the country that lasted until the onset of the Gulf War in January 1991.

The 1991 Gulf War created great concern among U.S. and UN coalition forces that Iraq possessed weapons of mass destruction (WMD), given its use of chemical weapons against Iranian forces during the Iran-Iraq War and against the Iraqi Kurds in the town of Halabja in 1988. Nevertheless, Iraqi forces engaged in only limited combat with U.S. and UN coalition forces and no WMD were deployed during the brief conflict that lasted only a few weeks. Iraqi forces were quickly defeated and expelled from Kuwait, and they suffered a large number of casualties.

After leaving units of the conscript army to suffer carpet bombing and frontal attacks by the U.S. and UN forces in January 1991, Iraqi troops who subsequently withdrew from Kuwait initiated an uprising in the southern port city of Basra in February 1991.³² The uprising quickly spread to most areas of Iraq and almost led to the collapse of Saddam's regime. The U.S. decision not to support the uprising and to allow Iraqi helicopter gunships to take to the air enabled the regime to successfully (and brutally) suppress the insurgents.³³ Media images of Iraqi Kurds being attacked in northern Iraq forced President George H. W. Bush to impose a no-fly zone on Iraq above the thirty-sixth parallel, in effect giving the three Kurdish provinces autonomy from the central government in Baghdad.

The brutal suppression of the 1991 intifada was followed by the imposition of the harshest set of sanctions ever imposed on a modern state. The UN even prevented the import of lead pencils because they could be used to build WMD. Government salaries lost almost all their value as the Iraqi dinar effectively became a worthless currency, the national economy collapsed, the education system ceased to function, and criminal activity, particularly oil smuggling and the smuggling of ancient artifacts, came to dominate what little economic activity did exist.

UN Sanctions and the Spread of Sectarian Identities

Iraq's massive defeat in the Gulf War, which led to the destruction of its economic infrastructure, the killing of many Baathist officials during the 1991 uprising, and severe UN sanctions, weakened the Baathist state. Saddam's response was to turn to traditional organizations, particularly tribes and religious groups, for political support. The so-called retribalization of Iraqi society did not involve just revising moribund tribes that would serve as the Baath's agents of control in the countryside, replacing the many Baathists who had been killed during the intifada; simultaneously it was an effort to weaken strong tribes that might challenge the central state. Saddam appointed clan leaders within powerful tribes as shaykhs, thereby undermining traditional lines of authority and creating competition with the paramount or main shaykh (*shaykh al-mashayikh*) and dissension within the tribe.

During the UN sanctions from 1991 to 2003, the spread of criminality was most evident within the state itself, where the Baath engaged in oil smuggling, especially across Iraq's borders. Saddam Hussein and Masoud Barzani, the head of the autonomous Kurdish region, as they both cooperated to smuggle oil out of Iraq. A civil war broke out within the Kurdish region in 1994 between the two main Kurdish parties, the KDP and the PUK. When PUK forces appeared to be on the verge of victory in 1996, Masoud Barzani asked Saddam Hussein to send Iraqi forces to the KDP stronghold of Irbil to help him stave off defeat. In exchange, Barzani turned over Iraqi opposition figures in Irbil who were summarily executed by Baathist intelligence operatives.³⁴

Saddam also played the "religious card" in an effort to strengthen his regime. After bombarding the Shiite shrine cities of al-Najaf and Karbala with Scud missiles during the 1991 intifada and attacking the cities with Republican Guard tanks that carried signs, "No more Shiites after today," Saddam subsequently tried to forge an image of himself as deeply religious. A theological seminary, Saddam College of

Theology, was opened. The regime supplied funds to repair the gold domes of Shiite mosques in the shrine cities. Women, who had benefited significantly from Baathist policies during the 1970s and early 1980s, now found many of their rights curtailed as Saddam tried to appeal to men for political support along traditional lines by giving them more control over their wives and female relatives. Thus, a woman could no longer travel without the written permission of her husband or a suitable male relative.

As part of his strategy to co-opt groups with which the regime had formerly been in conflict, Saddam opened contact with one of the most prominent Shiite clerics, Ayatollah Muhammad Sadiq al-Sadr, brother of the famous Ayatollah Muhammad Baqir al-Sadr, whom Saddam had executed in 1980 along with his sister, Bint al-Huda, a theologian in her own right. Both Saddam and Sadr thought they could use each other for their own political ends. For Saddam, this meant mobilizing support within the Shiite community through the legitimacy of Sadr who, in turn, tried to use the greater freedom he acquired through association with the Baathist regime to organize an Islamist movement among Shiite followers. Once Saddam discovered that Muhammad Sadiq al-Sadr was exploiting his political ties to simultaneously organize Shiite resistance, he ordered Sadiq al-Sadr and two of his sons assassinated in 1999.

The politics of the 1990s activated groups that traditionally had opposed the Baath, and they became actively involved in antiregime politics. The Martyr's Bureau (Maktab al-Shahid) was organized by the Sadr family and its supporters around the executions of Ayatollah Muhammad Baqir al-Sadr and Bint al-Huda and, later, the assassinations of Ayatollah Muhammad Sadiq al-Sadr and his two sons. The Maktab al-Shahid became the prototype for the Mahdi Army that emerged after 2003. Many other groups used the veil of religion—alleging they were engaged in religious charitable activities—to promote criminal as well as sectarian political activity. In a perverse way, the structural weakness of the

Baathist state, Saddam's return to tradition, and his encouragement of greater emphasis on religion in public life promoted two seemingly contradictory relationships: an increase in criminality and the encouragement of a religious activity, which sometimes itself played host to that criminal activity.³⁵

Iraqi Politics in the Post-Baathist Era

It should have come as no surprise to those Americans participating in the military and civilian occupation of Iraq that the 1990s had created significant economic, social, and political decay in the country. Instead of addressing the legacy of the 1990s, the George W. Bush administration largely ignored it. Unaware of the political and social dynamics of Iraqi society that had formed under UN sanctions, the Coalition Provisional Authority (CPA) that ruled Iraq from May 2003 until June 2004 adopted policies that intensified these problems. When U.S. forces entered Baghdad in March 2003, they secured the Ministry of Defense, located in Saddam's Republican Palace, and the Ministry of Oil while they allowed massive looting to occur in Baghdad. The looting led to the complete destruction of all government ministries and the theft and damaging of countless priceless artifacts in the Iraq Museum.

In the spring of 2003, CPA administrator, L. Paul Bremer, established the Iraqi Governing Council (IGC), which was organized along strict ethnoconfessional lines. While ethnic and confessional considerations had influenced the choice of cabinet ministers under the monarchy, the IGC was the first government in modern Iraq to be structured along explicitly sectarian lines. The manner in which the Bush administration constructed the IGC sent a message to all Iraq's major political actors and organizations that sectarian-based politics was the new order of the day.

Perhaps the most egregious foreign policy decision taken by the Bush administration after toppling Saddam Hussein's regime was the dissolution of the Iraqi conscript army in May 2003. Ignoring the advice of Iraqis and the U.S. military, the CPA dismissed

385,000 troops. The vast majority of these troops despised Saddam Hussein's regime. Many remembered being left to the mercy of U.S. and UN coalition troops in Kuwait in 1991, which included extensive carpet bombing. Members of the army resented the privileged treatment accorded to Saddam's Republican Guard and Special Republican Guard units, as well as his praetorian guard, the *Fadaya' Saddam* (Those Who Would Sacrifice for Saddam). The conscript army possessed substandard equipment and was paid only infrequently.

In interviews, former officers of the conscript army—all of them, including Kurds—pointed to its ethnically integrated nature.³⁶ Many officers argued that the sectarian violence that developed after the U.S. invasion would not have occurred if the army had been left intact.³⁷ In addition to the dissolution of the Iraqi army, the CPA also dismissed an estimated 125,000 public sector workers; the CPA used the rationale that governments should not be involved in running public enterprises. Because the national police were likewise dismissed, Iraqi estimates are that between six and ten million citizens were affected by these decisions, taking into account the families of members of the military, public sector workers, and police officers who lost their salaries.

The result was a dramatic increase in the supply of men to the nascent insurgency, many of whom were conversant in the use of weapons and military technology. The CPA policy created still further problems through its elimination of agricultural subsidies in August 2003; the CPA argued that subsidies discouraged innovation and hence growth in agricultural production. This decision further undermined the ability of Iraq's farmers to compete with Iranian and Syrian imports of fruits and vegetables, thereby forcing many to abandon their farms and migrate to urban areas in search of work. Sectarian groups recruited many of these internal migrants for violent and criminal activity.

In August 2004, Iraqi political leaders, under great pressure from the Bush administration, completed

the draft of a new Iraqi constitution. The constitution created a decentralized Iraq with a relatively weak central government. It gave the right to any group of three or more provinces to form an "autonomous region," such as the KRG in the north, comprising Dohuk, Irbil, and Sulaimaniya provinces.

In January 2005, Iraq held its first interim elections for a new parliament. In December 2005, elections were held for a permanent parliament in which representatives would serve four-year terms. With voter turnout approaching almost 60 percent, Iraqis clearly expressed their desire for a democratic system, even if voting was largely along ethnic lines. High voter turnout, despite threats from al-Qaida and other sectarian organizations that voters would be killed, indicated a strong desire among Iraqis to move beyond authoritarian rule. Nevertheless, the forward movement in the political arena did not lead to a decrease in violence. Ethnic cleansing continued to occur in many neighborhoods in Baghdad and other areas of Iraq, resulting in the displacement of large numbers of Iraqi families, which either became refugees within Iraq or were forced to move to surrounding countries, especially Jordan and Syria.

By 2006, Iraq appeared to be on a downward trend toward civil war and even political fragmentation. The Kurds continued to push for greater autonomy from the central government and demanded the right to produce and export oil in their region. The KRG argued, with some justification, that the central government in Baghdad was completely incapable of modernizing the technologically outdated and dilapidated oil industry. U.S. troops were unable to suppress the insurgency in the so-called Sunni Arab triangle that was fighting under the leadership of al-Qaida in the Mesopotamian Valley and the Islamic State of Iraq. In the Shiite south, the Mahdi Army controlled Sadr City in Baghdad, large areas of the port city of Basra, and many other towns in southern Iraq. In February 2006, bombings occurred in the city of Samarra, badly damaging the Askari Mosque where Twelver Shiites (the dominant Shiite sect) believe the last Imam,

Muhammad al-Mahdi, went into occultation at age five in 874 CE and will return to bring redemption to mankind in the future. Despite calls by the Shiite clergy under Ayatollah Ali al-Sistani to avoid responding with violence, a widespread wave of sectarian violence occurred, during which many Sunni and Shiite Arabs were killed.

In 2006, the Bush administration finally realized that its occupation policy had failed. Under the leadership of General David H. Petraeus and Ambassador Ryan Crocker, a “surge” of 30,000 additional U.S. troops was sent to Iraq and embedded in Iraqi neighborhoods that were characterized by high levels of violence. The idea was that, if Iraqis felt that they had meaningful security, they would cease supporting insurgent groups and sectarian militias. Equally important, the Bush administration finally began to listen to a chorus of policymakers that encouraged his administration to focus on economic and social reconstruction to address, for example, unemployment rates among Iraqi youth that reached as high as 60 and 70 percent in some areas of the country.³⁸ The CPA economic development model, in which large U.S. corporations such as Halliburton and KBR had built projects in Iraq with little study and concern for whether they met the most immediate needs of the country, was shifted to a smaller-scale strategy, best exemplified in the development of the Provincial Reconstruction Teams that helped implement projects defined by Iraqis, especially by providing U.S. technical expertise.³⁹

The success of this change in direction in U.S. Iraq policy was most vividly evident in al-Anbar Province, which *Washington Post* columnist Thomas Ricks had described as the most dangerous area of Iraq in the fall 2006.⁴⁰ By the fall of 2007, the security situation was changing dramatically. In al-Anbar, the Awakening Movement (Sahwat al-‘Iraq), formed by prominent shaykhs and comprising young tribal members, began to defeat al-Qaida, the Islamic State of Iraq, and associated Baathist militias.⁴¹ The tribes found that the insurgency was destructive to their

local economies as militants confiscated property and engaged in kidnapping and disrupted commercial activities. Tribal members who refused to cooperate with the insurgency were killed. Finally, al-Qaida and other insurgent groups began to impinge upon the political prerogatives of tribal shaykhs. These developments turned the local populace against the insurgency. Within eight months of the formation of the Awakening Movement, al-Qaida had been largely eliminated in al-Anbar province.

Another blow to sectarian groups was Prime Minister Maliki’s decision to attack the Mahdi Army in Basra in March 2008. The Mahdi Army had become extremely violent, terrorizing the city with kidnapping, extortion, and theft. Women were murdered for not adopting suitable Islamic dress. Although U.S. forces were largely surprised by his decision, which was taken with limited consultation with the Bush administration, the Iraq army was able to gain the upper hand within a short period of time and defeat Mahdi forces in Basra. After its success in Basra, the army turned its attention to the Mahdi Army’s stronghold in the large Shiite district in eastern Baghdad, Sadr (Revolution) City, where it likewise was victorious. Soon thereafter, the national army reached an accommodation with the Mahdi Army in the border city of Amara, an important transit point for the smuggling of arms into Iraq, and the national army occupied it.

As insurgent groups and sectarian militias lost power throughout Iraq, sectarian violence declined as Iraqis were no longer forced to depend on these groups for their security. Public opinion indicated that the populace was fed up with sectarian violence and the spurious manipulation of religious symbols by sectarian entrepreneurs.⁴² Provincial elections in the Arab south in January 2009 once again produced a large turnout. Sensing the movement of public opinion away from support for sectarian parties, Nuri al-Maliki did not run under the name of his party, the Islamic Call (Hizb al-Da’wa al-Islamiya), but under a new party, the State of Law Coalition, which, along



Iraqis smoke water pipes in Baghdad's Shahbandar Coffeehouse, a major cultural hub and important site of Iraqi civil society. The coffeehouse was destroyed by a bomb in 2005 and has since been rebuilt.

with secular parties, made impressive gains. One of the big losers was ISCI, which continued to emphasize religious symbolism in its electoral campaigning.

Interviews conducted in Iraq before the January 2008 elections made it clear that Iraqis wanted services, not propagandistic religious symbolism, from their political leaders. The desire for services was made even clearer recently following student demonstrations at Karbala University in March 2010; the cause of the demonstrations was the services provided by the university.⁴³ After being attacked by police for demonstrating, students lobbied the local council, which intervened on their behalf to prevent the excessive use of force by the police. These events point again to new political processes in which Iraqis are demanding their rights.

Significant also in terms of positive political developments were the elections for the Kurdish regional parliament that occurred in July 2009. Despite claims by the KRG that it had established a democratic autonomous region after January 1991, many Kurds resent the monopoly of political power held by the two dominant Kurdish political parties,

the KDP and the PUK. Kurds also bitterly complain about the appropriation of oil wealth by the KRG and the inflation and lack of employment that exist in the region. That the KRG has attempted to intimidate newspapers that have criticized government autocracy and corruption and control civil society organizations has likewise angered many Kurds.⁴⁴ For many Kurdish women, the rise of honor crimes in the north in response to their efforts to gain equal rights with men is another disturbing development.

It was impressive that the new political movement, Gorran, was able to mount a challenge to the KDP-PUK alliance in the elections during the July 2009 Kurdish regional parliamentary elections; Gorran won 25 of the 110 seats. If the 15 seats

won by the Services and Reform List—an alliance of Islamist and left-leaning parties—are added to Gorran's seats, more than 30 percent of the parliament is currently in opposition hands. In light of efforts of the KRG to intimidate Gorran candidates during the electoral campaign, including dismissing them from government employment, which was facilitated by the fact that the KRG is the major employer of the Kurdish population, the results of the July 2009 elections were all the more startling.

In March 2010, Iraq held its second round of parliamentary elections. The national voting turnout rate was 62.4 percent, and it reached a high of more than 70 percent in the KRG. Iraq's Independent High Electoral Commission, which organized the elections, and outside observers declared the elections to be fair and largely free of irregularities. That Iraq had moved from extensive sectarian violence in 2005–2007 to nationwide parliamentary elections in 2010—elections that were fair and transparent—bodes well for the political system. Also encouraging was the ability of the Iraqi army and police, rather than U.S. forces, to provide security. At the time of this writing, two major

electoral coalitions, the al-Iraqiya and the State of Law coalitions, were vying for the position of prime minister and a variety of other important offices.

Political Economy of Iraq

Iraq's economic development has had a distinct and profound impact on its politics. This impact stems from Iraq's dependence on hydrocarbon wealth for most of its revenues. Oil was discovered in 1927 and gradually came to dominate the Iraqi economy until, at present, oil accounts for 86 percent of Iraq's government revenues. More recently, large reserves of natural gas have also been discovered. Thus, hydrocarbon wealth will remain at the center of the Iraqi economy for the foreseeable future.

Much has been written in Iraq about the so-called oil curse and how possessing an abundance of oil and natural gas can impede democratic development.⁴⁵ The rentier-state hypothesis argues that hydrocarbon wealth allows the state to ignore internal political and social pressures because it is able to extract income, or rents, from the world market and thus is no longer dependent on taxes.⁴⁶ Iraq witnessed a particularly sharp increase in oil wealth during the 1970s, when the Vietnam War stimulated global demand for oil. Iraq's revenues from oil wealth rose from \$1 billion in 1972 to \$26.3 billion in 1980, a twenty-six-fold increase.⁴⁷

Without this dramatic increase in oil revenues, Saddam Hussein's Baathist regime would have been able neither to co-opt large segments of the Iraqi populace nor to develop a large repressive security apparatus and build a modern and well-equipped military. Oil revenues facilitated two important developments. They allowed the Baathist state to systematically eliminate all domestic opposition and dramatically enhance its ability to engage in war making. Of course, the Iran-Iraq and Gulf wars resulted in disastrous consequences for Iraq and undermined Saddam's regime, ultimately leading to its collapse in 2003. In this sense, it can be argued that Saddam's regime benefited from

a unique period of windfall profits from oil during the 1970s that is unlikely to be replicated again in the future. While adding to the state's repressive capabilities, the dramatic increase in oil revenues likewise allowed Saddam's regime to make choices that had profoundly negative consequences.

Most experts predict that Iraq's hydrocarbon wealth will dramatically increase during the next decade, in both the oil and natural gas sectors. There are predictions that Iraq might be able to export as much as 10 million barrels of oil per day in the near future. The rate of growth in Iraq's gross domestic product has been positive in 2008 and 2009, reaching 9.5 percent and 4.3 percent, respectively.⁴⁸ This scenario raises the following question: Could Iraq revert to the type of authoritarian regime that it experienced under the Baath Party?

Under current political circumstances, it is highly unlikely that a Saddam-like dictator will once again be able to impose the type of brutal repression that characterized the Baath. A more likely scenario will be a sharp increase in corruption, which is already widespread in Iraq, within the context of a political system struggling to consolidate democratic governance.⁴⁹ Although more efforts have been devoted recently to fighting government corruption, the Iraqi state bureaucracy and judicial system do not possess the resources to combat corruption in a systematic manner. With the amount of wealth flowing into the country expected to dramatically increase as the government offers ever larger numbers of leases for drilling for oil and natural gas, the increased inflow of revenues could overwhelm the relatively small institutional structure that currently exists for fighting corruption.

Iraq has not been able to devote considerable effort to economic reconstruction because security concerns have been foremost in the minds of political leaders. After the government was able to suppress the Mahdi Army, and, working with U.S. forces, the Awakening Movement was able to eliminate the military capacity of al-Qaida in Iraq, the Islamic State of Iraq,

and Baathist insurgent organizations, the modicum of stability that resulted has allowed private entrepreneurial activity to flourish. Since 2008 there has been a considerable effort to diversify the economy. One of the areas in Iraq in which such activity has been especially pronounced is al-Anbar Province, once the most violent part of the country.⁵⁰ Surveys have shown that Iraqis are highly entrepreneurial in their outlook, especially young people.⁵¹ In my own interviews in Iraq in 2007, there were already indications that considerable small-business activity was under way.⁵²

Regional and International Relations: The Role of “Neighborhood Effects”

Iraq's relations with its neighbors and the larger Middle East have been shaped by cultural, economic, and political variables. Iraq is the site of the holiest shrines in Shiism, including the tombs of Shiism's founder, Ali ibn Abi Talib, the first Shiite imam, and his son, Hussein, the third imam, who is buried in Karbala; and the battle of Siffin, which took place on the plains outside the city of Kufa and resulted in the assassination of Ali by one of his supporters who was part of a group, the Kharijites, that rejected his negotiating with his enemies; the shrine cities of south central Iraq; the Shiite quarter of al-Kadhimiya in Baghdad, where the seventh imam, Musa al-Kadhim, is buried; and the city of Sammara in north central Iraq, where the twelfth imam, Muhammad al-Mahdi, went into occultation in the ninth century CE.

As the center of Shiism, Iraq attracts large numbers of students to its religious academies, known collectively as the “scientific place of learning” (al-Hawza al-‘Ilmiya), which comprises about a hundred seminaries in and around the shrine city of Najaf. Historically, Iraq's centrality to Shiism has created a strong rivalry with neighboring Iran, especially the city of Qum, which has sought to rival Najaf as the main theological center of Shiism. The religious ties that bind Iraq and Iran have produced a steady flow of Iranian pilgrims to Iraq and

have resulted in considerable commercial ties between the two countries as well.

The tensions over which nation-state will dominate Shiism have been reflected politically in the modern period in boundary disputes between Iraq and Iran, especially along the Shatt al Arab waterway in southern Iraq, where the Tigris and the Euphrates join to demarcate the border between the two countries. The dispute first manifested itself during the 1930s. After the Baath Party seized power in 1968, tensions over the boundary issue intensified, this time in the context of the cold war. The Baathist regime, which was very hostile to the United States, was pitted against the regime of Shah Mohammad Reza Pahlavi in Iran, who was a strong U.S. ally. To place further pressure on the Baath, the shah supported a Kurdish rebellion in Iraq's three northern provinces that was led by Mustafa Barzani, head of the KDP. This rebellion collapsed when the shah withdrew his support following Saddam Hussein's agreement to sign the 1975 Algiers Accord that moved the Shatt al Arab boundary from the Iranian shore to the middle of the river.

The Iran-Iraq War (1980–1988) transformed Iraqi-Iranian relations. The early years of the war reflected the pinnacle of Iraqi efforts to become the dominant power in the Middle East. If Saddam Hussein's regime had been able to defeat Iran, it would have become the dominant power in the Persian Gulf and the Arabian Peninsula and would have been able to exercise control over the entire region. As a result, Iraq would have assumed the position of the most powerful state in the Middle East, rivaled only by Israel and Turkey. The war did not achieve the results that Saddam had anticipated, effectively ending Iraq's aspirations to become the Persian Gulf's hegemon and leader of the Arab world.

With the U.S. invasion of Iraq in 2003, Iran became, ironically, the most powerful external actor in Iraq, ranking second in influence only to the United States. Iran has supported many of the political forces involved in the insurgency against the U.S. occupation of Iraq. It has been argued that Iranian funds and

military supplies have even been provided to Sunni Arab insurgent groups. Iranian “special groups,” often claiming to be part of the Mahdi Army, inflicted a high level of casualties on U.S. troops through the use of explosively formed projectile devices. Following the March 2010 national parliament elections, most of the main political actors traveled to Tehran to have Iran’s leaders serve as brokers during the efforts to form a new government.

Iraq’s other important neighbors include Turkey and Syria. Turkey has attacked Iraq on several occasions in hot pursuit of Kurdistan Workers’ Party (PKK) guerrillas who seek to create an independent state for Turkey’s minority Kurdish population in the eastern part of the country. However, as Turkish commercial interests in the KRG have grown to investments totaling more than \$6 billion, Turkey has eliminated attacks on the PKK in Iraqi territory.⁵³

Relations with Iraq’s other major neighbor, Syria, have been strained since the 1960s, when the Baath Party split into two competing factions. The defeated faction, headed by party founder Michel Aflaq, sought refuge in Iraq, intensifying tensions between the two countries. After the Baath Party seized power in Iraq in 1968, problems between the two countries escalated as then each country claimed to be representing “true Baathism.” Following the 2003 U.S. invasion of Iraq, many Baathists fled to Syria, where they were given refuge by the regime of Bashar al-Asad.⁵⁴

Iraq’s Baathists have used Syria to mount their insurgency inside Iraq, exploiting the long and porous border between the two countries that is extremely difficult to control. After the United States began to threaten the Syrian government with retaliation, Syria made limited efforts to control insurgent traffic across its border with Iraq. There is little doubt that Syria continues to be a key base of operations for the deposed Baath Party, which seeks to prevent Iraq from making a transition to democracy.

In light of Iranian and Syrian efforts to destabilize Iraq following 2003 and support by Salafi elements in Saudi Arabia and the Arab Gulf states for Sunni Islamist

radicals, Iraq’s progress toward developing democratic governance and political stability is even more impressive. Saudi Arabia and the Gulf states do not want the development of a stable and democratic state in Iraq, especially one in which Shiites play a dominant role, given their own large Shiite populations that have historically been subject to very bad treatment. It is doubtful, therefore, that any of the Sunni Arab monarchies on the Arabian Peninsula will do much to help Iraq develop, whether politically or economically.

Conclusion

Iraq is currently engaged in a transition to democracy. That Iraq’s March 2010 national parliament elections were held although the outcome was not known in advance is itself an indicator of the progress that has been made in this direction. Sectarian political parties and organizations and the radical Islamists have lost much power in Iraq. Their loss of power has been in direct proportion to the central government’s ability to impose security on the country and to provide critical social services such as education, health care, and employment.

While still a powerful actor in Iraq’s domestic politics, Iran has dramatically reduced its support for violence in Iraq, preferring instead to assume the role of power broker among Iraq’s competing political factions. With ever larger influxes of hydrocarbon wealth derived from oil and natural gas, Iraq will possess the resources with which to implement the extensive social and economic reconstruction that it desperately needs. Whether this influx of hydrocarbon wealth will undermine Iraqi politics by creating a “Lebanese consensus,” in which political elites from different ethno-confessional groups agree on a system of dividing that wealth among themselves, remains to be seen.

If Iraq can continue its progress toward a democratic transition, the positive neighborhood effects on the region could be salutary indeed. After thirty-five years of repressive Baathist rule, two major wars, a national uprising in 1991, extremely harsh UN

sanctions between 1991 and 2003, and extensive sectarian violence between 2003 and 2007, the question is not why Iraq has failed to achieve greater political development since 2003. Instead, the question is how, under a myriad of constraints, Iraq has been able to achieve any successes at all.

SUGGESTED READINGS

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