



Kurds returning to their former neighborhoods in Kirkuk, 2003.

EDDY VAN WESSEL

# The Puzzle of Federalism in Iraq

Eric Davis

Reidar Visser and Gareth Stansfield, eds., *An Iraq of Its Regions: Cornerstones of a Federal Democracy?* (London: Hurst and Company, 2007).

Students of democratization in the Middle East have long pondered the relationship between ethnic diversity and the persistence of authoritarian rule. Those who view the Middle East through the prism of ethnicity argue that the region's nation-states, especially those in the Arab world, are "artificial," having been created by Great Britain and France to serve colonial rather than local interests. Because colonial powers often forced ethnic groups who lacked agreement on the definition of political community, and hence the boundaries of post-colonial nation-states, to live together, politics

devolved into authoritarianism as military coups and one-party rule became the order of the day.

It is in this context that *An Iraq of Its Regions* makes its contribution. In his introduction, Reidar Visser argues that the traditional conceptual prism that focuses on Iraq's three dominant communal groups, Sunni Arabs, Shi'i Arabs and Kurds, is laden with "Orientalist" overtones. Instead, he asserts, Iraq should be analyzed as an amalgam of regions, since regional identities often compete with ethnic identities. Viewing Iraq through a regional lens has numerous benefits. First, it allows analysts to avoid the negative dimensions of the ethnic or ethno-confessional model. Second, it allows them to test a hypothesis implicit in this volume—that regional federalism

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in a decentralized Iraq will help redress the political cleavages that are a residue of colonial rule and create more favorable conditions for democratization.

*An Iraq of Its Regions* includes many excellent essays that address the relationship between Iraq's geographical constitution, ranging from ancient times to the present, and questions of social and political identity. Alistair Northedge's essay presents an erudite overview of the classical Arab understandings of the idea of Iraq. Reidar Visser argues persuasively in "The Two Regions of Southern Iraq" that there is no legacy of envisioning a single Shi'i state in the south. While the tribes of the middle Euphrates demonstrated separatist tendencies at times during the twentieth century, there has been little support since 2003 for a regional "Shiastan" comprised of Iraq's nine southern provinces.

Ronen Zeidel's chapter is particularly good in documenting the changing nature of regional identity in Tikrit in the north-central province of Salah al-Din from the late nineteenth century through the last days of the Baathist regime. Saddam Hussein's hometown, Tikrit, assumed a special position after 1968, supplying many of the cadres for the bureaucracy, intelligence services and army officer corps. James Denselow's essay, "Mosul, the Jazira Region and the Syrian-Iraqi Borderlands," deftly demonstrates the problems created by Western colonialism in the post-Ottoman Middle East, underscoring that these problems have less to do with ethnicity than with social, cultural and economic disruption of traditional patterns of life. The ill-defined nature of the Syrian-Iraqi borderlands, and the divisions created among tribes and ethnic groups as some members were arbitrarily placed on one side of the border or the other, provided a recipe for unstable relations and conflict between the two states. Richard Schofield's well-written chapter, "Borders, Regions and Time," is one of the best accounts of the shaping of the borders of modern Iraq. He is one of the few contributors who gives political economy its due, showing the importance of oilfields in Great Britain's calculations when drawing the boundaries.

Gareth Stansfield and Hashem Ahmadzadeh's succinct yet comprehensive overview, "Kurdish or Kurdistanis: Conceptualizing Regionalism in the North of Iraq," is a *tour de force*, presenting changing forms of Kurdish identity in Iraq since the late nineteenth century, as well as linking these changes to Kurdish politics outside Iraq, especially in Iran. Their arguments about why a specific Kurdish nationalism arose—colonial economic penetration of the region, Ottoman efforts to rationalize the empire through the *nizam-i cedid* and the *tanzimat*, and the Turkification policies of the Committee on Union and Progress—are very significant in that they parallel those that gave rise to nationalism in Iraq's Arab regions. This chapter also highlights the conflicts between the Kurdish government and the leaders of the Christian and Turkmen populations living inside Iraq's Kurdish region.

One of Stansfield and Ahmadzadeh's central contentions is that the two main Kurdish political parties that together

control the Kurdistan Regional Government (KRG)—the Kurdish Democratic Party, run by the Barzani family, and the Patriotic Union of Kurdistan, controlled by Iraqi President Jalal Talabani—have been pursuing a local nationalist agenda that fails to recognize the growing desire among Iraqi Kurds for a pan-Kurdish nation-state extending to Iran, Turkey and Syria. As they state, "Kurdistan has now entered a third phase in its nationalist development, and this is the rediscovery of the true *nishtimani* [country] idea of unity across boundaries."

Fanar Haddad and Sajjad Rizvi argue in their chapter that there is little enthusiasm for regionalism in Baghdad. Using telephone interviews with 28 randomly selected Baghdad residents, they find that many Baghdadis fear for their city's status following the establishment of an Iraqi state comprised of regions. One can understand this unease in light of Article 120 of the Iraqi constitution, which states that, "The capital may not merge with a region," and includes the ambiguous proviso that, "A law [as yet not passed] shall regulate the status of the capital."

Beyond a historical focus, the volume includes chapters that are theoretical or predictive in orientation, including Liam Anderson's on theories of federalism. Anderson synthesizes a large political science literature on models of federalism, while including extensive comparative data from the Balkans, Nigeria, India, Spain and South Africa. He makes a cogent argument for the dangers of what he calls "ethnic federalism," and cautions that Kurdish regionalism may exacerbate rather than ameliorate political instability in Iraq.

Gareth Stansfield's conclusion reflects the problems of trying to make hard and fast predictions about the future of regional federalism in Iraq. This is understandable given that Iraq is only five years removed from the repressive centralism of Saddam Hussein's regime. Stansfield's outlook is largely pessimistic, as he emphasizes intra-Shi'i divisions, conflict between Kurds and non-Kurds in Iraq's three northern provinces, the problem of the disputed city of Kirkuk, and the hostility of Baghdadis and the Sunni Arab population to regional federalism.

After reading *An Iraq of Its Regions*, one is left puzzled. Part of the problem is that the notions of "region" and "regional federalism" are only loosely defined in the Iraqi constitution of 2005—and so the relevance of the historical discussions to the present is unclear. There is, in fact, no history of regionalism or federalism in Iraq that can be used as a model for the present. Visser's excellent historical research has shown that the Ottomans redrew the regional boundaries within Iraq several times. The administrative division of Iraq into the provinces of Mosul, Baghdad and Basra (including Kuwait), which many analysts cite either to support their argument that Iraq was an "artificial" state when the British created it in 1921, or as a basis for promoting a federated state with a weak central government, was put in place only in 1894, and thus was less than 25 years old when Ottoman rule collapsed in 1918.

Yet problems beset this volume that transcend the indeterminacy of the notions of regionalism and federalism. Apart from Haddad and Rizvi, contributors writing on the modern



An Erbil carpet shop features Muslim and Christian religious figures, politicians, the Kurdish flag and other motifs.

KARL BADOHAI

period fail to account for the significant causal influence of exogenous factors in making regionalism a central political issue in Iraq. Indeed, there is no attention to the hypothesis that regional federalism is the latest version of Western colonial efforts to “divide and conquer” Iraq, in this instance to make it a weak nation-state, thereby facilitating access to its oil wealth. Right or wrong, that hypothesis carries great weight among considerable segments of the Iraqi populace.<sup>1</sup> There is little information about US pressure on Iraq to complete its constitution hastily by the end of August 2004 (so the Bush administration could claim political progress in time for the November presidential elections) and its role in pushing the regional federalism agenda. Nor, in a related problem, is there much discussion of the influence of Washington’s local and expatriate allies, particularly the Kurds, the Islamic Supreme Council of Iraq (ISCI)—formerly the Supreme Council for the Islamic Revolution in Iraq—and Ahmad Chalabi’s Iraqi National Congress, who have much to gain from the implementation of regional federalism.

Outside the Kurdish provinces, which gained de facto autonomy through US military protection in 1991, regionalism has very little currency in Iraq.<sup>2</sup> A Brookings Institution poll in September 2006 found little support for the idea: “Iraqis appear to agree on having a strong central government.... Majorities of all groups do not favor a movement toward a

loose confederation and believe that five years from now Iraq will still be a single state.”<sup>3</sup> If anything, hostility to the idea of regionalism seems to be growing, especially with the decline since 2003 in the popularity of ISCI and Chalabi. ISCI’s efforts to create a “Shiastan” of Iraq’s nine southern provinces have provoked strong opposition among the Shi’a themselves, who see this proposal as a bald-faced effort to establish a semi-independent state that would allow ISCI to control the south’s vast oil wealth. This opposition reflects a form of “path dependence,” as Visser has shown, namely that there has never been any plan among the Shi’a, whether religious or secular, to create an independent state.<sup>4</sup> Even in the Kurdish areas, attitudes may be changing. Stansfield and Ahmadzadeh cite a January 2005 unofficial referendum in the three Kurdish provinces in which 98.8 percent of voters opted for secession from Iraq. Yet in March 2008 a poll showed only 52 percent of Kurds choosing that option (with 35 percent opting for a federal Iraq and 10 percent for a unitary state).<sup>5</sup>

Another problem is the volume’s failure to live up to the spirit in which it was conceived. In arguing for a regional approach to understanding Iraqi politics and society, *An Iraq of Its Regions* implicitly advocates greater conceptual and methodological pluralism. The essays do not, however, consider frameworks beyond ethnicity and region. Critical variables such as education, generation, class and gender

are not examined as to whether they reinforce or cut across regional identities.

A conceptual elephant in the room is Iraqi nationalism, defined as support for Iraq's current provincial structure with a special autonomous status for Iraq's three Kurdish provinces. Most Iraqis seem to support both a strong central government and a mechanism for stronger local governance in Iraq's provinces; hence the widespread support for the Provincial Powers Law approved in March 2008. Since 2007, public opinion polls indicate a tendency of Iraqis to reemphasize Iraqi nationalism, certainly the dominant political orientation in twentieth-century Iraq. Many factors are driving this reassertion. One is the increased revulsion of large numbers of Iraqis at sectarian politics. Recent interviews I conducted in Iraq and Jordan indicate that sectarian-based political parties are seen as pursuing little more than their own narrow agendas. These parties are also viewed as responsible for the lack of public services and the extensive corruption that pervades the Iraqi government (and the KRG as well). Improved security is part of the story: Freed to devote less attention to personal safety, Iraqis now rely less heavily on sectarian militias and insurgent organizations.

For those Iraqis who were forced to live under the rule of radical movements, such as the Islamic State of Iraq, before government authority was reestablished in their areas, the experience was sobering. Threatening smokers that their fingers would be cut off, forbidding women to leave their homes without male escorts, banning the showing of soccer games in coffee houses, seizing houses and property in the name of "Islam," and kidnapping wealthy businessmen and notables for ransom alienated many Iraqis. Thus, another contributing factor to the rise of nationalism is disillusionment with radical Islamist political organizations.<sup>6</sup>

Other indicators of what one might call the "return of nationalism" are to be found in polling data. In a March 2007 poll, 94 percent of respondents (and 78 percent of Kurds) stated that "separation of people along sectarian lines" is "a bad thing for Iraq." Since then, support for a strong federal system—and a strong central state (and democracy)—has grown, indicating that the idea of a weak confederated Iraq with a number of large autonomous regions is losing ground. Thus we need to distinguish between a federal model more like the US and a loosely integrated confederated state such as the United Arab Emirates.<sup>7</sup> Clearly, the former rather than the latter model seems to have captured the imagination of the majority of Iraqis. Indeed, the outpouring of nationalist sentiment in July 2007 when Iraq's soccer team won the Asia Cup was striking because it included all sectors of Iraqi society. Significantly, the KRG threatened Kurds who did not immediately lower Iraqi flags with seven years' imprisonment. If Kurdish nationalism was so enshrined in Iraq's Kurdish provinces, one wonders why the need for the KRG's drastic response.

While *An Iraq of Its Regions* offers strong historical narratives, it provides surprisingly little information on what Iraqis feel

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currently about regional federalism. There are no citations from the numerous public opinion polls conducted in Iraq since 2003, or from the burgeoning Arabic and Kurdish press available on the Internet. Iraqi newspapers conduct frequent, unscientific, but nevertheless informative opinion polls on topics related to Iraq's administrative structure.

Public opinion data could play an important role in explaining discrepancies between arguments presented in *An Iraq of Its Regions* and contradictory findings. During a visit to Iraq's Kurdish region in October and November 2007, I found that virtually all Kurds, at least in Erbil, spoke Arabic. University students to whom I lectured even knew colloquial Egyptian Arabic because they had watched Egyptian television programs. Many Kurdish scholars still write in Arabic. Commercial ventures between Kurdish and Arab Iraqi businessmen are booming. Far from being isolated from and rejecting the Arab south and its culture, the situation one would expect if pan-Kurdish sentiments were widespread, Iraq's Kurdish areas remain tied to the rest of the country.

One illustration is a response by the Kurdish intellectual Nazar Agri to the editor-in-chief of the Beirut literary journal *al-Adab*, who had argued that the Arab Parliamentary Union should not have met in Erbil in February 2008 due, among

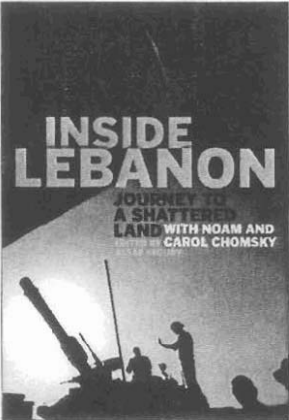
other things, to alleged Kurdish hostility toward Arabs." Arguing that Kurds are not hostile to Arabs or Arab culture, Agri pointed out that Iraqi President Jalal Talabani has memorized far more of the poetry of Muhammad Mahdi al-Jawahiri, Iraq's premier nationalist poet, than most Arab Iraqis. He also noted that Arab Iraqis who have moved from the south to escape violence and political instability have been well treated by the Kurds, who have even established Arabic-language schools for those families with children. Iraqi Arabs have also joined Kurdish NGOs, such as those struggling for greater democracy and women's rights.

All this calls into question the rather non-porous cultural and political boundaries suggested by the Stansfield and Ahmadzadeh chapter. In interviews that I conducted with Turkish Kurds in 2005, none indicated a desire to move to Iraqi Kurdistan. They pointed to a more conservative cultural environment there, especially in Erbil, the condescending attitudes of many Iraqi Kurds toward them, and language differences, another topic unexplored in the volume under review. An academic conducting survey research among Kurdish youth discovered that all respondents at Dohuk University chose to answer the researcher's Arabic-language questionnaire rather than the one in Sorani Kurdish. Speaking the Kurmanji dialect, Dohuk students were afraid of making mistakes when answering the questions written in Sorani.

These considerations are not meant to dispute the existence of a strong sense of Kurdish culture and identity, especially when many Kurds continue to distrust Iraqi Arabs given Saddam's genocidal Anfal campaign and the Iraqi army's gassing of Kurds in Halabja in 1988. My interviews indicated that relatively few Kurds seek an independent state, however, even if some spoke of that as an eventuality far in the future. Arguing that an independent state would place them at the mercy of Turkey and Iran, evoke hostility from the Arab south and dry up needed investment capital from the Arab Gulf region, Kurds instead seem more inclined toward an administrative arrangement akin to the Canadian model, where the province of Quebec occupies a culturally distinct position within English-speaking Canada, and the central government takes bilingualism seriously. (One notable obstacle here is that while many Kurds know Arabic, very few Arabs know Kurdish.) Perhaps the "Iraqi nationalism" of the two dominant parties in the KRG is not as far removed from popular sentiment as Stansfield and Ahmadzadeh would have us believe.

Iraq may indeed decide to become a state of its regions. Yet with the Iraqi parliament having passed the Provincial Powers Law in March 2008, and the central government having made concessions to the KRG on Kirkuk, agreed to fund the Kurdish *peshmerga* (making them, in effect, part of the national army) and allowed the KRG to sign contracts with Western oil firms, there seems every reason to believe an alternative hypothesis, namely that Iraq will experience greater administrative integration—rather than become a state of loosely confederated regions—and that a more traditional

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
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"path-dependent" Iraqi nationalism will trump the more recent (and largely externally imposed) notion of regional federalism. With provincial elections scheduled for October, the provinces will acquire a stronger national voice and be able to exert more power in Baghdad, especially to obtain the development aid to which they are entitled, but which the central government has been slow to dispense. These elections may further undermine centrifugal political forces in Iraq.

*An Iraq of Its Regions* offers much food for thought. It should be required reading for those interested in Iraqi politics. But whether regional federalism will become part of Iraq's political future is still very much an open question. ■

### Endnotes

1 Iraq's oilfields are said to have been only 30 percent explored. Its proven reserves of 115 billion barrels could actually be closer to 200 billion barrels. *Asia Times*, February 16, 2008.

2 A KRG minister whom I interviewed in November 2007 argued that the only meaningful divide in terms of regionalism in Iraq was between Kurds and Arabs, and that regionalism held little appeal in Iraq's Arab provinces.

3 Brookings Institution. *The Iraqi Puzzle on the US Presence and the Future of Iraq* (Washington, DC, September 2006).

4 Paul Pierson. *Politics in Time: History, Institutions and Social Analysis* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2004).

5 ABC/BBC/ARD/NHK poll, March 17, 2008. Accessible online at [http://www.uniraq.org/documents/Poll\\_Iraq\\_five\\_years\\_later\\_March2008.pdf](http://www.uniraq.org/documents/Poll_Iraq_five_years_later_March2008.pdf).

6 See, for example, *New York Times*, March 4, 2008.

7 ABC News/USA Today/BBC/ARD poll, March 19, 2007. Accessible online at <http://abcnews.go.com/images/US/1033a1raqpoll.pdf>.

8 ABC News/BBC/ARD/NHK poll, March 17, 2008.

9 "When the Arabs Met in the Vicinity of Mossad's Offices!" *al-Hayat*, April 27, 2008.

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