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EDITORS
Tareq Y. Ismael
Jacqueline S. Ismael

Department of Political Science
University of Calgary
2920 University Drive NW
Calgary, Alberta, Canada
T2N 1N4

Tel: +1 403 220 5928
Fax: +1 403 284 8773
E-mail: ismael@ualberta.ca

Book Reviews Editor
Eric Herring
University of Bristol
E-mail: e.herring@bristol.ac.uk

Editorial Assistants
Christopher Langille
Candice M. Jubay

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Introduction: The question of sectarian identities in Iraq

The question of sectarian identities has been instrumental in shaping western understandings of Iraq. In the West, an ‘imaginative geography’ continues to view the core determinants of Iraqi politics as a function of the interaction between its three regionally concentrated ethnic groups, the Sunni Arabs, Shi‘ite Arabs and Kurds. In this imaginary, Iraq’s main ethnoconfessional groups coexist in an uneasy relationship. Hostility simmers below the surface, threatening to erupt into serious disputes and even violence at any time. Conversely, ethnic and confessionally based tensions, it is argued, necessitate authoritarian rule to prevent Iraq’s political fragmentation. In this model, it is only a small conceptual-theoretical step to the idea of Iraq as an ‘artificial country’, condemned to never-ending conflict and instability. This discourse of sectarian identities in Iraq raises the following questions: What are its origins? How valid is its conceptualisation of the dynamics of Iraqi politics and society? If it is flawed, why has it continued to resonate among academics, the media and policy-makers in the West and among some Iraqi scholars as well? And if the discourse is indeed flawed, how can these flaws be rectified?

The articles in this special issue of The International Journal of Contemporary Iraq Studies address the question of sectarian identities in Iraq. Written by some of the best scholars of Iraq, they present a nuanced and historically rich overview of the complex dimensions of sectarianism. All of the articles underscore the centrality of sectarian identities to Iraq’s future because such identities
Following the massive destruction of the 1991 Gulf War and the brutal suppression of the 1991 intifada, many studies began to confront the questions of sectarianism and violence in Iraq. See, for example, al-Uzi (1991); al-Sayyid (1997); al-Salih (1998); Matar (1997); al-Hayijan (1993); Yasin (1995); Abbas (2002); al-Jasim (2005); and, from a British perspective, Iraq Information Bank (1995), which reproduces Sadiq Hussein’s article of the 1991 intifada that were originally published in the daily newspaper, al-Thawra, between 3 and 4 April 1991.

The idea that cultural identities are ‘given’ or ‘social life originates in the belief that cultural markers are natural and most important’, is to say that cultural elements (individual and collective essences) are constitutive components of the social and cultural identity of societies in the primordial model, sectarianism results from deep-seated historical traditions that come to define ethnic-confessional communities through shaping the core components of their social and cultural identity (Connor 1994; Geertz 1968; Smith 1986).

Constructivist notions of sectarian identities assert that they are socially determined, as opposed to ‘natural’, and therefore from generation to generation. Primitivists would have us believe that ethnic-confessional communities are perpetual captives of sectarian identities from which there is no possibility of escape. A more recent variant of primitivists on the notion of ‘culturalism’ that assumes that cultural markers translate into cultural and political identities (Kymlicka 1995; Tamir 1993; Taylor 1993).

The question that informs this research is how can liberal theory and ethnic minority rights be reconciled (Lecours 2001: 503).

Alternatively, constructivists would have us believe that sectarian identities represent a social aberration. Once the negative forces that cause ethnic-confessional groups to think in sectarian terms are eliminated, such identities disappear. The instrumental quality of this approach has encouraged the application of rational choice theory to the study of sectarian identities in which they are viewed as the outcome of a rational calculation promoted by what I refer elsewhere as sectarian entrepreneurs (Davis 2000). As detailed in Bassam Youssef’s article, the focus on the concepts of grievance, greed, opportunity costs and outcomes generated by constructivism dominates models of ethnic violence and civil war (Collier and Sambanis 2006). The rationalist underpinnings of constructivism have more recently led to their examination through formal modelling (Lustick 2000). As with most binaries, both primitivists and constructivists – whether in their more ‘classic’ or revised forms – are reductionist and cannot stand alone as theoretical models. Primitivists are unable to explain why communities that have been characterized by sectarian identities often find that the younger generation disperses with such identities. Indeed, my own research on Iraqi youth between the ages of 14 and 30 indicates that most do not adhere to sectarian identities. Constructivists, on the other hand, largely preclude the inclusion of cultural variables. In their efforts to develop models of ethnoconfessional violence, they are often unable to explain why communities of mixed ethnicities and religions – those that have lived in harmony for lengthy periods of time – suddenly experience unexpected and explosive periods of violence (Kalyvas 2006). Clearly, the problem with both these models is their multidimensional nature. In failing to historically contextualize sectarian identities and analyse them in a dynamic fashion, these analyses proffer analytic caricatures that fail to provide any meaningful explanatory power.

The binary between primitivist and constructivist approaches to ethnic and sectarian identities draws attention to another theoretical concern, one that has significant implications for the study of sectarian identities. Groove modes, primitivism is rooted in ‘methodological collectivism’, while constructivism is based in ‘methodological individualism’. Primitivists (and culturalists) assume that we can ascribe forms of collective consciousness to groups, e.g., all Iraqi Shi’a think x, Sunni Arabs think y and Kurds think z. Constructivists, particularly in their rational choice incarnation, argue, as do all methodological individualists, that by ascribing ‘states of mind’ to collectivities, whether they be ethnic-confessional groups, charitable associations or revolutionary movements constitutes a form of ‘metaphysics’ (Elster 1985: 3-48; Olson 1971: 98-131). Clearly this is the assumption of those primitivists who redress the drivers of Iraqi politics to ethnic and confessional variables, i.e., the attribution of a ‘communal mind’ to each of Iraq’s main ethnic-confessional communities (Davis 2009).

The rationalist and choice-theoretic assumptions underlying constructivism forces us to focus on political actors rather than collective action. It further assumes that the individual actors who subscribe to sectarian identities employ a self-conscious cost-benefit calculus that structures their social and political behaviour. Yet we know that ethnic cleansing has occurred in numerous political contexts, including Iraq, where violence did not have a well defined goal and often was self-destructive to the agents who resorted to it.

How then do we integrate the two approaches, e.g., the behaviour of sectarian entrepreneurs, such as Sadrist Trend leader Muqtada al-Sadr and Kurdish Democratic Party (KDP) leader Masoud Barzani, with the culturally and politically based collective action that they have been able to organize among their followers? Surely, no one would argue that all actors, both leaders and followers, behave according to an identical cost-benefit calculus. Thus the assumption of methodological individualists that we can only develop theory inductively, namely by aggregating preferences of individual actors, does not provide, a satisfactory way of understanding the functioning of sectarian identities in Iraq (or elsewhere for that matter). Indeed, the articles by Aceded Dawisha, Peter Sisglett and Abbas Kazhemb suggest that actors’ preferences are often distorted by unforseen structural variables that can dramatically alter ongoing patterns of political behaviour, e.g., the abandonment of prior
nationalist commitments by many prominent Sunni Arab political actors following the suppression of the 1920 Revolution, once they realized the political opportunities that would be available to them were they to cooperate with the British colonial occupation administration. Dina Khoury, whose article demonstrates, in rich detail, the mixture of affective and instrumental motivations that informed the behaviour of Ba’ath Party leaders and operatives following the suppression of the 1991 intifada, points to the need for an analytic synthesis between primordial and constructivist approaches to sectarian identities and the need to transcend the methodological collectivist and methodological individualist divide.

Third, we need to reference a binary based in the concepts of *social class* and *political power*. Here we need to distinguish between dominant political elites on the one hand, and the populace at large, on the other. In this instance, the core hypothesis asserts that political elites tend to be more instrumental in their manipulation of sectarian identities, and focus on immediate or short-term gains, while mass publics tend to internalize such identities less in strategic terms, namely seeking immediate ends, than in affective–emotional terms (see Gagnon, 2004). In other words, the concepts of social class and power allow us to differentiate between sectarian entrepreneurs, who are often prominent members of their respective ethnoconfessional communities and influential members of nationally based political elites as well, and the social *base*, namely those social groups who are susceptible to being politically mobilized against an ‘other’ viewed in negative terms. The social base’s behaviour is often conditioned by past experiences of violence, and fear of how they imagine the negatively viewed ‘other’ might treat them in the future.

The impermanence of this binary is that it forces us to analyze socially divide societies between elites and masses, and realize that the interests of the two can both coincide but differ as well. Thus we find that many Shi’a in Iraq, for example the middle-class professional and merchants who comprise the political base of the Supreme Iraqi Islamic Council (ISCI), are not attracted to the appeals of sectarian groups such as the Sadrist Trend (former Mahdi Army). Indeed, many Shi’a, continuing a traditional support for secular politics that traces its roots to the early years of the Iraqi nationalist movement that emerged after World War I, reject Islamic politics entirely.

Fourth, the concepts of *cross-cutting* and *reinforcing* cleavages are of central concern to any model of sectarian identities. As I have already noted, all too often theorists of ethnic conflict fail to situate it within a broader social context. Gender, social class, education, age (generation), profession, geographical location, ideology and/or political experiences (e.g., being affected by ethically based violence) can either reinforce or cross-cut sectarian identities. These concepts highlight the analytic failings of the sectarian/non-sectarian and primordial/constructivist, and methodological collectivist/individualist binaries.

For example, although it adopted a more sophisticated perspective after the fall of Saddam Hussein’s Ba’athist regime in 2003, the ICP historically argued that social class consciousness represented ‘true’ consciousness while ethnoconfessional consciousness was considered transient and ‘epiphenomenal’. Obviously this was not the case. The Ba’ath Party, on the other hand, which has viewed Iraq in exclusively Arab terms, accused the ICP and other political parties, such as the former National Democratic Party, of being traitors to Arabism because their membership incorporated all of Iraq’s numerous ethnic and confessional groups, not just Shi’a, Sunni Arabs and Kurds, but Christians, Jews, Turkmen, Armenians, Yazidis, Sabsaens (Mandeans) and others. If the ICP argued that social class trumped ethnoconfessional consciousness, the Ba’ath Party has tried to deny Iraq’s ethnic diversity. In both cases, the ICP and the Ba’ath Party attempted to reduce the reality of Iraqi politics to their respective ideological preferences. The ICP failed to recognize that ethnic or confessional identities could, in certain instances, cross-cut social class consciousness, while the Ba’ath Party refused to admit that ArabIraqis often viewed themselves less in Arab ethnic terms, or as part of a Pan-Arab nation, than in Iraqi or local nationalist terms (Davis 2005: 13–16). Clearly, then, it is not just western academics, policy-makers and the media that have distorted our understandings of Iraq but also political forces within Iraq have tried to appropriate the country’s political identity for their ideological goals.

Fifth, we need to incorporate structural considerations into our model of sectarian identities in Iraq. How does holding formal office within the political order, for example, affect an actor’s views of sectarian identities and structure his/her political behaviour? How does the ability or inability of the state to deliver necessary services affect sectarian identities? How does the structure of Iraqi federalism—an institutional constraint—fluence sectarian identities? In short, how does the organization of politics constrain actor preferences (Sirovich 2008)? Positions within an institutionalized power structure can either intensify or ameliorate sectarian identities. For example, ‘Usama Al-Nujayfi’s election in the fall of 2010 as Speaker of the Council of Representatives in Iraq has damped his strong sectarian rhetoric as he now must build ideologically diverse coalitions to pass legislation within the parliament and therefore establish himself as a credible leader of parliament. Prior to acquiring this position, when he was head of the Moqtada-based Arab nationalist al-Hadba’ party, al-Nujayfi was known for his anti-Kurdish and inflammatory sectarian rhetoric.

From the perspective of state services, my interviews with Iraqis in 2007 and 2008 made clear that support for sectarian organizations stemmed largely from the inability of the central state to provide security and social services. Once security was provided and some social services became available, Iraqis quickly abandoned support for these organizations.

Introducing the concept of institutional design, it is possible to see how electoral systems as defined by the nation state’s constitution reflect voting patterns, but can also promote sectarianism. The ability of Iraq’s three Kurdish majority governorates—Dohuk, Arbil and Sulaimaniya—to form a regional semi-autonomous political entity, the Kurdistan Regional Government (KRG)—a right that any three provinces have under Iraq’s new constitution—has served to reinforce ethnic consciousness by grouping the large majority of Kurdish voters in one region of the country that competes, to a large degree, with the interests of the central government in Baghdad.

My own interviews in the KRG indicated a surprising lack of ill feeling among Iraq’s Kurds towards the majority of the Arab population, especially remarkable in light of Saddam Hussein’s notorious Anfal campaign that resulted in the destruction of hundreds of Kurdish villages, the death of thousands of Kurds, the burning of the Kurdish city of Halabja with chemical weapons, and the estimated displacement of 3.5 million Kurds and other ethnic groups in northern Iraq. Nevertheless, the formation of the KRG has enabled the Kurdish political elite, comprising the two dominant parties, the KDP and the Patriotic Union of Kurdistan (PUK), an institutional platform through which to stoke the flames of ethnoconfessional discontent through blaming all of the KRG’s ills on Arab hostility towards the Kurds.
It remains to be seen whether the continued efforts of the KRG political elite to manipulate negative feelings towards the Arab majority will succeed. Certainly the formation of the Gorran (Change) party, that counts among its members large numbers of young Kurds and professionals, indicates that the efforts of the KRG’s sectarian apparatus to promote memories of past Arab hostility towards the Arabs to hide their own corruption and nepotism, especially in their use of the KRG’s oil wealth, have not been successful. Here we need to distinguish between Kurdish ethnonationalism, and hostility towards Arab Iraq based in hostile ethnic feelings of a ‘primordial’ nature.

Reidar Visser’s contribution underscores the lack of any historical attempts of the Shi’a in the southern part of Iraq to create their own ethnoconfessionally based state. It complicates the ethnoconfessional model of Iraqi politics in many ways. For example, why have the Shi’a, who have been as marginalized and oppressed by many Iraqi governments as has the Kurds, not chosen to establish a separate state—what some have called an Iraqi ‘Shi’ist’—comprising Iraq’s eight southern provinces?

His article suggests that the demographic concentration of ethnoconfessional communities is less important in influencing sectarian identities than other variables, such as the manner in which that group has been treated historically by the state. For the Kurds, their treatment since the founding of the Iraqi state in 1921 has been largely negative. Still, as I noted in my own interviews, many are not hostile to the Arabs and indeed there continues to be intermarriage between the two ethnic communities. Sectarianism, to the extent that it exists in the KRG, seems largely a function of elite behaviour, not an inherent hostility towards Arabs among the mass of the population.

In the case of the Shi’a, we could ask why their treatment by the Iraqi state since 1921 (well detailed by Aedee Dawisha, Peter Sluglett and Abbas Kadhim, which has also been largely negative, especially after the intifada of February and March 1991, until the Ba’athist regime’s collapse in 2003, has not produced a separatist response. Here we need to reference a number of variables. These would include the historical, geographically based tensions between the Shi’ite and the Sunni Arab communities, and the demographic changes that have been exacerbated over time by the feeling of the Shi’ite community that it has been marginalized, especially in the case of the Shi’ite communities of the south, where 70% of Iraq’s oil wealth is located, that the clerics of the Shi’ite communities want to dominate that wealth. We also find elite cleavages and interests that pit the more established mercantile centres of the Shi’ite community, best represented in the ISCI against the more populist Sadrist Trend, that attracts poorer clerics and marginal sectors of the Shi’ite community, especially youth who have been forced to migrate from rural to urban areas. Furthermore, the Sadrist Trend has advocated a strong Iraqi nationalism that is hostile to any break away Shi’ite pump state. ISCI, on the other hand, has been sympathetic to the creation of a ‘Shi’ist state, despite lack of popular support for this idea among the Shi’a.

Another key structural variable is historical memory. It may seem odd to characterize memory as a structural rather than cultural variable. It is actually both. It is cultural in that it provides the symbols, myths and rituals that enable people to make sense of their empirical surroundings and daily life (Davis 2005; Kaufman 2000). Memory is structural in that it’s ‘transmission belts’ are situated in institutions such as organized religion, tribes and extended family networks and, of course, political institutions. Precisely because forms of memory that emphasize historical forms of victimization, repression and marginalization are
(Rueschemeyer 2003: 303-306). This means that no theory of sectarian identities is possible if it divorced from a diachronic framework, or if it fails to socially and politically contextualize the intensification or decline in salience of these identities, especially during periods of crisis or their aftermath. The historical approach embodied in all of the articles contained in this issue offers powerful substantiation of this theoretical axiom.

The emphasis on dialectics is likewise critical because ethnoconfessional identities need not involve a process of 'hostile othering', namely a negative view of groups other than one's own. Under certain circumstances, political and social appeals may be cross-ethnic and cross-confessional in nature and lead to political solidarity rather than conflict, as often occurred during the apogee of the powerful Iraqi nationalist movement between the mid-1920s and 1963 when it was suppressed by the first Ba'athist regime (Davis 2005).

In other words, to escape the binary of sectarianism as either an all-encompassing and all-defining characteristic of Iraqi society, as opposed to its denial, we may instead substitute a dialectical model that juxtaposes conditions under which ethnoconfessional differences contribute to the strengthening of social solidarity and political identity as opposed to conditions under which sectarian entrepreneurs who constitute powerful political elites are able to exploit such differences for social and politically destructive ends. Or, as is empirically often the case, this approach better helps us understand the simultaneous and ongoing competition between groups that seek to mobilize ethnoconfessional consciousness for positive or negative ends. Abbas Kadhimi's study of the events leading up to and following the powerful 1920 Revolution provides an excellent example of this dialectical tension. Although the articles by Adeed Dawisha and Peter Sluglett detail the manner in which Iraq, as a nation-state, was formed less with the interests of Iraq's people in mind than with those of British colonial interests. The equally insightful articles by Tareq and Jacqueline Isaac and Bassam Younis' historically 'bracket' this set of variables. Focusing on the period after 1920, these group of authors demonstrates the detrimental consequences for Iraq's national identity, respectively, of the negative role played by the expatriate elite of 'carpetbaggers' who returned to the country in 1920 to exploit Iraq's politics for narrow personal interests, and the many ill-considered decisions enacted by the Bush administration during 2003 and 2004 through the Coalition Provisional Authority (CPA).

Viewed from an exogenous perspective, what are the origins of the discourse of sectarian identities in Iraq? This discourse begins with the British invasion of 1914. The British had little understanding of Iraq and discovered that a sectarian model of society served two functions. On the one hand, it supplied the 'webs of meaning' that allowed colonial officials to interpret and understand what they saw to be the structure and dynamics of Iraqi politics and society (Geertz 1973). On the other hand, defining Iraq through sectarian identities allowed the British to posit a sense of superiority that allowed them to 'stand above' a society that, in their view, did not, nor could it ever, constitute a nation-state (defined of course in European terms). View Iraq exclusively through a sectarian lens legitimized their sense of mission civilatrice.

Finally, it provided the British with a political mechanism that allowed them to once again apply the strategy of 'divide and conquer', as they had done throughout the British Empire. In this sense, British colonial officials, such as Arnold Wilson and Gertrude Bell, 'imported' policies that had already been applied elsewhere, especially in the south Asian sub-continent where Hindus, Sikhs and Muslims had been the objects of this strategy. In short, the rise of sectarian identities understood from a colonial perspective needs to tie Iraq to the larger project of colonial empire that the British had begun with the East India Company in the 1500s.

However, attributing the origins of sectarianism solely to British colonialism, as have many apologists for strife in colonial and postcolonial countries, only constitutes a partial explanation of the discourse. Colonial rulers did not create sectarian identities, even if they often self-consciously tried to promote them for short-term political gain. In Iraq, sectarianism was grounded in intra-Muslim strife resulting from the cleavage that developed between Sunni and Shia in the mid-seventh century CE. This strife took on greater political overtones with the decline of the Abbasid Empire. The most pernicious legacy of the decline and ultimate fall of the empire in 1258 CE, following the brutal invasion of the Mongols under Hulagu, came to be seen by sectarian elements in the Sunni Arab community as the legacy of al-Sha'ubi. 4

Although this discourse has been shown to have no basis in historical fact, it asserts that Arab bureaucrats of Persian origin, who had formerly served the Sassanian Empire that had been defeated by Arab-Muslim forces in 637 CE at the Battle of al-Qadisiya (in what is now south eastern Iraq), and who subsequently were employed to work for the Abbasids, conspired to undermine the empire from its inception (Mottahedeh 1976). Acting as a 'fifth column', they progressively undermined the Empire which, as a consequence, was unable to counter the attacks of the Mongols. Underlying this argument is the implicit assertion that the al-'Ajam (those who spoke Arabic with a Persian accent) were loyal to Persia (Iran) and to Shia Islam and not to the Abbasid Empire and its Sunni Arab rulers.

The other important component in the development of proto-sectarian identities in Iraq was the struggle between Ottoman Turkey and Persia over control of Iraq. Ottoman incorporation of Iraq into its empire in 1534 CE led it to favour the Sunni Arabs for lower level administrative positions and lower echelon positions in the army and police. The Ottomans favoured Sunni Muslims over the Shia due to the perception that the former constituted more loyal subjects. This had as much to do with geographical proximity as religious sect since the south had greater commercial and cultural interaction with the Ottomans' arch-enemy, the Persian Safavids, while the Sunni Arabs of north central Iraq were closer to the empire and, of course, co-confessionalists. Over time, those subjects in Ottoman Iraq who obtained lower level positions in the state bureaucracy, the military and local administration were largely Sunni Arabs who came to view the state as a privileged area of employment. Thus Ottoman policy sharpened the distinction between Sunnis and Shi'a, and between Arabs and Kurds, since the latter were largely excluded from government positions as well.

We derive two conclusions from the analysis thus far. First, there was a 'primordial' component to sectarian identities in Iraq located in the historical memory of Shia's martyrdom and the marginalization of the Shi'a under Sunni Arab rule, both during the Umayyad and Abbasid empires, and which continued under Ottoman rule. This historical memory is critical because it provides...
The hanging of fourteen Iraqis, nine of them Jews, on 31 January 1969, was another example of state-sponsored efforts to provoke sectarian hatred. Its real purpose was to intimidate the Iraqi people so they would not oppose what was still, six months after it had seized power, a weak and politically divided regime.

The continuous traditions — the ‘transmission belts’ — that are constantly reinforced through religious rituals and customs that exist, in a latent sense, to be manipulated socially and politically during periods of crisis.

Certainly, the collapse of the Abbasid Empire was a great calamity for Iraq, leading to massive destruction of its agricultural lands, its irrigation system and the liquidation of a large section of its population. In its instance, it was a social and political crisis that activated sectarian identities. The efforts of various Persian empires to control Iraq, combined with the privileges accumulated by the Sunni Arab population over time, did create social and political cleavages within Iraqi society. However, many of these cleavages were superceded, especially among the younger generation, following the establishment of a powerful nationalist movement which was formed not only by hostility to British colonialism but by the fundamental transformation of Iraq’s political economy, as Peter Sluglett demonstrates so well. These latter changes involved the rapid decline of the agrarian sector after World War I, massive rural to urban migration, and the mobilization of workers in powerful trade unions, especially in the national railways, among oil workers and layers of oil pipelines and port workers in the southern port city of Basra (Davis 1994). While the nationalist movement by no means eliminated sectarian identities, it fostered creation of a large segment of Iraqi society that came to realize that positive political, economic, social and cultural change could be best achieved through cross-ethnic and cross-confessional cooperation, rather than by succumbing to the politics of sectarianism.

An overview of twentieth-century Iraqi political development indicates few instances of ethnoconfessional violence. The most pronounced, the Assyrian massacre of August 1953, was not the spontaneous eruption of ethnoconfessionally based violence, but violence initiated by the Iraqi army that swirled out of control, following orders from the state to disarm the Assyrian Levies, who had formerly been part of the British army in Iraq.

The Farhad of 1–2 June 1941 was an example of Sunni Arab nationalists attacking members of Baghdad’s Jewish community. Here, however, the hand of exogenous forces was evident as the attacks were carried out by members of the al-Mudhanna Club, whose anti-Semitism had been encouraged by the Nazi ambassador to Iraq at the time, Fritz Grobba. No such attacks against Iraqi Jews took place in any other city of the country where Nazi propaganda was non-existent. Furthermore, 168 non-Jewish Iraqis were killed or injured trying to protect members of Baghdad’s Jewish quarter (Cohen 1966).

Fighting between Kurds and Turkmen in the northern city of Kirkuk between 14 and 16 July 1959 may be cited as another example of ethnoconfessional violence. Politics entered the fray here as well. Many of the Kurds were part of the Peace Parishes, a group affiliated with the ICP. The hostility between Turkmen and Kurds stemmed from the fact that Kirkuk, an oil-rich city, had been under Ottoman control, with the Turkmen population still retaining loose ties to Turkey. However, their population had decreased to about half of Kirkuk’s population by 1959, with the Kurds becoming increasingly numerous, especially in the villages surrounding the city. While the conflict had an ideological overlay, the changing demographics — a factor that still incites ethnic conflict in the city to this day — was the main driver behind the violence (Batatu 1978: 912–21). Aside from Kirkuk, it is difficult to isolate ethnic or confessionally based violence in Iraq prior to the Ba’ath Party staging a palace coup in July 1968 and Saddam Hussein seizing power in 1979.7

These empirical observations suggest the need for a number of important analytic distinctions. First, we need to distinguish between ethnoconfessional consciousness, ethnoconfessional tensions and hostility and ethnoconfessional violence. Even if it can be empirically demonstrated that Iraqis have been historically conscious of social differences based in ethnicity and religious sect, and that that consciousness has entailed negative stereotypes of the ‘other’, there is no logical reason that such consciousness should cause any significant political behavior.2 It is under conditions of crisis, such as the Abbasid Empire’s collapse, discriminatory Ottoman policies in Iraq, Great Britain’s ‘divide and conquer’ strategy and Ba’athist efforts to stir ethnoconfessional hatred, that sectarianism is activated. We see, therefore, the need to theoretically synthesize primordial notions, on the one hand — understood not in any essentialist sense but in terms of the continuity of forms of historical memory that reflect persistent forms of discrimination and repression — and the multiple ways in which political actors — religious, political and (in Iraq) tribal — socially construct sectarian identities for their own particularistic ends.

CONCLUSION

All ethnically and confessionally divided societies include large sectors of the populace that are aware of such differences. However, for these differences to assume political significance, three elements must be present. First, there must be instances, historically, of hostile actions on the part of one ethnoconfessional group against another. Second, there must be an awareness in a particular ethnic group of these actions. Third, there must be a crisis situation that allows sectarian entrepreneurs to promote the transformation of the awareness of historical grievances into political action. Only if sectarian entrepreneurs are able to generate a strong sense of vertical identities can such mobilization be effective. Put differently, the success of sectarian entrepreneurs to mobilize sectarian identities will vary directly with the degree to which they can promote social and political solidarity along vertical lines.

Much more research is needed on the manner in which consciousness of ethnic and confessional differences is transformed into hostility and vilification of a negatively viewed ‘other’. We also need to understand what types of crises are especially susceptible to manipulation along sectarian lines. We could ask, for example, why the British suppression of the 1920 Revoltion (see Abbas Kadhim’s article) resulted in a nationalist movement that emphasized cross-ethnic and cross-confessional cooperation, while the US invasion of 2003 resulted in sustained ethnically and confessionally based violence between 2003 and 2007.

Dina Khoury’s article analyses, in disturbing detail, the social, economic and political degradation that afflicted Iraqi society in the wake of the Iran–Iraq war, the 1991 Gulf War and subsequent Intifada, and the ensuing sanctions regime. Despite confronting an invasion by British forces in 1914, Iraq did not experience the massive societal degradation that began in 1980 and continued almost without interruption until 2003. The manipulation by Iraqi expatriate political actors of the US invasion and occupation of Iraq, both prior to and after 2003, is detailed by Tareq and Jacqueline Ishaq. Clearly, the Ba’athist regime’s destruction of civil society, accompanied by great violence and economic privation, facilitated the activities of sectarian entrepreneurs, who often mobilized under the banner of ‘religious charities’, prior to the US invasion. Once these domestic political forces were joined by sectarian ‘carpetbaggers’

8 As the research of James Fearon and David Laitin (1996) has demonstrated, in ethnoconfessionally divided societies, cooperation rather than conflict is the norm.
from abroad, a strong set of political and social forces had been created to offset the nationalist movement's legacy of promoting national interests opposed to sectarian interests. US policy in Iraq under the CPA, as Bassam Houshni demonstrates, only exacerbated the conditions favourable to the spread of sectarian identities.

In summary, we cannot define sectarian identities divorced from temporality and social, political and economic context. To argue that each of Iraq's constituent ethnoconfessional groups incorporates some essentialist sectarian identity is to stretch the limits of systematic empirical analysis.

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National identity and sub-state sectarian loyalties in Iraq

ABSTRACT

The article rests on a simple proposition: to speak of an Iraqi nation means that all other forms of belonging (including sectarian ones) should be subordinate to loyalty to the nation. While in the first two decades of Iraqi statehood, communal divisions between Sunnis and Shi’ites did exist, there is also abundant evidence of communal bridges and connections. The state-sponsored Arab nationalist project under the direction of Sattar al-Husari and then Fadhil al-Jamali sought to mould Iraqi patriotism into Arab nationalism, thus undermining communal sectarian dislocations. This endeavour showed considerable success by the 1950s and 1960s. But it was to suffer a major setback under Saddam Hussein, particularly in the wake of the first Gulf war, and then later on in the post-2003 period because of the policy of ethno-sectarian appointments, as well as deepening communal polarity, which erupted in violence and became evident in election results. The conduct and results of recent elections however show a possible resurgence of the national idea.

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ADEED DAWISHA
Miami University, Ohio

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ABSTRACT

The article rests on a simple proposition: to speak of an Iraqi nation means that all other forms of belonging (including sectarian ones) should be subordinate to loyalty to the nation. While in the first two decades of Iraqi statehood, communal divisions between Sunnis and Shi'ites did exist, there is also abundant evidence of communal bridges and connections. The state-sponsored Arab nationalist project under the direction of Sati' al-Husari and then Fadhel al-Jamal sought to mould Iraqi patriotism into Arab nationalism, thus undermining communal sectarian dispositions. This endeavour showed considerable success by the 1950s and 1960s. But it was to suffer a major setback under Saddam Hussein, particularly in the wake of the first Gulf war, and then later on in the post-2003 period because of the policy of ethnico-sectarian appointments, as well as deepening communal polarities, which erupted in violence and became evident in election results. The conduct and results of recent elections however show a possible resurgence of the national idea.

KEYWORDS
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Shi'ites
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communal faultlines
Sati' al-Husari
elections
political appointments

A nation state is conceptualized as a state where the vast majority of the population is attached to one unifying cultural tradition. But what if this condition does not pertain? What of states that have more than one cultural tradition? The term ‘nation’ can still be juxtaposed on the state if these multiple
'attachments do not preclude identification with a common state'. (Stepan et al. 2010: 56) What this tells us is that at its most basic, nation is a form of identity. Individuals identify with their nation in the same way that they might identify with other forms of collective identity, such as religion, sect, tribe and ethnicity. And indeed, belonging to an Iraqi nation need not nullify other forms of sub-national identities, such as attachment to one's religious sect. Thus in reference to such sectarian affinities, it is perfectly natural for an Iraqi man to also identify himself as a Sunni or a Shi'ite. The crucial question, however, is to which of these identities is he most attached and loyal? To speak of an Iraqi nation means that all other forms of belonging, including sectarian loyalties, should be at a minimum equal to, and preferably subordinate to, the sense of attachment and loyalty to an Iraqi nation.

How such an attachment is arrived at was the subject of intense philosophical debate in eighteenth- and nineteenth-century Europe, where ideas of nationalism originated, clustering into two main intellectual strands (Fink 1992; Kohn 1967): a German conception that saw nations as cultural creations, their beginnings implanted in a remote, even immemorial, past, and a French/English formulation that conceived of the nation as a purposeful construction of the state, or at least of determined political segments within it (Dawisha 2002). The late Ernest Gellner was a firm exponent of the latter position. 'Nations as a natural, God-given way of classifying men are a myth... Nationalism... sometimes takes pre-existing cultures, and turns them into nations, sometimes invents them... that is a reality' (Gellner 1983: 48).

Even a cursory glimpse into Iraqi history would tell us that the German conception of an immemorial Iraqi nation is in no way sustainable. In fact, once the Iraqi state was put together by the British in 1921, its ruling elites, epitomized by King Faisal I, took on the urgent and important task of trying to mould the country’s disparate communities into a coherent and viable nation.

It is in this sense that Iraq follows the pattern expounded by French and English thinkers of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. One can see Iraqi national developments reflected in the words of the nineteenth-century French historian and philosopher Ernest Renan who saw the role of the French monarchs as indispensable to the creation of the French nation. In his celebrated essay 'What is a Nation?', Renan relates that the French nation was created by 'the King of France, partly through his tyranny, partly through his justice' (quoted in Dawisha 2010: 68). This is indeed proposition to the Iraqi monarch who worried over the country’s communal divisions and tried valiantly to merge them into a coherent Iraqi nation, intervening constantly to bring in Shi’ite youth into Iraq’s body politic, and encouraging a national and secular educational curriculum to replace existing religious and particularistic teachings. Yet he did not shrink from using state power, including the resort to force, to subdue separatist political and cultural tendencies.

Faisal’s task was not made any easier by Ottoman policies in Iraq that favoured Iraq’s Sunni minority and neglected, even marginalized, the Shi’a majority. In assessing the condition of the Shi’ites under Istanbul’s dominion, the prominent Iraqi politician in the monarchical period Kamel al-Chubcherji, himself a Sunni, wrote: ‘No Shi’ite was accepted in the military college or in the bureaucracy, except on very rare occasions. There were all kinds of hurdles preventing Shi’ites from even entering high schools. The state did not think of the Shi’ite community as part of it, and the Shi’ites did not consider themselves to be part of the state’ (Dawisha 2009: 72). Compounding this indifference was a perception by the political elite, most of which was Sunni, that the loyalty of Iraqi Shi’ites was rather questionable.

The reason for such suspicion is the neighbouring Shi’ite-majority state of Persian Iran. While in Iran and Iraq the Shi’ites constitute a majority, in the world of Islam as a whole, it is the Sunnis who form the overwhelming majority. As is generally the case with minorities, the Shi’ites have been persecuted throughout much of Islamic history. Hence a deep-seated bond exists among Shi’ites in general, and consequently it is hardly surprising that there exists a cultural affinity between the Iraqi and Iranian Shi’ites. This kinship was strengthened over time by the existence in Iraq of the two holiest cities in Shi’ite Islam, Najaf and Karbala, which attracted Iranian pilgrims throughout the ages, constituting something akin to an open flow of humanity.

To some Sunnis this apparently was proof of Shi’ite hostility to Iraq’s national project. For instance, a 1933 book by a Sunni writer, titled al-'Urda fi al-Mam (Arabism in the Balance), equated the Iraqi Shi’ite population with the Sassanian Persians, lamented the Shi’ites’ indifference to Arab nationalism and accused Shi’ite teachers of being more loyal to Iran than to Iraq. This engendered widespread acts of sedition in Shi’ite cities, including attacks on security forces. The disturbances were quelled only after an appeal by the high-est Shi’ite cleric, and after the author was put on trial and briefly imprisoned (Hasani 1988: 243, vol. 3). What was unfortunate about such Sunni claims was that while ties between Iraqi and Iranian Shi’ites were indeed strong, the ethnic divide between Arab and Persian was in fact a much more powerful impulse.

At no time have Iraqi Shi’ites exhibited any enthusiasm for political links with Iran. Nor have they agitated for a separate Shi’ite state of their own. This was true not only over the formative years of the Iraqi state but throughout the twentieth century. Since Arabic is their mother tongue, and since they share the same ethnic characteristics of the Iraqi Sunnis, all the Shi’ites would demand of the political system was to restructure the political and socio-economic balance in the country which since Ottoman days had been heavily in favour of the minority Sunnis. In their efforts to rectify this historical injustice, the Shi’ites, more than once, specifically in 1927, 1932 and 1935, drew up manifestos articulating their demands of the Sunni-dominated Iraqi government. These included greater Shi’ite participation in government, parliament and civil service; the teaching of Shi’ite jurisprudence in the Law school, changes in the taxation system in the rural Shi’ite south; and government investment in health and education in Shi’ite areas (Nakash 1994: 122). Still in terms of national consolidation, the Shi’ites, most of whom in the formative years of the state belonged to the tribal confederations of the south, mistrusted the urban Sunni elite who ruled the country (al-‘Alawi 1990). The result was a relatively enduring perception during the early period of Iraqi statehood that the Iraqi state was essentially a Sunni project. King Faisal would lament the sectarian divisions in his country that had led to the persistent and widespread view which he ‘had heard thousands of times that taxes and death are the Shi’ites’ lot in life, while public positions are reserved for the Sunnis’ (Dawisha 2009: 75). Throughout his reign, Faisal well recognized the archaic road ahead for national consolidation.

On the other hand, these communal faultlines that existed in the early days of the monarchy were not so deep as to be irreconcilable. They were balanced by many instances and events that exhibited a communal proximity between
the two sects. Particularly potent was an emerging anti-Turkish and later anti-British nationalism and an awareness of a parallel (perhaps more powerful) nationalist impulse that cut across sectarian and regional ties.

Prior to World War I, a nationalist network was emerging that brought together anti-Istanbul elements from Baghdad and Basra. Moreover, some of these nationalists established contacts with similar minded men in Egypt and Syria (Ireland 1938: 234–35). Thus even in those early days there existed a rudimentary nationalist sentiment that opened up political horizons that lay outside immediate locales. The connection between Shi‘ite Basra and Sunni Baghdad was especially pertinent. In 1912, Sayyid Talib, Basra’s influential leader, demanded the independence of Iraq, meaning specifically Baghdad and Basra. His call was celebrated by the many young nationalists in Baghdad. Indeed the year before, the Baghdadi nationalists had established the National Scientific Club, whose name belied its political anti-Turkish character and purpose. The founders of the club immediately asked Sayyid Talib to be its president. Talib telegraphed from Basra his agreement, declaring his willingness to martyr himself for his country (Dawisha 2009: 76). The club brought together Sunni and Shi‘ite intellectuals and political activists, and when at the end of 1913 the Ottoman authorities pursued the club’s Baghdadi leaders, they fled to Basra, seeking and receiving the protection of Sayyid Talib (Tipp 2000: 27). While this hardly constituted a fully fledged nationalist movement, it nevertheless exhibited a centripetal national consciousness among an elite group of politically aware men of different sectarian attachments living in various parts of Iraq.

Later, the 1920 revolution showed clearly that in the face of perceived universal threat the Sunni–Shi‘ite communal fissure was purposefully narrowed. It is difficult to pinpoint the event that facilitated the revolt, but early in the year Grand Ayatollah Muhammad Taqi al-Shirazi issued a fatwa that banned Muslims from choosing or electing those who resided outside the faith to rule over the Shi‘ites. This literally delegitimized British rule, making it almost a religious duty to rebel against the British (Kasrid 2002: 279). Other Shi‘ite clerics followed with their own edicts supporting that of the Grand Ayatollah. These fatwas were to fuel the flames of discontent already felt by disaffected tribesmen, who were primarily Shi‘ites, but with a few Sunnis among them, as well as urban nationalists, mostly Sunnis but with a minority Shi‘ite presence. Such diverse groups naturally had differing motives and interests, but they were all united in their determination to see the end of British rule.

Anti-British nationalist sentiment gathered momentum throughout the first half of 1920. It was fanned by religious events that invariably turned into political demonstrations. This was not a new phenomenon. What was new was the increasing tendency of Sunnis and Shi‘ites to attend these events and celebrate them together, symbolizing a nationalist unity of purpose against the outsider. This was something which Iraq had rarely seen before. Thus, during the holy month of Ramadan, a large procession would leave the Baghdad Shi‘ite neighbourhood of Kadhimiyah and go to the Sunni neighbourhood of Al-Kadhimiya, which lay on the opposite side of the Tigris river, where the senior clerics of the two communities would escort their unity in Islam, and the two communities would pray together. The following week, the same would happen, this time in reverse direction. And when the anniversary of the death of Imam Hussayn, who had perished at the hands of the Sunni Ummayyads, Sunni delegations participated in the wakes, emulating their Shi‘ite counterparts in walling and beating their chests (al-Ward 1992: 191–92). There can be little doubt that the main spur for the growing enmity between the hitherto distant sects was the presence of the hegemonic non-Muslim British. It did not escape the attention of someone as perceptive as Gertrude Bell. ‘The extremists have adopted a plan that is difficult to counter,’ she wrote to her father in June 1920. ‘It is the uniting of Shi‘ites and Sunnis, that is the unity of Islam. [Prayers] are held sometimes in Shi‘ite mosques, sometimes in Sunni mosques, and are attended by both sects. In reality, these meetings are political, not religious […] and they all evolve around the idea of enmity to the infidels’ (al-Ward 1992: 195).

The actual insurrection erupted and was maintained primarily in the Shi‘ite mid and lower Euphrates part of Iraq. But it received much support from urban Sunni elements. That support was on the whole moral in nature, consisting of fiery mosque speeches and pamphlets extolling the revolution. Moreover, a number of Sunni ex-Ottoman officers lent their expertise to the rebels south of Baghdad. There were also a few acts of sedition: some of Baghdad’s youth sabotaged a section of the railway north of the city, and later burned a British transportation depot. Beyond the urban centres, the rebellion did spill over into Sunni tribal domains, particularly to the north and north-west of Baghdad, which compelled British forces to withdraw from Ramadi and Ba‘quba, while Fallujah was cut off from Baghdad for months (al-Bazzaz 1967: 105–07). While the contribution of the Sunni population to the 1920 uprising should not be overstated, as the heart of the rebellion and the bulk of the operations were centred in the Shi‘ite area, the insurrection itself and the events that preceded it, showed that a higher cause or a perceived common enemy could overcome the historical differences that divided the two communities.

If the common enemy in 1920 was the British occupier, in early 1922 it was the warlike ‘Ikhwani’ forces of Nejd in the Arabian Peninsula. Driven by their fanatically held ultra-puritanical version of Sunni doctrine and their intense hostility to the Hashemites, they mounted a major raid into Iraq’s Shi‘ite domain in March 1922 in which several hundred tribesmen were killed. Senior Shi‘ite clerics decided to hold a conference in Karbala to discuss ways to counter any future incursions by the Ikhwani. While the call to attend was made specifically to Shi‘ite tribal chiefs and urban notables, invitations were issued also to a number of Sunni clerics and prominent civilians, who met in Baghdad in a large gathering. The consensus of the meeting was that Iraq’s Sunnis should stand shoulder to shoulder with their Shi‘ite brethren against the Ikhwani’s ultra-puritanical form of Sunni Islam. A fatwa was issued and signed by a number of senior Sunni clerics, which legitimized taking up arms against the intruders from Nejd. A Sunni delegation from Baghdad was elected to attend the conference in Karbala. A similar delegation of Sunnis was dispatched from Mosul, and a number of notables and tribal chiefs from Tikrit in Iraq’s Sunni heartland signed a declaration pledging themselves and their money to any resolution produced by the conference (Dawisha 2009: 78–79). The conference produced little more than pledges to fight the Ikhwani under the banner of the King, but the Sunni–Shi‘ite rapport was of much greater significance for those tasked with creating a unified national identity. Here was a situation where Iraqi Sunnis pledged to fight alongside their Shi‘ite countrymen against their Sunni co-religionists from across the border in Nejd.

All this would endow some hope to those who were entrusted with creating a nation out of the various communities in the new state of Iraq. The hopeful sculptors of the nation would argue that the events of the 1920 insurrection and the coming together of Sunni and Shi‘ite in the face of Ikhwani belligerency in
of the Arab nation. The goal, according to one Iraqi analyst, was to 'melt the various (Iraqi) groups into the crucible of one country (sultan) before moving on to achieve the Arab nationalist (qawmi) aspiration' (al-Nasiri 2000: 71). Husri and the other nationalists, therefore, depicted the building of, and loyalty to, Iraq as going hand in hand with, indeed as inseparable from, the Arab nationalist march. In a history textbook for high school students published in 1946, King Faisal II was portrayed as a man who first and foremost was devoted to building the Iraqi nation state, while never losing sight of the broader Arab nationalist project (Walid and al-Rayas 1946: 131).

Indeed, those entrusted with the nationalist project went even further: they endeavoured to symbolize and portray Iraq as the centrepiece of any Arab nationalist project. One of Husri's successors as Director-General of Education, Sami Shawkat, would liken Iraq's situation in the late 1930s to that of Prussia's leadership in the unification of Germany in 1871. 'Prussia sixty years ago used to dream about uniting the German people,' Shawkat said in a speech to members of the nationalist al-Muthana Club. 'What is to prevent Iraq from dreaming about uniting the Arab lands now that it has achieved its dream of becoming independent?' (Mutl 1996: 29). Such hopes of Arab unification seemed to be well invested in Iraq. The nationalists would look back to the past and proudly point to the luminous civilization that flourished in Baghdad under the Abbasid Dynasty at a time when the West languished in the darkness of the medieval ages. By the middle of the ninth century, scholars working in the large library of Baghdad's Bayt al-Hikma (House of Wisdom) had translated and commented on the main works of the Greek philosophers. In the Hall of Science, which had a complete library and laboratory, medicine, astronomy and mathematics flourished. Much of the philosophic and scientific work done in ninth-century Baghdad was later centuries translated by Europeans and used in their universities. The custodians of the nationalist project in Iraq would ask: who else among the Arabs could match such a pedigree?

From his position as Director-General of Education Husri exerted profound influence on the educational and cultural orientations of the country, particularly in its crucial formative years. He disseminated his ideas on nationalism and nation-building through purposeful educational policy, such as sharing school and college curriculums and appointing like-minded educators. For him, the purpose of education was not so much to transmit knowledge, but to mould the individual's identity into that of the state and the nation it represents; not to make people and citizens better informed, but to make them more determined nationalists.

In the period prior to the birth of the Iraqi state in 1921, education, such as it was, was hardly the state's abiding concern. Jews and Christians had their own parochial schools, and the few literate Shi'ites, on the whole, had attended religious institutions. State-established schools were meagre in number and deficient in educational standards. Husri set out to establish a state-controlled educational system with a standardized curriculum that would be taught in all schools. If the primary goal of the educational system was nation-building, then it was hardly surprising that the teaching of history would take pride of place in the nationalist enterprise. To this purpose, Husri imported young Arab intellectuals, primarily from Palestine and Syria, whom he knew to be committed and vocal Arab nationalists. They were employed as teachers of history, language and social studies in Iraqi secondary schools. This group of committed nationalists would become the purveyors of Husri's pedagogical mission: if the object
of the exercise is to wage a struggle for independence and political rejuvenation, Husri would argue, then that can only begin by searching for revelation from history, for ‘faith in the future of the nation derives its strength from a belief in the brilliance of the past’ (al-Husri 1984: 95–96). The relevant term here is ‘brilliance’, so history books were not to dwell on the embarrassments of the past, but stress and embellish, even mythologize, episodes of accomplishments and success. Thus one history book, written in 1931 and taught in Iraqi secondary (high) schools, was little more than a panegyric of Arab contribution to human progress throughout history, and particularly under the Baghdad-based ‘Abbasid dynasty, yet the five centuries of Ottoman domination of Iraq were dismissed in a few pages (Marr 1985: 96–97). If this history was at best ‘guided’ if not ‘doctored’ that in no way disturbed Husri. After all, he had issued a directive to teachers of history in Iraq’s elementary schools in 1922 reminding them that the ultimate objective of historical studies was ‘the strengthening of patriotic and nationalistic feelings in the hearts of the students’ (Cleveland 1971: 147). This wholesale effort to inculcate nationalist values among Iraq’s sectarian communities was, to say the least, a tough undertaking, but one that Husri believed in and embarked on with a passion.

The nationalist project was pursued and expanded on by Muhammad Fadhl al-Jamal, a Shi’ite who became the Director-General of Education in 1933. There can be little doubt that Jamal’s policies played a critical role in eventually assimilating Shi’ite youth into Iraq’s body politic. Jamal began by establishing directorates of education in the provinces, and these were tasked with bringing up the levels of primary school instruction in rural areas to the standards enjoyed by urban schools. The goal was to allow provincial graduates to enter secondary schools. He also made sure that students from Shi’ite provinces were able to enter the Higher Teachers Training College in Baghdad, even sometimes at the expense of better qualified Sunni and Christian students. And he facilitated the acceptance of provincial students, particularly Shi’ites, into the foreign mission program. He also opened a secondary school in the Shi’ite holy city of Najaf, staffing it with high-quality teachers (Marr 1985: 98). Jamal consistently rejected accusations of favouring Shi’ites, claiming that his policy was aimed at spreading education to all Iraqi provinces, and indeed his policies did accelerate the expansion of education in Iraq, so that for example the number of secondary school students increased from just over 2000 in 1930 to almost 14,000 in 1940, and by the latter year, every province had a secondary school (Batatu 1978: 34; Marr 1985: 99). Even so, it is clear that the greatest beneficiaries were the Shi’ites from the southern provinces. The point here is that although Jamal was a Shi’ite, he was a committed nationalist. Under his stewardship, education continued to be structured around a uniform curriculum, which was directed from Baghdad, and which consciously propagated sectarian nationalistic themes and ideas. Jamal’s policies were to bear fruit in the post-World War II period as ever greater numbers of Shi’ites were incorporated not just into an expanding Iraqi nation but also into the mainstream of the Arab nationalist idea.

In urban centres especially, some important gains were made in bridging the sectarian divide. The result was that in the 1950s, particularly among the educated classes in urban areas, national loyalties were beginning to supplant the more particularistic affiliation to smaller sub-state groups, such as sects and tribes. And this was patently true in the case of the Shi’ite community.

The effort at nationalist in-gathering would naturally spill over into other sectors of state-building. By the 1950s, there was significant economic progress among the Shi’ites. Suffice it to say that the Shi’ites were the largest landowning group in the country, and by 1958 fourteen of the eighteen members of Baghdad’s Chamber of Commerce were Shi’ite (Marr 2004: 145). Parallel to increased prosperity, the Shi’ite educational status improved perceptibly. Secular schools, teaching mathematics, the sciences and foreign languages, and using modern instructional methods, replaced the old religious madrasas. At the turn of the century, over 8000 students attended Shi’ite madrasas in the holy city of Najaf. By 1957, the number had dwindled to 1954 (Nakash 1994: 254). These secular, state-sponsored schools emphasized the ‘oneness of Iraq’ and the ‘Arab’ character of the country. By the 1940s and 1950s droves of young, well-educated Shi’ites had entered the ranks of the middle class, working in governmental institutions, the private sector and the professions. Their social mobility undoubtedly created some erosion in the social and cultural barriers that had separated the two sects. For example, ‘Sunnis began giving their daughters in marriage to [the Shi’ites] when only a few decades before the impediments to such intermarriage seemed insurmountable’ (Batatu 1978: 47). Moreover, the exodus of the Jews from Iraq in 1951 allowed the Shi’ites to expand their presence in the country’s commercial life.

Along with this came improvement in the Shi’ite political status. Between 1947 and 1954, four prime ministerial positions went to Shi’ites, whereas not one Shi’ite had attained the position before 1947. In the first decade of the monarchy, Shi’ites occupied just under 18 per cent of the ministerial positions, yet in the monarchy’s last decade, their share of ministerial positions had gone up to almost 35 per cent (Batatu 1978: 47).

This meant that by the end of the 1950s, the Shi’ites had gradually been integrated into Iraq’s body politic. To be sure, friction between the two sects, especially pertaining to Shi’ite grievances about the unmitigating Sunni domination of Iraqi politics, continued to hover under the surface. And even though some of the richest Iraqis were Shi’ites, the community as a whole was economically, as well as socially, still considerably inferior to the Sunnis. Nevertheless, while these disparities would cause a few ructions, these were limited in scope and purpose. The bottom line was that as a group not alienated ethnically from the rest of society, the Shi’ites in the 1950s and increasingly in subsequent decades saw themselves as functioning citizens of Iraq. Sure enough, they would agitate to improve their socio-political status in the country vis-à-vis the Sunnis, but they had no reason to extricate themselves from the country. By the 1950s and after, many Sunnis too shared the same perception, at a minimum questioning the hitherto widely held belief within their community that Shi’ite affinity with their confidants in Iran was stronger than their loyalty to the Arab state of Iraq.

The integration of the two under the banner of ethnic union and Iraqi oneness would pass its sternest test during the 1980–88 Iran-Iraq war. Responding to the Ayatollahs’ appeals to Iraq’s Shi’ites to join forces with their Iranian co-religionists, Saddam Hussein would utilize the ethnic banner of Arabism as the most effective identity that would separate the ‘Arab’ Shi’ites from the ‘Persian’ ayatollahs of Iran, regardless of the sectarian proximity that existed between the two communities. Thus, the war was quickly likened to the famed battle of al-Qadisiyya, when the Arabs of the Peninsula defeated Sassanian Persia in 637 AD and expelled the Persians from Iraq. Indeed the war, popularly and in vigorous governmental propaganda, came to be known as Qadisiyyat Saddam, the Qadisiyya of Saddam.
Another example of the use of historical imagery in emphasizing the ethnic divide between Arab and Persian Shi'ites was to extol the Arab ethnicity of the founders of Shi'ite Islam. Saddam and his agents of cultural production would place a huge banner at the entrance of the Imam 'Ali mosque in Najaf, the holiest religious site in Shi'ite Islam, which declared: 'we take pride at the presence here of our great father 'Ali, because he is a leader of Islam, because he is the son-in-law of the prophet, and because he is an Arab' (Dawisha 1980: 142). Such symbolism of Iraq's Arabness was reinforced by an equally potent identity symbol, that of the oneness of Iraq. Constant references were made to the unity of the 'Iraqi nation,' reminding the Iranians that Sunnis, Shi'ites and other sects formed a unified Iraqi nation that is fighting to safeguard its values and new spirit (Dawisha 1983: 23). And more often than not these invocations of Iraqi nationalism would be linked to the larger ethnic Arab bond, particularly since the 1980s, Saddam and his agents of cultural production had fused the Mesopotamian and Arab identities into each other (Parasiliti 1998: 126). The fact that throughout the duration of the Iraq-Iran war no real dissonance occurred among the rank and file of the Iraqi army, the majority of which was Shi'ite, suggests more than just a passing coincidence between regime and populace over the centrality of the Arab identity and the oneness of the country.

The genocidal assault by Saddam's troops to quell the revolt in the south after Iraq was thrown out of Kuwait in March 1991 would trigger the deepening estrangement of the Shi'ites (who constitute the majority population of the south of Iraq) from the country's body politic. The troops made up primarily of Republican Guard divisions from Iraq's Sunni regions, backed by some of the most merciless and feared elements of state and Party security, exacted savage retribution on everyone regardless of culpability. Purposeful bombardments targeted homes at houses with little regard for its occupants, and people were shot in the streets indiscriminately. Rotting bodies were left in full public view, and those attempting to retrieve them for burial were themselves shot at and killed. Within less than three weeks, over 30,000, including women and children, had been killed, and some 70,000 had fled the country, mainly to neighbouring Iran (Marr 2004: 251).

This was followed by more than a decade of state-perpetrated reign of fear in the Shi'ite south where many were imprisoned without trial and tortured, and others were executed and dumped into mass graves. Shi'ite clerics were assassinated, or they simply disappeared, and when demonstrations followed, they were shot at indiscriminately. The marshes of the Shi'ite south were dried up to force the inhabitants to urban areas where they could be more easily controlled. All this led to such Shi'ite alienation that by 2003 Iraq's national identity had been seriously, and some feared irretrievably, fractured.

In the post-2003 era, the deepening sectarian attitudes became more entrenched as a result of policies undertaken by the American-led Coalition Provisional Authority (CPA). In mid-July 2003, an Iraqi Governing Council (IGC) was appointed to provide an Iraqi face to decision-making. It was decided that membership of the IGC should reflect the ethno-sectarian composition of the country. While this move was initially applauded for giving fair representation to groups, such as the Shi'ites and Kurds, who had been excluded by Saddam Hussein from participation in the political process, it was in hindsight the one decision that would open the way for the institutionalization of ethno-sectarianism in the country's body politic. A year later, the CPA ceased to exist, and the IGC dissolved itself and created a government under the premiership of Ayad Allawi. Following the same ethno-sectarian formula in the apportionment of cabinet portfolios, this government ended up institutionalizing further the primacy of ethno-sectarian attitudes, which came to the fore in the results of the 2005 general elections.

Any hopes that the electorate would vote to separate sect and religion from politics were completely frustrated by the election results. The virulently non-sectarian Iraqi National List, headed by Ayad Allawi, obtained no more than a measly 8 per cent of the national vote. The winning coalition, the quintessentially Shi'ite United Iraqi Alliance (UIA), who in its electoral campaign consistently appropriated the name and image of the most senior and revered Shi'ite cleric, Grand Ayatollah Ali Sistani, so dominated the voting in the nine southern Shi'ite provinces that it ended up winning 70 of the 81 district seats. Similarly the two exclusively Sunni lists won 15 of the 17 seats in the Sunni Anbar and Salah al-Din provinces (Dawisha and Diamond 2006: 100).

Indeed, sectarian divisions had been visible during the campaign period when neither Shi'ite nor Sunni parties ventured into each other's territorial domains. Even in the large, supposedly multiethnic cities—such as Baghdad, Mosul and Basra—there was little crossing of ethno-sectarian lines. Rather, each party focused its energy on cementing support among its own base and its own area. By 2006, sectarian divisions had become so pronounced and mistrust between the two communities so deep that civil war would erupt. Between the spring of 2006 and fall of 2007, more than 100 people were being killed every day (to say nothing of the many more who were maimed and seriously injured) because of targeted sectarian attacks. Because of the indiscriminate nature of such conflict, people would be victimized simply by where they lived, and consequently, divisions along identity lines would consolidate along geographic boundaries. It was thus predictable that cross migration from Sunni to Shi'ite areas and vice versa would gather momentum either as a result of intimidation or because of people's propensity to be with their own folk in situations of pervasive violence and fear.

According to figures from the United Nations Assistance Mission for Iraq, over 700,000 persons were forced to flee their homes due to sectarian violence in the twelve months spanning March 2006–March 2007 (United Nations Assistance Mission for Iraq 2007: 19). By July 2007, according to the Iraqi Red Crescent Organization, 1,128,000 Iraqis had been internally displaced (United States Government Accounting Office 2007). Most disconcerting was that during this period these migratory waves, as well as sectarian killings, did not seem to undergo a consequential deceleration even in response to highly publicized governmental security initiatives.

It was thus hardly surprising that this period would see a shift in Shi'ite political attitudes away from the national idea of a unified Iraq. While not necessarily shifting in their demands for autonomy and/or independence, the Shi'ites did become more amenable to calls from some Shi'ite leaders for a broadly autonomous region. 'Abd al-'Aziz Hakim, the leader of one of the largest Shi'ite parties, demanded a Shi'ite nine-province region, akin to the Kurdish autonomous region (Dawisha and Diamond 2006: 90), and parliamentarians from the Shi'ite UIA repeatedly asked for debates on federalism in which the southern provinces would be modelled on Kurdistan. Such was the persistence of Shi'ite parliamentarians that a prominent Sunni member of the institution was moved to remark 'I regret to say that it is unlikely we will be able to prevent the partition of Iraq. I think it is going to be the way they (the Shi'ites)
want' (al-Jazeera 2006). Such Shi’ite demands would resurrect the old and dormant Sunni suspicions regarding the separatist tendencies of the Shi’ites and of the latter’s possible preference for Shi’ite Iraq.

Fortunately for Iraq, or more precisely for its unified national identity, such sectarian political discordations did not materialize. The months of bloodshed, the thousands of casualties and the widespread political chaos that led to almost complete governmental paralysis seemed to have convinced both Shi’ites and Sunnis of the symbolic and material value of a united and purposeful Iraqi state. By the fall of 2008, the ‘Iraqi state’ aided by American forces had successfully banished the sub-state perpetrators of sectarian violence. And buoyed by the return of a semblance of security and normalcy, the majority of Iraqis would flock back to the all-encompassing idea of a national state, and thereby particularistic sectarian attitudes and loyalties would diminish.

By the time the campaigns for the 2010 general elections had begun, even the political parties had recognized the disdain for sectarianism held by the Iraqi voters. The insistence of the secular Ayad Allawi and his Iraqi list that there should be ‘no difference between a Muslim and non-Muslim [or] a Sunni and a Shia’ (Dawisha 2010: 34) would find fresh resonance in the country as a whole. The Shi’ite prime minister and leader of the State of Law (SOL) coalition spent much time trying to bring Sunnis into his coalition, and vigorously campaigned against sectarian splits and attitudes. Even blatantly sectarian parties could see the writing on the wall. The aggressively Sunni Tawafiq promised to seek support from all parts of the country and not just the Sunni centre. The quintessentially Shi’ite Iraqi National Alliance (INA), the inheritor of the UIA’s mantle, took every possible opportunity to declare its own abhorrence of sectarianism, pledging itself to the preservation of the country’s unity. The Shi’ite coalition even ‘went modern’ by nominating female candidates whose campaigns posters showed them bareheaded, even wearing makeup. In this new milieu, the Shi’ite political party which had advocated a Shi’ite super region in the south akin to Kurdistan found it prudent to reframe itself, discarding the concept and reinstating its belief in a united Iraq with a strong centralizing government in Baghdad (Dawisha 2010: 34). The wind of change seems to have filled everyone’s sails.

The return to nationalist proclivities would be confirmed by the election results. Of the 260 seats won by non-Kurdish parties, 184 went to parties whose political campaigns were avowedly secular, nationalist and pointedly anti-sectarian. The ‘Shi’ite’ INA was able to muster a disappointing 70 seats and just 19% of the national vote (compared with the UIA’s 46.5% in 2005). And the Sunni Tawafiq was trounced by the secular Iraquiya in the Sunni provinces (Dawisha 2010: 36). There was no missing the attitudes of Iraqis in these election results.

Returning to the opening paragraph of this essay, a nation is a form of identity. National identity need not invalidate other forms of sub-state loyalties and sub national identities. It is perfectly legitimate to identify a person living in the southern city of Basra as an Iraqi Shi’ite in the same way that a Bostonian could be referred to as an American Catholic. But that is as far as the argument goes. To speak of an American nation, our Bostonian’s unquestionable loyalty should be to America, superseding his Catholic affinities. In a similar vein, to speak of an Iraqi nation, our ‘Basrawi’ has to subordinate his Shi’ite sense of belonging to the supreme sense of loyalty to an Iraqi nation.

This essay has traced the ebbs and flows, peaks and troughs of these attachments among Iraqis since the early beginnings of the state. Entering the second decade of the twenty-first century, it cannot be said that the national idea had decisively trumped sub-state attachments, including sectarian proclivities. What can be surmised from this narrative, however, is that even during inhospitable political conditions the national idea was not disdained, but would remain dormant ready to be resurrected at later times. One conclusion that can be drawn from this is that the national idea appears to possess an almost timeless resilience that seems to be embedded in the social and psychological fabric of Iraqi society.

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The British, the Sunnis and the Shi‘is: Social hierarchies of identity under the British mandate

ABSTRACT
This article deals with the beginnings of sectarianism in Iraq. In the course of the eighteenth century, many Shi‘i clerics migrated from Iran to the shrine cities of southern Iraq (Karbala, Najaf, Samarra). By the early nineteenth century the school known as Usulism had become the prevailing orthodoxy of Twelver Shi‘ism, and this advocated a significant socio-legal role for the ‘ulama at a time when the Qajar monarchy was seeking legitimation for its rule. Accordingly, a partnership developed between the monarchy and the ‘ulama, which lasted until the 1880s and 1890s, when the clergy became highly critical of the monarchy’s submissive attitude to foreign economic intervention, and joined in a series of protests that culminated in the Constitutional Revolution of 1905–11. For much of this period Shi‘i did not form the majority of the population of Iraq, but their numbers gradually grew, largely as a result of the ‘conversion’ of what had been nominally Sunni tribes, most probably in protest against Ottoman policies of sedentarization. The Ottomans became alarmed at this growth in Shi‘i numbers, and at the growth in the influence of the clergy, but could do little about either. To facilitate its administration of the provinces, the Ottoman state made alliances with groups of notables on whom it came to rely. In Iraq, these individuals transferred their loyalties almost seamlessly to the British after the collapse of the empire in 1918. The Shi‘i (clerical) leadership, on the other hand, called

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PETER SLUGLETT
University of Utah
for the complete independence of Iraq, and insisted that the decision over whether Britain should stay in Iraq ought to be handed over to a Constituent Assembly. The British found it almost impossible to work with the Shi'i leadership, and effectively ran Iraq with the help of their Sunni clients. This arrangement continued throughout the mandate and monarchy, although, with the spread of universal education, the Shi'a complained increasingly about the underrepresentation of their sect in the ranks of the bureaucracy and at ministerial level.

As it has almost become fashionable to imply to the contrary, external forces or agencies cannot create sectarianism, ex nihilo within a particular region or state. Rather, such forces can use and mould existing circumstances for their own immediate or long-term ends. This is what seems to have happened in Iraq in the first half of the twentieth century, and by large the results were not unanimously oppressive until the 'triumph' of Arabism and Ba'thism in 1968 (after which being a Shi'i Iraqi made one somehow less Iraqi than a Sunni Iraqi). There are several reasons for this: perhaps the first and most obvious is that, in many important ways, the manner in which the British eventually chose to administer Mesopotamia/Iraq under the occupation and mandate (1914–32), which they bequeathed to the administrators of the semi-independent state (1932–58), did not generally mark a dramatic departure from Ottoman practice. Secondly, given the extent and nature of the 'permitted political arena', heavily weighted in favor of supporting the maintenance of the British connection, broadly democratic aspirations for political participation on the part of both politically conscious Sunnis and Shi'is went unequally unsatisfied. Thirdly, although it is true that a small group of Sunnis ran the machinery of state and government under and after the British, they could not have done so without the partnership and/or acquiescence of the great landowners of southern Iraq, almost all of whom were Shi'is. Finally, the spread of education and the general sense of limitless possibilities in the quasi-postcolonial world of the 1950s created an atmosphere in which sectarian divisions and sectarian identity gradually came to seem less significant. As it happened, the apparently irreversible march of secularization characteristic of most European states since the end of World War II came to an end in the Arab (and Muslim) world in the late 1960s and early 1970s.

In spite of the reality of sectarian and ethnic divisions throughout the modern history of Iraq, the country's formal political arrangements never resembled those in Lebanon, where forms of sectarian representation have been part of the political furniture since the mutawassit upbringing. Whether 'things would have been better' if such dispositions had been imposed is a matter for speculation. In spite of what are generally unsung improvements to the contrary, there is no clear evidence from Iraqi history to suggest that Iraqi Sunnis have hated Iraqi Shi'is (or vice versa) 'from time immemorial'. Ancillary evidence from the 1950s suggest that the Iraqi (Sunnis) political elite were indeed aware of the miserable conditions of the Shi'it poor, and were fearful of the potential mobilizational potential of the new movement, but such fears seemed to have been less sectarian-based than class-based: that is, the elite were afraid of 'communism', rather than 'Shi'ism' as such.

This article will show how the British found the Sunni (and the Kurds, although to a lesser extent) more generally congenial partners than the Shi'a, in much the same way that they favoured the 'martial races' in India (such as the Muslims in general and the Gujars, Jats and Rajputs). After the demise of the Ottoman Empire, the Sunni 'aristocracy of service' that had formed in Iraq in the late and post-Tanzimat period seemed content to transfer its loyalties from the Ottomans to the British. Since many existing administrative structures were not significantly changed for quite a while, it was almost a matter of business as usual.

For the Shi'i clerical leadership on the other hand, the British presence was much more morally questionable; objectionable, to be resisted and rejected if at all possible. After the deportations of the 'dissident' ulama to Iran in 1923 (see below), a kind of secular Shi'i politics emerged, which seems to have come into being largely as an immediate response to the Iraqi government's desire to introduce conscription. Later, with the spread of more or less universal education (at least in the cities) the Shi'i, particularly the aspiring middle class, become increasingly intolerant of the liberal education that seemed to block their advancement. In addition, they soon discovered that for all its secular pretensions, Pan-Arabism and Arab nationalism, which attracted many urban Sunnis in the 1940s and 1950s, favoured an interpretation of the Iraqi (and Arab) past in which the Shi'is and their extensive tradition played a minimal and indeed rather negative role.

SUNNIS AND SHI'IS IN LATE EIGHTEENTH AND NINETEENTH-CENTURY IRAQ

Any discussion of the origins and foundation of the Iraqi state and its early years inevitably involves plodding over some well-trodden terrain, although some parts of the landscape may be a little less familiar. For much of the nineteenth century (and indeed earlier) the Ottomans were unsure how best to deal with the heterodox Muslim populations of the empire, and were generally inconsistent in their approaches. Twelve Shi'is formed the largest heterodox community, and most of them were concentrated either in Lebanon (in Jabal 'Amil and the 'Baqi' valley), or in central and southern Iraq. A further complicating fact that many of the 'urban' Shi'is in Iraq, particularly the clergy of the 'atbat, the shrine cities of Karbala and Najaf, were Persian nationals, many of whom were the descendants of those who had fled there after the Afghan ('Sunni) capture of Isfahan in 1722. Most of the newcomers from Iran were Ulema, followers of an interpretation of Shi'i Islam, which 'legitimated an activist role' for the clergy as legal scholars in society. In contrast to the 'ulama living in the shrine cities at the time, many if not most of whom were Arabic, whose general attitude was that the clergy were more or less powerless in the face of the Imam, thus assigning themselves a more modest sociopolitical role.

For a while, the 'Iraqis' were influenced by the Akbarians they found in their new home, but by the 1760s, as Ottoman influence in the region declined, and as the star of Kazim Khan Zand, and later of the Qajars, began to rise in Iran, the Ulema, whose world view enabled them to interact more easily with a secular power, especially a Shi'i one, gradually came to form into a mainstream, the general weakness of the Ottoman state, in general, and in Iraq in particular, for much of the late eighteenth and the first half of the nineteenth centuries meant that there were few barriers to the continuous strengthening

3 See Farouk-Sluglett and Sluglett, "Iranian foreign policy of notables."

4 For the events of 1967 as a watershed, see Kassab, Contemporary Arab Thought. In the following passages, which I have translated from Arabic or Malouf's (1984), Identité Méditerranéenne, 'Claire', the author imagines seeing a 10-year-old man in the streets of Basrah in the mid-1960s, and speculates on that individual's changing perceptions of his identity:

In 1980 or so, that man would have declared proudly, 'I am Yugoslav' without any searchings. Questioned more closely, he would have added that he lived in the Federated Republic of Bosnia-Herzegovina, and, in passing, that he came from a family that was originally Muslim. The same man encountered twelve years later would say that his family was from the district in which they now lived, that the war was at its height, would look at him reprovingly and with some vehemence: 'I am a Muslim! Perhaps he would even have quoted the redemption verse. He would also have added that he was a Muslim and he would not have appreciated being reminded that he used to define himself equally proudly as a Yugoslav. Today [1990], our subject, questioned again, would say, 'I am a Muslim. I would first declare myself Bosnian, then Muslim, in fact, I am on his way to the mosque, but he would also insist that his country was part of Europe, and that he hoped that it would join the European Community one day.
of ties between the clergy of the Holy Cities and the dynasties in Iraq. Those factors combined to isolate Najaf and Karbala’ in particular from the centres of Sunni political power for much of the second half of the nineteenth century, and to make them more or less independent enclaves in which, with some exceptions, the Ottomans tended not to intervene unless provoked.12

For reasons that cannot be fully articulated here, the Shi’i clergy (whether in the Holy Cities in Iraq or in such Iranian sacred towns as Mashhad and Qum) played a crucial role first in legitimating, and then in continuing to legitimize the rule of the Qajar dynasty, which could not, and did not, claim any kind of divinely sanctioned authority. Of course, once bestowed, ‘divine sanction’ can be withdrawn, and the Shi’i clergy’s actions in the Tobacco Rebellion in the early 1890s and the Constitutional Revolution a decade or so later, in the general direction of questioning and contesting Qajar absolutism, greatly increased their authority and their political clout. On the other hand, it was not the case that the Shi’i mujtahids were ‘intrinsically (emphasis added) hostile to states ruled by kings, notables or other non-clerics.13 The idea that they were ‘innately’ hostile seems to have been the product of attempts to rationalize a somewhat incomprehensible set of developments in the aftermath of the Iranian Revolution in 1979. Of course, the fact that many of the leading clerical thinkers and protagonists of the Constitutional Revolution of 1905–11 were living in Ottoman Iraq, far from the reach of the Iranian state, certainly facilitated their enterprise.14

THE SHI’I AND THE OTTOMAN STATE

At this stage, in the last few decades of Ottoman rule, it is not quite clear either how much the political activities of the Shi’i ‘ulama vis-a-vis the government in Tehran were causing the Ottomans any unease, or the extent to which the Ottomans appreciated their significance. The Ottomans had certainly been concerned about increased British influence in southern Iraq as a result of the Baghdad bequest, a fund established by the (Shi’i) rulers of the Indian state of Awadh to distribute quite substantial sums of money each year in the ‘alms’ (through the senior clergy there), which was taken over by the British after the annexation of Awadh in 1856. The visit of Nasir al-Din Shah in December 1870–January 1871 to the ‘ulama also caused Ottoman administrators some concern,15 but what began to worry them much more was the rapid rise in the numbers of Shi’is, mostly the result of the conversion, en masse, of large southern tribes and tribal confederations, including the Zuhayl, the Bara Lami and the Al Bu Muhammad. This was a recent phenomenon: as Yitzhak Nakash says, ‘There is no evidence that would suggest that the Shi’is were ever close to forming the majority of the population in Iraq before the nineteenth or even the twentieth century’.16 It was not a uniform process: some tribal sections remained Sunni, while others converted. Thus the Sa’dun family, the leaders of the Murtadha confederation, remained Sunni while most of the tribesmen converted to Shi’ism.17

Exactly what this signified to the newly converted (given that, by all accounts, the tribes were ‘hardly Muslims before they were converted to Shi’ism’) is a matter for conjecture, but Nakash considers that at least part of their reason for converting was to demonstrate their opposition to the Ottoman government’s often ruthless attempts to settle previously nomadic tribes. In addition, the position of the tribal shaykhs underwent a slow and seemingly inexorable decline in the late Ottoman period, largely through the gradual, however sporadic and uneven, ‘conquest of the countryside’ by the Ottoman authorities. Many of the tribal leaders (in central and southern Iraq, but a similar process was visible elsewhere in the Empire) had ceased to be unquestioned authority figures, and their power over their tribes had dwindled. This fragmentation accompanied the process of agricultural and pastoral settlement. In the more intensively cultivated areas, the sirkal, or sub-chief, rather than the shaykh, paid revenue directly to the government, which greatly reduced the shaykh’s sociopolitical role.18

Hence the presence of large numbers of Shi’is in Iraq at the end of the nineteenth century, and the fact that so many of them were serving in the 56th Army, was a new and somewhat alarming problem for the Ottoman authorities, both in Iraq itself and at the Sublime Porte. In spite of this, the Ottomans, whose censuses seem to have been remarkably accurate,19 never made any attempt (in Iraq, nor, I think, anywhere else) to count the Shi’is separately, a practice that was continued when the state came into existence in 1920. Even today, we can only guess at the numbers of Shi’ism and Sunni’s, since modern censuses also only count ‘Muslims’. A series of largely unsuccessful measures were taken to try to stop the conversions, or at least to count their effects, including sending Sunni ‘missionaries’ to Iraq and trying to persuade young Shi’is to study Sunni Islam in Istanbul.20 In 1890 a military inspection committee was sent to Iraq to report on the problem, confirming the tendency that had been noted in previous years, blaming Indian and Iranian money for the extent of Shi’i proselytizing; the committee’s report also notes that the Sunni madrassas were inactive, and that teachers’ salaries were being cut. In 1893, Sunni teachers were appointed to various small Shi’i cities in central Iraq; another report blamed the Iranian government for its role in spreading Shi’ism in Iraq, and urged the Ottoman government to open schools, and to send carefully selected ‘ulama to Iraq.

QAJARS AND OTTOMANS: ATTEMPTS AT A SUNNI/SHI’I RAPPROCHEMENT?

At the time of the Tobacco Protest in Iran in 1891–92, the political activist Jamil al-Din al-Afghani had just been expelled from the country by Nasir al-Din Shah. al-Afghani encouraged Ayatollah Hasan Shirazi, the murtada-i ta’lif, who resided in Samarra’, to call for a ban on the sale and consumption of tobacco, and other and this other publicity ensured that the Shah to cancel the procession. At about this time, Sultan Abd al-Hamid II, whose leanings towards Pan-Islamism had already manifested themselves, became interested in promoting Sunni/Shi’i unity, and decided to employ al-Afghani to that general purpose, inviting him to Istanbul in 1892. Something of a consensus seems to have emerged to the effect that the best way to effect reconciliation would be through the mujtahids living within the Empire. Eventually a (mostly Shi’i) working group was set up in Istanbul, led by al-Afghani, whose members sent letters to various Shi’i ‘ulama advocating Islamic unity: the Iranian government got wind of this and was profoundly displeased. Subsequently, some members of the group were expelled from Istanbul, and the project fizzled out after the assassination of Nasir al-Din by an associate of al-Afghani in 1896. al-Afghani was not allowed to leave Istanbul, dying there (apparently of natural causes) in March 1897.

However this was not quite the end of the matter. Mushir al-Dawla, who became the foreign minister of Nasir al-Din’s successor Muzaffar al-Din,
THE BRITISH AND THE 'SECTS'

It is not clear when members of the British administration in Iraq came to understand either the nature of the relationship between Sunnis and Shi'a's, or that it might come to constitute a 'problem', however defined. Unlike some situations involving members of different sects or religions inhabiting much the same area in the late Ottoman period (especially in the Balkans) there were few reports of violent or confrontational sectarian incidents in Ottoman Iraq in the run-up to World War I, or indeed for much of the mandate and monarchy, probably because it was in no-one's particular interest to provoke them. However, in his autobiography, written at the end of the 1920s, Sir Arnold Wilson, the acting high commissioner in Iraq between 1918 and 1920, takes the notion of the 'deep-rooted cleavage' between the sects as a given, referring to it in somewhat hackneyed (as well as inaccurate) terms:

At the hands of the British Government Shiism is entitled on historical grounds to equal treatment with Sunniism instead of being regarded as a 'sect'. It is impossible to deal in greater detail in the present work with this aspect of Mesopotamian politics, but it will be understood that the deep-rooted cleavage between the two great branches of the Islamic faith was a factor of profound importance in all political discussions, and made extreme caution necessary in introducing the constitutional experiments advocated from Syria, where the tradition of Sunni predominance was unquestioned.

It is difficult to reconstruct a nuanced picture, largely because, except as far as the clergy and the educated laity was concerned, it was of course much more of a matter of identity than of belief. Sunnis are the sons and daughters of Sunnis, and Shi'a the sons and daughters of Shi'a; only the most sophisticated and educated members of each sect would have been able to espouse their own beliefs, and an even smaller number would have been able to explain the beliefs of the 'other'. As has been noted earlier, 'conversion' is not quite the right word to describe the activities of the Shi'a missionaries among the tribes: their activities could be better described as acquainting the tribesmen with the rudiments of their own version of Islam rather than enticing them to Shi'ism away from the Sunniism in which they had been 'baptised'.

The question of identity is further complicated by the fact that between the 1890s and 1914, very few of the inhabitants of the Balkans of Bassit, Baghdad and Mosul would have thought of themselves as 'Arabs', even less as 'Iraqis'. Here the waters have been muddied by efforts to postulate the existence of a degree of 'Arab national consciousness' far earlier than the point at which this actually occurred; the idea that Arab nationalism substantially antedated World War I, or even the end of the nineteenth century, is a myth. In addition, the fall of the Ottoman Empire, which had been in existence for well over 600 years (400 in the Arab world) was neither especially predictable nor, when it came, the result of a long anti-colonial struggle on the part of the Arabs. In fact, the more politically aware inhabitants of the Arab provinces who understood the nature of the Ottoman state and the international situation at the beginning of the twentieth century regarded the Empire as their protector against the encroachment of the European powers rather than as their enemy, they could see what had happened to Egypt, and to Algeria and Tunisia, since the 1830s. That a certain form of anti-Turkish orientalism (between the same language) and that something of an Arab intellectual renaissance took place at the end of the nineteenth century, cannot be equated with a rise in 'national consciousness', which took place in earnest in reaction to the activities of Britain and France after World War I.
THE BRITISH AND THEIR SUNNI PARTNERS

Benedict Anderson has remarked: "To see how administrative units could, over time, come to be conceived as fatherlands, one has to look at the ways in which administrative organizations create meaning." This helps us to understand what happened in Iraq in the 1920s and 1930s, although it has to be combined with an appreciation of the operation of empires. As Philip Ireland wrote in 1937, in a passage whose stentorian common sense is still striking:

"Nations do not vie amongst themselves for control over lands [...] primarily to give justice or to raise standards of living among the people or suppress disorder per se [...] If these benefits extend to the natives of the country it is because the latter cannot, in the very nature of the circumstances, help sharing them. [...] In a conflict of interests [...] it is very natural that those of the mother country should come first and that the good of the people, in reality, be subordinated to the expected material and political returns."

In the latter years of World War I and the early 1920s, one of the watchwords of British colonial policy was economic restraint, or empire on the cheap; another was a general sense of the inavoidability (for various reasons, based both on British domestic and on broader international political considerations) of the outright acquisition of colonies, which was why Sir Arnold Wilson's grandiose schemes for an Iraq administered by British and Indian officials could not be realized. The indirect rule, or the means through which Britain administered her new Middle Eastern Empire, required, among other things, the identification of those individuals with the writing of the Ottoman Empire, who were responsible for founding and leading the basic school textbooks in Iraq and Syria, Anderson, Imagined Communities, p. 53.

Ireland, Iraq, pp. 36-38.

Suggett, Britain in Iraq, p. 41. Dodge, Iraq, p. 34.

The term is usually attributed to Legard, The Dual Mandate in British Tropical Africa.

Thus Britain's contributions to the defence and internal security of the Mandates dropped from 632 million in 1922-23 to 40.4 million in 1930-31. Suggett, Britain in Iraq, 182.

Note 13 above.

has been discussed already, the Empire was alarmed at the recent growth in the number of Shi‘is in Iraq, partly because of Iraq's proximity to Iran and for other reasons already discussed. Whether this really was a cause for alarm is a matter for conjecture, given the very low level of education of the converts, and what must have been at best the haziest understanding on their part both of the workings of the Qajar state and an even vaguer notion of how their interests might be served if they were to make some kind of commitment to it. As a matter of record, there are no instances of sections of the population of southern Iraq making common cause with any Iranian government until the oppressive circumstances of the 1980s.

Hence it was 'natural' that when the British were casting about for partners with whom they could build up an 'Arab state' in Iraq, they should turn to the Sunni Arabs, who supplied the main cadres both for the civil administration of Mesopotamia and for the officer corps of the Iraqi army, founded in January 1921. Such individuals were recruited from the old notable families (which included both urban absentee landlords and tribal leaders in central and western Iraq) as well as from the ranks of more nouveaux riches ex-Ottoman officers and officials. Since so few Shi‘is were either ready to take such positions, or perhaps more importantly, were deemed competent to be able to serve in them, the result was the gross under-representation of Shi‘is in government service and the armed forces (except of course as conscripts after the introduction of compulsory military service in 1934) in proportion to their numbers and, for similar reasons, in all the ministries of the pre-1958 period. In their desire to control Iraq, the British generally found the Sunni more congenial partners, and for their part both the Sunni aristocracy and the Sunni nouveaux riches seemed happy enough to transfer their loyalties almost seamlessly from the Ottomans to the British and subsequently to the new state. Faysal, the new king, came from a leading Sunni family in the Hijaz, and his principal Iraqi supporters were all Sunni, partly members of the service aristocracy and partly from the ranks of the Ottoman officers and officials who had gathered around him both during the Arab revolt and during his time in Syria between 1918 and 1920.

In contrast, in February 1919, Ayubullah Muhammad Taqiq al-Shirazi, the marja‘i-t-taqi‘, and Shaykh al-Sharif al-Isfahani wrote two letters to President Woodrow Wilson, seeking his aid against Britain and the British occupation. The second letter, dated 21 February, contains the following passage:

"The desire of all Iraqis, as [members of] a Muslim nation is that they should be given the liberty to choose a new independent Arab and Islamic state, with a Muslim king assisted by a national assembly. As far as the question of a protectorate (mulsim, i.e. this letter antedates the introduction of the term 'mandate', British, 1930) is concerned, it should be up to the national assembly to accept it or reject it, after the convening of a peace conference."

About a year after his letter to Woodrow Wilson, Ayubullah Shirazi issued a fatwa asserting that service under the British was unlawful. Similar sentiments continued to be expressed in various petitions submitted to the British occupation authorities in the run up to what has become known in somewhat grandiose terms as 'The Great Iraqi Revolution of 1920', and the words 'independent Arab and Islamic state' or 'independent Islamic state' crop up again and again. Not surprisingly, British reports routinely portrayed the Shi‘i clerical leadership as extremists, fanatics, reactionaries, irreversibly opposed to progress.
and so on, presumably in an attempt to deflect attention from their core (and of course unacceptable) demand for independence. On the other hand, given their previous linkages to the Ottoman state, it was almost inescapable that the Sunnis’ aristocracy of service” should seriously ally themselves with a Shi’i independence movement led by ‘fanatical clerical reactionaries’, which, if it were to succeed, would almost certainly undermine the foundations of their own power.

Nevertheless, the events of 1920 did have the effect of uniting most of the Iraqi population against the British occupation, not I think because of the forging of some deep sense of national unity, but because the majority of ‘Iraqis’ had already become profoundly disenchanted with the British and saw concerted military action as the best way to get rid of them. For a few moments, then, to use an overworked phrase relevant to the fluctuating coalitions that are the common currency of most nationalist movements, they all knew what they did not want. However, it soon became clear that, for a variety of reasons, the British were not about to leave Iraq. So the coalition of Shi’i tribal leaders and ‘ulama and their followers on the one hand, and the Sunni politicians, together with the Shi’ites and ex-Ottoman officers on the other, collapsed quite quickly, and the Sunni participants proceeded to align themselves with the British with almost indecent haste. Later on, more or less the same Sunni cast of characters would eagerly embrace the ideology of Arab nationalism (essentially a Sunni version of Arab history), and, a little later still, the notion of a united fertile crescent under Hashemitic rule.

In the early 1920s, largely, I think, because of the demands of the clerical leadership (essentially those put forward at the time of the Revolution of 1920), it was difficult to see how the Shi’is could be incorporated within the framework of the kind of Iraqi state envisaged by those who were then in power. At this point, rather late in the day, it is worth saying that in spite of my own tendency to generalize about ‘the Shi’is’ (or ‘the Sunni’), neither community was or is monolithic; both were and are internally different by a variety of factors, urban/rural, class, education or the lack of it, different generations and intensity of religious belief. The confrontation between the state and the Shi’i ‘ulama, which represented, to all intents and purposes, the only Shi’i forces with an authentic voice at the time, gradually worked itself out in the early 1920s, and, not surprisingly, given the balance of forces, ended with the defeat of the ‘ulama.

The Shi’i ‘ulama in the early 1920s

In the course of 1921, the British government decided that it would be easier to institutionalize its relations with Iraq by means of a treaty that would incorporate the terms of the mandate, on the grounds that such an arrangement would acknowledge that Iraq was a sovereign state. Hence the Anglo-Iraqi Treaty was concluded in August 1922, in the face of the unrelenting opposition of the Shi’i ‘ulama. This opposition continued through the next stage, the convening of a Constituent Assembly, one of whose principal functions would be to ratify the treaty. For a while King Faisal seems to have toyed with the idea, or the fantasy, that he could enter into some sort of alliance with the Shi’i hierarchy against the British. Even after the mujahidin’s expulsion from Iraq in the summer of 1923 Faisal immediately began secret negotiations with them over the terms under which they would be permitted to return. But this is to anticipate.

By November 1922, the rumours that had been circulating earlier in the year about fatwas being issued against the Treaty took on more substantial form. The mujahidin issued interdictions against participation in the elections, and posters carrying the text of these fatwas were widely displayed. Their general tone was uncompromising:

Participation in the elections or anything resembling them which will injure the future prosperity of Iraq is pronounced haraam by the unanimous verdict of Islam.39

The situation was all the more serious because the fatwas were issued not only by well-known clerics but also by Ayatollah Ishafani (one of the co-authors of the letter to President Woodrow Wilson) and Ayatollah Nasiri, who had been a leading figure in the Persian Constitutional Revolution.40 It was reported from Karbala’ and Ba’quba that the election committees had tendered their resignations, and the local Shi’i population seemed determined to follow the lead given by the clerical hierarchy. The prohibitions were confirmed again in the spring of 1923, and the ban on participation in the elections was accompanied by a further fatwa forbidding Shi’i to assist the Iraqi government in its military campaigns against the Turks in northern Iraq.

In the face of this obstinacy, the cabinet decided in June 1923 that strong measures were necessary if the authority of the government was not to fall hopelessly into disrepute. After hostile demonstrations that month, it was decided that Shykh Mahdi Khalisi, undoubtedly the guiding spirit behind the ‘Iraqi anti-election campaign, should be deported — like many of the other Shi’i ‘ulama, he was a Persian national, so this was a fairly straightforward matter for the Iraqi authorities. Many other leading mujahidin promptly left Persia in protest. In spite of the British high commissioner’s forecast of a ‘fearsome squall from Tehran’,41 Persian official reaction was fairly mild, after a few initial salvos, perhaps because of the general distraction brought about by events attendant on the rise to power of Reza Khan. It was explained that, with the exception of Khalisi and his immediate following, the ‘ulama had not been expelled and that they were free to return whenever they wished, provided they undertook not to interfere in politics and to revoke the fatwas forbidding participation in the elections.42

This action on the government’s part solved the immediate crisis, though it naturally exacerbated sectarian feelings. For his part Faisal had tried, and would continue to try, to come to a friendly understanding with both Shi’i clergy and Shi’i laity, but the more influential (Sunni) politicians, with the general approval of their British advisors, were more concerned to put the Shi’i hierarchy firmly in its place. In communications with Whitehall dealt with the importance of keeping clerical meddlers out of politics rather than with the more serious question of responding to Shi’i grievances and the exclusion of Shi’s from power. Throughout the mandate, in attempting to justify its frequently discriminatory policies towards the Shi’i, the Iraqi government argued that until Iraq became ‘independent’ the Shi’i had had no voice at all in politics, no separate courts and no publicly financed educational institutions. In general, however, the obvious imbalance of Shi’ in the Cabinet, the Chamber of Deputies and in the civil service was a constantly exploitable source of irritation. More immediately important for this particular period was that Faisal was forced to abandon his attempts to broaden the basis of his support within the


40 Given what was happening in Iraq in the early 1920s, it is interesting that Neriu’s Text al-Imam wa Bani al-Mishk published in Baghdad in 1909 and Tehran in 1910, was a rejection of absolutism and a justification of constitutionalism based on arguments derived from fiqh. See Nourie, The constitutional ideas of a Shi’ite Mujahid, pp. 234–47.


42 Most of them returned to Iraq in 1924.
country, although he continued negotiations with the exiled 'ulama during the autumn of 1923.

It is difficult to gauge the immediate effect of the deportations on Shi'i political circles. The 'urban politicians' were evidently nonplussed for a while, while some of the tribal sheikhs, notably 'Abd al-Wahid Siddiqi and Samawal al-Shallub, had been closely associated with Ayatullah al-Naqi and al-Ishfahani and were clearly deeply affronted at their treatment. A group of moderate sheikhs told the RAF Special Service Officer at Hilla that while they realized that the 'ulama should not have interfered in politics to the extent that they had, "this knowledge in no way counterbalanced the feeling that their removal was a heavy blow at the religion of their sect." A summary of the situation is contained in a contemporary intelligence report:

It is interesting at this stage to speculate as to why the 'ulama have seen themselves so particularly hostile to the King and to the elections. They seem to be mowed by several motives. First they desire a weak government, which would allow their ignorant theocracy to rule the tribes and to exploit them [...] They fear that if the elections take place and an elected assembly sits to ratify the British Treaty and to validate the measures of the Provisional Government, then the King and the Iraqi government will be able to claim that their authority is based on the will of the people and will gain in strength and no longer have to defer to the 'ulama. They believe that the Turks would be better for their interests because they would inevitably be weak. Secondly, they feel that, if the Iraqi government continues as at present constituted the Shahs will have no influence in it. The Electoral Law was so formed that the elections must be hopelessly gerrymandered in favour of the Sunni. Thirdly they have some personal dislike of the King, which is rumoured to be due to His Majesty having sworn to them at the beginning of his reign to follow a policy which he has found impossible.

The second and third grounds for the hostility of the 'ulama seem to have been correctly analysed, but the picture of credulous tribal leaders being pushed on to precipitate action by their religious leaders needs some modification. Apart from the direct encouragement given to tribal leaders by the 'ulama in 1920, it was frequently the case that the tribal leaders themselves actually sought validation of their anti-British or anti-government movements from the clergy rather than simply accepting their dictates. Perhaps it is more accurate to say that while the 'ulama would tend to encourage rather than discourage concerted action on the part of tribal leaders before 1923, it is rare to find them actually instigating such action.

THE SHI'I LEADERSHIP, THE BRITISH AND THE IRAQI STATE

Similar pleas for more cabinet and civil service representation were heard from the Shi'i throughout the rest of the mandate, and while promises were made they were rarely kept. For the next few years, however, the Shi'i opposition ceased to be an active source of danger (real or imagined) to the regime, and by the time of the next serious revolt, in 1935, the Iraqi army had become sufficiently powerful to crush all but the largest combination of tribal forces. It was only in 1927, when the Shi'i sheikhs' interests in resisting conscription coincided with British interests in trying to discourage its introduction, that Shi'i grievances once more became a major factor in Iraqi politics. In broad terms, the leadership that emerged after the deportations was more flexible and less united than its predecessors had been. It is important to remember that the whole spectrum of Iraqi politics was personalized to an extent that is often baffling: few individuals can be credited with the pursuit of consistent principles, and the various permutations and combinations charged backwards and forwards through paths which are frequently impossible to trace. In the broadest possible terms, Shi'i politicians and tribal leaders can be divided into those who would be prepared to cooperate with the Sunni 'opposition' and those who would not, but again, these divisions lack permanence.

Thus, in 1924, Muhammad al-Sadr, an 'alim from Samarra' whom had been politically active before World War I, an opponent of the British in 1920, and who would become one of Faisal's most loyal supporters, joined Yasin al-Hashimi, Naji al-Suwaydi, and Shaykh Ahmad al-Durud in an attempt to encourage the Euphrates shaykhs to vote against the ratification of the Anglo-Iraqi Treaty in the Constituent Assembly. On the other hand, Ja'far Abul-Timman, a prominent Baghdad merchant, later president of the Baghdad Chamber of Commerce and the most consistently respected secular Shi'i politician of his day, glosomly advised his colleagues that there was no point in mounting a concerned opposition, since the British would get their way in any case. He refused to involve himself in politics for several years, partly because of his belief in the futility of opposition, and partly because of his distrust of the Sunni politicians with whom he would have been obliged to work. Generally, Muhammad al-Sadr seems to have advocated a policy of alliance with those Sunni politicians opposed to the 'King's Party' (consisting of 'Ali Jawdat, Nuri al-Said, and Ja'far al-'Askari). The opposition group consisted normally of 'Ali Mahmud; 'Abd al-Qahar al-Haddad, Rashid 'Ali al-Gaylan, Yasin al-Hashimi, Rifat al-Chadrich, Bahjat Zaynul and Mawdul Mukhis. On the other hand, the members of the Shi'i Hizb al-Nahda (Renascence Party), led by Amin al-Charchafchi, which included the 'alim Muhammad Husayn Ali Kashfi al-Ghitaa (later a prominent Ayatullah and a highly influential anti-Communist, avidly embraced by the Iraqi regime in the 1940s and 1950s) and the tribal leaders 'Abd al-Wahid Siddiqi, She'alun Abul-Shar, Samawal al-Shallub, Saqban al-Ali and Salman al-Dahban, were more inclined only to seek alliances with other Shiis. Of course these alignments frequently failed to survive political crises, especially when Rashid 'Ali and Yasin al-Hashimi simply used opposition support to persuade either the more conservative members of the King's Party or even the more independent minded 'Abd al-Mahsan al-Se'dun, that it was necessary to either both of them in the Cabinet. Once in office, their supporters looked in vain for the reforms and improvements the two had promised. A further complication in the maze of political alignments was provided by the Sunni tribal leaders or landowners whose position and influence had been created or maintained by British favour. Notable here were 'Ali Sulayman, 'Abadi al-Hussain, Muhammad al-Rafi'a and Muhammad al-Salih, all of whom had supported Britain actively or passively in 1920, and who constantly clamoured for direct British rule, which they insisted would protect their 'rights' more effectively than the government of King Faisal.

In 1920, a brief moment of 'Pan-Islamic' unity had secured the cooperation of the Shi'i Holy Cities, political activists from both sects, the tribal leaders and the 'Shi'is' against the British. When it became clear to the Shiis that some of their leading partners in the alliance were prepared to compromise with Britain in order to gain positions of power and authority for themselves,
they naturally complained of betrayal and of having sacrificed Shi'i lives and property simply to install a group of foreigners and upstarts and abetted by Britain.47 After the rising of the leaders of the Shi'i hierarchy maintained their hostility towards Britain, and made their cooperation with the Iraqi government conditional on their own grievances being redressed at the same time. Tactically, however, they remained at a permanent disadvantage, since so few sanctions were open to them apart from the rather extreme threat of tribal insurrection, although—if they had been able to unite—the combined strength of the tribes long represented a more formidable and numerous force than the Iraqi army. However, after the major air and police campaign against the Bani Hushayn in the winter of 1923/24 it was evident that the British authorities would not tolerate any opposition to the Iraqi government that would upset the status quo.48

A further difficulty facing the Shi'i leadership was the apparent lack of suitable or acceptable candidates for ministerial office or government employment. This deficiency was greatly exaggerated by their opponents, but the result was that apart from the presence of token Shi'is as Ministers of Education, only three Shi'i politicians, Ja'far Abul-'Timman, Muhshin al-Shahba and Salah al-Jabir, held significant Cabinet posts until the end of World War II. Hence an important typology of much Shi'i agitation through the end of the mandate in 1932 came to consist in their appealing to the British to preserve their rights vis-à-vis the 'umma', a process that became increasingly discernible, on a variety of levels, in the years after 1924. In April 1925 the prime minister, Yasin al-Hashimi, who, with Nuri al-Sa'id, was a fervent advocate of a stronger and larger army, urged Muhammad al-Sa'id to exert his influence in his government's favour, and to support the introduction of conscription. Both Yasin and Nuri al-Sa'id were deeply opposed to the proposals of the high commissioner and the colonial secretary, which amounted to increasing the number of British officers serving with the Iraqi army, and continuing to vest executive control in a British inspector general. They wanted al-Sa'id to raise protests against these plans among Shi'i tribal leaders and nationalists, but he could not find any significant tribal leaders prepared to cooperate. Fearing that conscription would deprive them of their own corps of armed retainers, the tribal leaders were quite content that the British should continue to command.49 Exactly the same reaction greeted Ja'far Abul-'Timman in 1927 when he was urged by the pro-conscription party, in the interests of national independence, to encourage the religious hierarchy at Karbala and Najaf to consider conscription favourably. Again, the Shi'i tribal leaders were at the forefront of those protesting against the withdrawal of British Administrative Inspectors from the districts in 1930. By 1927, those who may be described as less radical Shi'is, including the followers of Amin al-Charchafchi (the Nekdah group), realized that it might be possible to use the apparent deadlock over conscription as a bargaining counter. Deputies were sent to the King to try to obtain satisfaction for the usual Shi'i demands, especially for a higher proportion of places in the civil service.50 Later in the year, it was reported from Kadhimiyah that

'Abd al-Husayn Chalabi said at the house of Sayyid 'Abd al-Husayn al-Yasin that Nuri al-Sa'id had told him that the conscription bill was intended to secure complete independence to Iraq and that it was the duty of all Iraqis to support it. He said that the quota would only be 20,000 and that the government would be grateful for the assistance of the 'ulama. Sayyid 'Abd al-Husayn al-Yasin commented that the 'ulama were quite prepared to assist, but they required it to be stipulated that half of Government appointments should be held by Shi'is.51

When it became clear that the government was not going to yield to these demands, the Shi'i leaders turned almost unanimously to Britain to look after their interests, especially after the riots during the 'Ashura procession in Kadhimiyah in July 1922, which were almost certainly instigated by individuals close to the government,52 and a similar incident at Basra gave rise to widespread fears of a more general anti-Shi'i movement.

It is said that the Government (Nuri, Ja'far al-'Askari, Yasin and Amin Zak) were making plans to weaken the power and prestige of the tribal chiefs and prominent Shias. It is also said that the reason for this is that they are desirous of enriching themselves by the purchase of lands from displaced shaykhs and landlords.53 And, later in the year:

An arrival from Najaf states that the Shia agitators there have apparently come to know that the Government is fully aware of their activities and that he has been instructed to explain to the British that the activities of the party (not named) were in no way anti-British or directed against British interests. Were they the slightest sign that they had the practical sympathy of the British Government they would hoist the British flag and throw out the foreigners.54

A few days after the Kadhimiyah riots, the acting high commissioner wrote to the Colonial Office:

A leading Shia said to me a few weeks ago: 'We know we are uneducated and cannot at present take our proper share in the public services. What we want is British control, to save us from Sunni domination, until our sons are educated. Then we, who are the real majority will take our proper place in the government of the country and shall not need British control.'55

For its part, the Iraqi government could not afford to make major concessions to Shi'i politicians, whether from secular or clerical backgrounds, since this would undermine its own very shaky credibility. Broadly speaking, it paid off the noisier and more power-hungry shaykhs with tax remissions and beneficial land legislation, frightened the 'ulama into silence and paid attention to secular politicians as and when the need arose. Britain could not have satisfied the Shi'is in power, just as the Sunnis could not admit the Shi'is to power afterwards. Although the Shi'is could not be dealt with by either the Sunnis or the British when strong and united, they could be used by both when weak and divided. The result of this political equation has been that until the beginning of the twenty-first century the Iraqi Shi'is were largely excluded from playing a major part in the government of their country, both individually and collectively. With the Sunnis in power, the British could control the country through them; with the Shi'is in power there could have been no British mandate.
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CONTRIBUTOR DETAILS

Peter Sluglett has been teaching Middle Eastern history at the University of Utah, Salt Lake City, since 1994. He is co-author of Iraq since 1958: From Revolution to Dictatorship (3rd edition, I.B. Tauris, 2001), author of Britain in Iraq: Converting King and Country (Columbia University Press, 2007), co-editor of The British and French Mandates in Comparative Perspective/Les mandats français et anglais dans une perspective comparative (Brill, 2003) and editor of The Urban Social History of the Middle East, 1750–1950 (Syracuse University Press, 2008).

E-mail: Sluglett@aol.com
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ABSTRACT

This article revisits the manifestations of amicable Shi'a-Sunni relations in the months leading up to, and during the course of Iraq's 1920 Revolution. During the 1920 Revolution there was cooperation exhibited by some social and religious leaders in both communities. They persuaded their respective constituents to disregard their mutual aversion and focus on the country's national interests. But many among the political and religious elite were not interested in such cooperation.

On the one hand there were Sunnis who cooperated with the Shi'a and assumed an active role in the resistance to the British occupation in the Middle East region, but there were also those who refrained from participating in such activities, either because of their anti-Shi'a mindset or because they supported the British as a matter of social and financial interest, or were motivated by political ambitions, such as the political hopes in Baghdad and Basra. This group of 'non-cooperative' Sunnis publicly criticized the revolution and described the participants as short-sighted rebels and agents of foreign powers who allowed themselves to be used against the interests of the Iraqi people.

Historically, Shi'a and Sunni members of the Iraqi elite fought over power, privileges and political control, while their constituents intermarried and entered in business partnerships. Similarly, Shi'a landlords maintained good relations and

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strong trust with Sunni city merchants and Sunni Bedouin camel owners who undertook the transport of the Shi’ite farm produce from rural Middle Euphrates to the cities. But during the events that led to the revolution, Sunni and Shi’ite leaders made extraordinary concessions towards each other. Sunni notables participated in Shi’ite religious services and vice versa.

The main aim of this article is to analyse the meaning of these events and their implications for the current and future Iraqi Shi’a-Sunni relations in light of the significant changes of power distribution since 2003.

Shi’a-Sunni coexistence in Iraq began in the seventh century CE. For the following thirteen centuries, the Shi’ite population of Iraq had ranged from a majority to a small, underground minority, depending on the tolerance of rulers, or lack thereof, and the intensity of sectarianism in the society. For the purpose of this article, sectarianism is defined as feelings of narrow-minded prejudice, which often result in intolerance, discrimination and hatred towards people of other religious sects or ethnic groups.

When the British completed their occupation of Iraq in 1918, the Shi’a constituted about 53 per cent, having increased to 56 per cent by the end of the League of Nations Mandate in 1932. This slight majority was achieved mainly through relentless efforts by the Shi’a ‘ulama of Iraq to convert parts of the newly settled Sunni tribes in the previous two centuries. The partial conversion of highly cohesive tribes added a tribal dimension to the network of Iraq’s sectarian relations. Thus, religious antagonism between the two sects moderated by the strong tribal connections, because the partial conversion of certain clans within Sunni tribes did not result in separating the tribal members who converted to Shi’ism and the ones who remained Sunni.

The British invasion of Iraq, 1914-1918, was met with a variety of reactions from the Iraqis of all social and religious backgrounds, according to their respective interests. The most favourable reaction came from the merchants, contractors and farm owners who made very handsome profits as a result of doing business with the British, as opposed to their former dealings with the Ottomans. The British paid generously for the goods and services they acquired, while the Ottomans were prone to confiscate and conscript. The other group that welcomed the British occupation consisted of notables with political aspirations whose loyalty was traditionally given to the victor, regardless of who they might be. The British also managed to purchase the loyalty of several tribal shaykhs who promised to deliver the consent of their constituents. However, British efforts to secure the consent of religious authorities in Iraq proved to be fruitless. In this regard, British officials operated under the mistaken assumption that centuries of Ottoman oppression were enough to make the Shi’a ‘ulama ready to accept anyone who would deliver them from the ordeal imposed on them by the Sunni Ottomans. To the contrary, the Shi’a ‘ulama in Najaf, Karbala and Baghdad sided with the Sunni Ottomans against the non-Muslim invaders. Many of the ‘ulama, such as Muhammad Sa’id al-Habibi, actively participated in fighting against the British, and mobilizing resistance forces, while more senior scholars, including Mahdi al-Khalil and Mahdi al-Haydarli, used their religious credentials to call for a binding jihad against the invaders. Their effort reached its climax in June 1920, with the onset of a countrywide popular revolution that cost the British more than 400 lives and a heavy monetary burden of 40 million pounds.

Confronted by the British occupation as a common enemy, who, unlike the Ottomans and the Safavids, shared neither side’s sectarian identity, the Iraqi Shi’a and Sunnis pragmatically set their sectarian conflict aside and focused their collective effort on the struggle for independence. However, this approach was short lived. When the British favoured the Sunnis for political, military and administrative positions, the Sunnis began to view the British, like the Ottomans, who also favoured the Sunnis, as constituting a tolerable occupation.

This article revisits the manifestations of amicable Shi’a-Sunni relations in the months leading to, and during the course of, Iraq’s 1920 Revolution. Some scholars of Iraqi studies often present this era as ‘a historical aberration’, or an exception to the rule, with fewer voices citing this ethico-confessional cooperation as evidence that Shi’a-Sunni conflict in Iraq is not predestined to continue (Davis 2009: 48). Acknowledging the merits of both viewpoints, this article argues that Shi’a-Sunni relations have always been a mix of partial conflict and partial cooperation.

**SHI’A-SUNNI RELATIONS PRIOR TO 1920**

The history of Shi’a-Sunni relations since the seventh century CE is beyond the scope of this article, which examines sectarian relations from the beginning of the twentieth century. However, a brief account of these relations during the Ottoman era is necessary to provide historical context. The Ottomans became the self-appointed protectors of Sunni Islam after the forced conversion of Iranian Sunnis by the Safavids, who imposed the Shi’a doctrine and in turn became the self-appointed protectors of the world’s Shi’a from the sixteenth century forward and began to view this role to the subsequent Iranian regimes. The Shi’a of Iraq faced a precarious situation as the area they inhabited became the battlefield for these two empires. For the Ottomans, Baghdad had a great symbolic importance as the seat of the ‘Abbasid Islamic caliphate for five centuries (750–1258 CE) and, therefore, its contribution to their legitimacy was second only to the two holy cities in the Hejaz, Mecca and Medina. As for the Safavids, Iraq was the burial place of six Shi’a Imams and many other prominent members of the Prophet’s family, as well the place of the twelfth Imam’s Occultation. For the Safavids, access to these shrines was a non-negotiable claim, politically and spiritually.

The Ottomans and the Safavids engaged each other in ‘a seesaw struggle for control of the land of Iraq’ between 1508 and 1638, when the Safavids finally acknowledged Ottoman control of Iraq in return of certain privileges in the Shi’a holy cities. Each time Iraq was invaded, the victorious power committed massacres against the inhabitants of the opposite sect and, occasionally, sectarian atrocities were also committed in response to the mistreatment of co-religionists inside the other empire. Selim 1 (1512–20) retaliated against Safavid persecution of Iranian Sunnis by instigating an inquisition of his own. He managed to extract a fatwa from the Sunni ‘ulama that classified the Shi’a as unbelievers and used the fatwa to kill approximately 40,000 of them (al-Wardi 1969–79, vol. 1: 45–46). Selim was retaliating against a similar atrocity carried out after the Safavid conquest of Iraq in 1508. The Safavids massacred numerous Sunnis and desecrated the tomb of the founder of the Hanafi school of Islamic jurisprudence, Imam Abu Hanifa, in Baghdad. These types of massacres continued throughout the Ottoman era. The final Ottoman conquest of Iraq was sectarian par excellence.
of this group was the prominent poet Jemil Siddqi al-Zahawi, who praised the revolution and eulogized the Iraqis who died in battle, but was one of the participants at the reception of Sir Percy Cox in Baghdad in October 1920. He recited a strong-worded poem condemning the participants in the revolution while praising Cox.

The third group included nationalist Iraqis who detested the British occupation and worked diligently towards the full independence for Iraq. Most of them joined the Hara al-Istiqali/The Guardians of Independence, a secret group with nationalist aspirations and a cross-ethnic and cross-confessional membership. Some of its members were accused, perhaps for good reasons, of being anti-British mainly because they lost their former privileges and status under the Ottomans, but once they were incorporated into the new Iraqi government, they reversed their anti-British position. Be that as it may, it was this latter group of notables and intellectuals who advocated, and facilitated, rapprochement among their respective communities.

The Shi'a-Sunny cooperation, however, could not have materialized without the presence of certain social prerequisites. Historically, Shi'a and Sunni members of the Iraqi elite fought over power, privileges and political control, while their constituents intermarried, entered in business partnerships and engaged each other in various social activities. Similarly, Shi'a landlords maintained good relations and strong trust with Sunni city merchants and Sunni Bedouin camel owners who undertook the transport of Shi'a farm produce from rural regions to the cities.

During the events that led up to the 1920 Revolution, Sunni and Shi'a leaders made extraordinary concessions towards each other. Sunni notables participated in Shi'a religious services and festivals and vice versa. Sunni poets composed poems describing Imam Ali, son-in-law of Prophet Mohammad, as the designated successor of the Prophet (peace be upon him), ignoring the fact that this doctrine has been the main point of contention between the two groups for over thirteen centuries, while Shi'a notables went out of their way to praise the ico's of Sunni Islam, something they do not normally think of, much less practice. Similarly, some Sunni Shaykhs who joined the revolution in their districts, such as Shaykh Dhari of Zobi', presented their Sunni constituents with fatwas (binding religious edicts) from Shi'a 'alims to secure wider participation in the revolution. This important fact has not received attention from scholars to date and merits a separate study. Considering how incongruent it was with the dynamics of authority in Muslim communities, the Sunni shaykhs' actions speak volumes as to how far the interested parties from the two sects went to reconcile their differences.

In the summer of 1919, Sunnis attended the religious gatherings held after the death of the Shi'a Mufti, Sayyid Kadhimi al-Yazidi (Wilson 1931: 253). Shi'a and Sunnis also attended prayers in the same mosque and participated in one another's various rituals – Sunnis participated in the t'arif, gatherings commemorating the martyrdom of the Prophet's grandson, Imam Hussayn (d.681 CE), and the Shi'a attended the Sunni chanting rituals at the Prophet's birthday (masahid; sing. masahid). Despite some partisan objections on both sides, 'Muslim unity' was deemed paramount. Mulla Uthman, a well-known Sunni orator, recited the mawlid, while Shaykh Muhammad Mahdi al-Hasani (later Dr al-Hasani) recited the t'arif (Nasiri 1984: 358). These manifestations of Shi'a-Sunnī solidarity continued throughout the year and well into 1920. In May 1920, they began to acquire clear political significance, especially with the arrival of Ramadan, the month of Muslim fasting and traditional
The same invitation was sent from the leaders of each quarter, after changing the name of the quarter on the invitation form.

night-time social and religious gatherings and ceremonies (Wilson 1931: 254). The combining of *mawlid* and *taziya* became a normal course of action and was transformed from a socio-religious to a political gathering. The British colonial administration was alarmed by this orchestrated effort to unite Iraqis from the two sects, who had lived side-by-side in Baghdad for centuries but often avoided each other's rituals. During Ramadan in May 1920, Sunnis and Shi'a solicited each other's attendance by formal invitation (Wilson 1931: 255). One such invitation was phrased as follows:

The residents of Maydan Quarter invite your esteemed person to attend the gathering, which they hold on Friday at the Maydan Mosque for the blessings of reciting the solemn *mawlid* followed by the commemoration of the martyrdom of our master, Husayn, peace be upon him.  

(al-Basir 1990: 82)

On one occasion, an employee of the Administration of Religious Endowments (al-Awqaf), named 'Izz al-‘Abd al-Qadir, recited an emotional poem calling for Muslim unity and denouncing the British spies in the assembled crowd. The British administration could not accept the involvement of its own employees in these defiant acts or, in the words of then acting high commissioner Arnold T. Wilson, ‘being indulged in a speech which was judged dangerous to public order’ (Wilson 1931: 254). The employee was arrested the next day to become example for others, but his arrest became a cause for more defiant acts and provoked a large demonstration that was held to protest the arrest and call for his freedom. A delegation of Shi’a and Sunni notables, known as the *mandubin*, was appointed to negotiate his release. However, they soon developed a different agenda, namely, they became the negotiators of Iraqi self-determination. In their 2 June 1920 meeting with the acting high commissioner, a few days after the arrest of the Awqaf employee, they presented a list of three major demands, which included no mention of his plight, their delegation’s raison d’être (al-Wardi 1969-1979, vol. 5, part 1: 184–85).

In its effort to contain the protests following the arrest of the Awqaf employee, the British administration ordered a few armored vehicles to move towards the centre of the gathering, the Haydar Khana mosque. Once they arrived, the vehicles became the target of stone throwers and in the chaos one of them ran over a carpenter, who apparently was using his hammer as a weapon to attack the car. He died in the hospital shortly thereafter. His funeral service on the following day caused yet another round of agitation, with the participation of more than 3000 protesters (al-Wardi 1969-1979, vol. 5, part 1: 175–80).

To avoid more mutual hostilities in a religiously charged environment, the British decided to allow the gatherings to continue throughout Ramadan. This policy appears to be made by the acting high commissioner, Arnold T. Wilson, who wrote:

The leaders were officially warned that no breach of the peace would be permitted, but after discussion with Lt.-Col. Prescott, the Commissioner of Police, and Lt.-Col. Balfour, the Governor of Baghdad, I decided against resorting at that moment to measures of repression. I have come to the conclusion in light of after events that this was a grave error of judgment on my part. I underestimated the influence of the Nationalists.  

(Wilson 1931: 254)

This decision facilitated some unprecedented levels of Muslim unity that were manifested in numerous gatherings in Baghdad and other cities in the Middle Euphrates. Needless to say, the British were increasingly alarmed by what seemed to be a prelude to an increasingly dangerous threat. Gertrude Bell (1927), the brains behind the British administration at the time, put it most clearly in a letter to her father, dated 1 June 1920:

We are in the thick of violent agitation, and we feel anxious. Not anxious as to our safety – don’t think that for a moment – but anxious as to whether we shall get through Ramadan without a disturbance [...] They have adopted a line difficult in itself to combat, the union between Shi’a and Sunni, the unity of Islam. And they are running it for all it’s worth. There are 2 or 3 meetings every week in the mosques to celebrate this unprecedented event. Sometimes in Shi’a mosques [...] and sometimes in Sunni, and all attended by both sects. It is in reality political not religious and I don’t know that anyone believes the boasted union to be permanent. There’s a lot of semi-religious, semi-political preaching and reciting of poems, and the underlying thought is out with the invidel.

Ms Bell was also listening to the pro-British Iraqis who were equally alarmed that their positions were becoming increasingly precarious. She reported a conversation with Sulayman Payl, a Sunni notable from Basra, in which he revealed his struggle to be true in his loyalty to the British administration and the necessity of adhering to popular sentiment. He told her:

You cannot let things go on as at present. The agitation is taking dangerous proportions [...] Though I dislike the mawlid intensely I find myself obliged to go to them, I dare not stay away – such pressure is brought to bear on me.

Payl then goes on to state the real fear confronting him and his like-minded notables: ‘I may say in passing that the boasting of a reconciliation between Sunnis and Shi’a is most distasteful to me and that I should regard Shi’a domination as an unthinkable disaster’ (Ariyyah 1973: 284).

The *mawlid* and *taziya* were finally banned according to a declaration issued by General Sanders, the commander of British forces in Baghdad, published in the al-Iraq newspaper on 13 August 1920. Such events were to be held only after obtaining a permit from the acting high commissioner and violators were threatened with a special tribunal and ‘the most severe punishment’ (al-Basir 1990: 88).

There was also a significant involvement of other minorities in the reconciliation activities. Muslims from both sects participated in Christian celebrations and Christians offered greetings during the Muslim religious celebrations on 18 June 1920. A high-profile Jewish delegation also visited their Muslim counterparts in an ‘unprecedented scenario’ of multi-confessional solidarity (Nazmi
The Murtajj region included today's Dhahra Province. In spite of its Shīʿa majoriteness, the Sunnite secrets had enjoyed an overlooked position since 1346, when the Ottomans occupied Basra. For the history of the region and its tribal and socio-religious makeup, see al-Saffi (1979).

In a political exchange between Fāṭimī Khālid al-Fāʾīrī and Mīhrī Al-Bashir, both of whom were participants in the revolution who wrote their own accounts, Al-Bashir noted:

I stayed in Kadhāla a long time and went back and forth to Twīth and the Wind River, where the fighting tribes took position, but I did not witness any war activities on their part, except for the chanting that kept them busy day and night.

Shi'a-Sunni Relations in 1920

Iraq during the 1920 Revolution found itself in a different situation than any other period in its modern history. The population, except for a small minority of the affluent, was united by its struggles against an authoritarian British occupation that had replaced four centuries of equally exploitative Ottoman rule. The revolution provided Sunni nationalists with an opportunity to capture power by seizing refuge in the territories where the British administration lacked control, namely in the Middle Euphrates, Diyala and parts of the Murtajj. They resided in the 'liberated' areas as guests and occasionally participated in public gatherings and leadership meetings where their opinions were taken into consideration, but apparently none of them took part in the fighting.

On the other hand, the revolution disturbed the plans of the politically aspirant pro-British Sunnis, who spent years arranging for lucrative positions in the administration or to tie themselves to the future plans the British had for Iraq. Other Sunnis sided with the British as a matter of pure financial interests and provided services for regular payments, such as the Shaykhs of the Dulaym region, who stood firm in their support of the British to assure the continuation of such payments. These notables were also disturbed by the revolution and took active steps to prevent its spread to the areas under their influence. According to General Haldane, the commander of British forces, the spread of the revolution to the Dulaym region was prevented because

...Jan arrangement was come to with the Dulaym tribe, whereby their head, Shaykh All Sulaïmān, in return for a subsidy, undertook to garrison Hill until such time as it could be reoccupied. Both he and Patriarch Ibn Hadhadhal, Shaykh of Anizā, as well as his son Mahārūt, stood loyal to the Government throughout the insurrection, and later received rewards for their good services at so critical a time.

(Haldane 1922: 105)

And yet another group of Sunnis stood against the revolution as a matter of sectarian dislike towards the Shīʿa. Sulayman Fāʾīrī, Abdurrahman Al-Naqīb and Tālib Al-Naqīb were but a few examples. Contrary to the proponents of sectarian rapprochement among the Sunni nationalists, like Ali Al-Bashir and the other members of the Harās al-Iṣlāḥ who cooperated with the Shīʿa and assumed an active role in resisting the British occupation in Baghdad and the Middle Euphrates region, these groups of 'non-cooperative' Sunnis publicly criticized the revolution and described the participants in it as short-sighted rebels and agents of foreign powers who allowed themselves to be used against the interests of the Iraqis. One such example was Mūzaffhir al-Fāḥchāt, who stated in a 1920 speech welcoming Sir Percy Cox:

The present movement is not purely an Arab movement, but it is mixed with an alien element, who have been, to my deepest regret, successful in using Arab fame, wealth and blood for their own benefit, in the hope of weakening the position of Great Britain elsewhere. [...] The influential families of Baghdad have no sympathy with a movement which has ruined their country.


Following al-Fāḥchāt's example, Tālib al-Naqīb took every opportunity to criticize the revolution, its leaders and participants. While the revolution was gathering ground, al-Shārq newspaper published a letter addressed to Tālib al-Naqīb from someone whose name was not disclosed asking al-Naqīb to reveal his plan for Iraq. Two days later, on 21 September 1920, al-Naqīb replied in the same paper explaining his 'plan of action', which included some generic 'patriotic' statement but no actionable plan. Al-Naqīb did not pass up the opportunity to attack the revolution and the tribes. Indeed, his plan was vaguely described in the first five lines of his so-called plan of action, whereas the scathing attack on the revolution took 24 lines. He wrote of the revolution:

On one hand, they call for complete independence, and then at the same time they loot and cause children to be orphans. Rightful claims are made, yet the laws are broken. They unjustly cause women to be widows and kill the prisoners of war [...] How can they call for rightful demands and, at the same time, misbehave and bring the biggest harm to the people and the country?


al-Naqīb's accusation about killing prisoners of war at the hands of the Iraqis who participated in the revolution calls for a careful examination. Contrary to his allegations, the British acknowledged the good treatment given to their prisoners of war. Gertrude Bell, in a letter on 2 August 1920, wrote:

The Manchester episode, of which I told you last week, created a very unfortunate impression, as you may imagine. Of the 400 men who went out 199 are missing. They are most of them, in all probability, safely in the hands of the tribes who are not at all vindictive.

General Haldane's account of the prisoners' treatment is chaotic. He speaks of unspecified mistreatment, reported by Hamid Khan, the assistant political officer in Najaf, who apparently was trying to look loyal by claiming that 'he was sending these unfortunate men such clothes and comforts as he could procure, and that each prisoner would be given a small sum of money'. But Haldane admits that a Muslim doctor was summoned from Baghdad to see wounded
prisoners, and then, Haldane goes on to say, 'that in the end their treatment had been good was evident from their healthy and well-nourished appearance when released.' In general, Haldane’s statements on the mistreatment were either speculations or reports by informants, but his personal observations revealed good treatment, as the above passage shows (Haldane 1922: 190-91).

On 1 October 1920, while the revolution was still in full strength throughout the Middle East, Sir Percy Cox arrived in Basra with a mandate from the British foreign office to create an Iraqi national government. He was received by many Iraqi notables and a party was organized the next day to honour him and bid farewell to the outgoing acting commissioner, Arnold T. Wilson. Several political hopefuls gave speeches praising the “noble efforts” of Great Britain as they accused the revolution’s leaders of shortsightedness. Of these, Muzahim al-Pachachi’s speech is worthy of quoting:

I very much regret that the follies of some individual Arabs have served to disappoint the British nation in its honourable undertaking [i.e. the occupation of Iraq]. These acts committed partly owing to unattainable dreams and partly owing to selfish material interests. The present movement is not purely an Arab movement, but it is mixed with an alien element, who have been, to my deepest regret, successful in using Arab fame, wealth and blood for their own benefit, in the hope of weakening the position of Great Britain elsewhere. Do not believe in appearances, which are mostly deceptive, especially in the east. Do not consider that the present revolt of some nomad tribes is really a national revolt seeking for independence. Such a movement cannot be taken as representing the feeling of the whole community. The influential families of Baghdad have no sympathy with a movement which has ruined their country.

Such are the feelings of the people whose views carry weight. They are anxious to convey what they think and feel to those in England, who are advocating the withdrawal of Britain from this country. They cannot realize that withdrawal means no less than the breaking up of law, and the ruin of a people, followed by anarchy throughout the country, which might involve an Asian war, in which Britain could not stand aside.


It is noteworthy that Muzahim al-Pachachi, like many other Sunni notables, did not forego the opportunity to present the hackneyed accusation that the Shi’is are not “pure Arabs”, a charge that persists until the present time, thereby questioning the Shi’is’ loyalty to Iraq. For the display of such pro-British loyalty, Muzahim al-Pachachi, who, as Arnold T. Wilson notes, expeditiously described himself as “an extreme Nationalist”, became a prominent figure in subsequent Iraqi politics. He later agreed to sign, on behalf of Iraq’s government, the agreement that virtually gave away Iraq’s oil for 90 years to a foreign company whose main owners were British. The ministers of education and justice, Muhammad Rida al-Shabibi and Rashid ‘Ali al-Gayani, resigned over this decision which, in the words of al-Shabibi, ‘squandered Iraq’s rights’. Having signed the contract on 14 March 1925, al-Pachachi sealed this deal, by adding the Ministry of Justice to his portfolio (al-Hassani 1953, vol. 1: 204-12).

The Return of Competing Interests

When the 1920 Revolution came to a conclusion and, consequently, the framework of a national government was contemplated, the bases of alliances shifted from mainly economic and ideological to sectarian. The Shi’a allies of yesteryear were cast aside, by the emerging Sunni political elite, merely because they fell on the other side of the dividing sectarian line. This political exclusion was institutionalized by the often expressed anti-Shi’a sentiment of the British and the shadows of the revolution that continued to project its legacy, both positive and negative on its upbeat actors, the revolutionaries, as well as its cynical detractors – the former retained their wounds and claims to equal citizenship while the latter collected the spoils.

The formation of Abd al-Rahman al-Naqib’s provisional government reversed the amicable relations between the Sunnis and Shi’a. Sunnis, even the revolutionary allies of the Shi’a, stood silent or even participated in the new political arrangement that largely marginalized the Shi’a or, as Eric Davis notes, “the Monarchy, its supporters among the ex-Shari’ah officers, who were overwhelmingly Sunni Arabs drawn from Baghdad and northern Iraq, and the British conspired to exclude the Shi’a from power” (Davis 2005: 49). The British role in the “conspiracy” is substantiated by what Gertrude Bell bluntly articulated as Great Britain’s intentions regarding the sectarian problem in Iraq, while describing the rationale of its Mosul policy in the aftermath of the revolution:

Sunnis Mosul must be retained as a part of the Mesopotamian state in order to adjust the balance. But to my mind it’s one of the main arguments for giving Mesopotamia responsible government. We as outsiders can’t differentiate between Sunni and Shi’a, but leave it to them and they’ll get over the difficulty by some kind of hanky-panky, just as the Turks did, and for the present it’s the only way of getting over it. I don’t for a moment doubt that the final authority must be in the hands of the Sunnis. In spite of their numerical inferiority; otherwise you will have a Muslim-held, theocratic state, which is the very devil.

(Bell 1927, Letter on 3 October 1920)

While the British opinion of the Shi’a was generally the outcome of mistrust and resentment, the views of Iraq’s first monarch, King Faisal I, were contemptuous and condescending, notwithstanding the fact that the Shi’a were the ones who facilitated his ascendance to the throne of Iraq after he lost the throne of Syria. In a memorandum he wrote about the conditions of Iraq, dated in March 1922 and circulated to a select group of his confidants in the government, he revealed his thoughts as follows:

Iraq is a kingdom governed by a Sunni Arab government established on the rules of the Ottoman rule. This government rules over a Kurdish part, most of which consists of a majority of ignorant people [...] and an ignorant Shi’a majority that belongs racially to the same [ethnicity] of the government. But the oppression they had under the Turkish rule did not enable them to participate in the governance or give them the training to do so.

(al-Hassani 1953, vol. 3: 288)

15 Davis goes on to note that in the years of the British mandate “(1920-22), Shī’ī ministerial appointments constituted only 7.7 per cent of the total despite the fact that the Shī’īs comprised between 50 and 60 per cent of the population. A Shī’ī did not become prime minister until 1947” (Davis 2005: 49).

16 According to ‘Abd al-Razzaq al-Hassani, the essay was shared with his inner circle, like Ja‘far al-Akabi, ‘Yusef al-Hassani, Naqi al-Sawwadi, and Naj al-Sawwadi, all of whom were Sunni Shari’ah officers who held high-ranking positions in the government. In the essay, Faisal states that he spoke frankly because only a few were going to read his remarks (al-Hassani 1953, vol. 3: 288).
Given Ottoman policy, it was expedient for King Faysal to blame the exclusion of the Shi'a from his government on Ottoman oppression and not on his government's lack of fairness.

Also contributing to Faysal's failure to include the Shi'a, perhaps unwittingly, were the Shi'a Mujahids, whose lack of political prudence led them to fail to appreciate the new political reality associated with the creation of the Iraqi nation state. The Mujahids were mostly Iranian citizens whose residence in the newly formed Iraqi state was subject to occupation whenever the government deemed necessary. Failing to adjust to this change, they continued to act according to the rules of the status quo. The first test of their status accompanied the call for a national election for the Constituent Assembly, which was intended to ratify the Anglo-Iraqi Treaty in 1922. The protagonists in the treaty drama were 'Abd al-Muhsin al-Sa'dun, who represented the Iraqi government, backed by the British of course, and, on the other side, the Iraqi nationalists and the Mujahids, led by Shaykh Mahdi al-Khalisi. In October 1922, al-Sa'dun, in his capacity as minister of interior, issued instructions to the provinces to prepare for the elections. In response, the Mujahids issued a set of binding edicts stating that the elections were a violation of religion on the part of the voters and the office seeker alike. Responding to a written question from his constituents, al-Khalisi wrote:

We have decreed that the election is unlawful for the entire Iraqi nation. Whoever enters, participates or helps is among the ones who are antagonizing Allah and His Messenger. Allah, the Exalted, has said in His glorious Book, 'Have not they known that whoever antagonizes Allah and His Messenger will enter the fire of Hell for eternity, which is the great disgrace? May Allah protect all people from such punishment.'

(al-Wardi 1969-1979, vol. 6, part 1: 202)

Similar edicts were issued by other prominent Mujahids, particularly Abu al-Hasan al-Isfahani and Muhammad Husayn al-Na'ini. Initially, the edicts were successful, along with other edicts and other calls to resist the elections and withdraw allegiance to Faysal, who violated the conditions of the contract with the Iraqi people, namely, to secure and protect Iraq's independence. The Mujahids found allies in some of the tribal Shaykhs and Sheyks of the Middle Euphrates, particularly those who led the 1920 Revolution such as Muhann Abu Tabikh, 'Abd al-Mahdi Al Sikar and Nur al-Yasin. In a series of meetings that began on 2 August 1922, they began demanding that the Anglo-Iraqi Treaty be rejected because it would endanger Iraq's hopes for any form of meaningful independence.

At that point, the treaty was submitted to the cabinet and approved by the Naqib government. Therefore, the opponents of the treaty also called, in a letter to King Faysal, for the dissolving of the government which they described as 'a tool in the hands of the British' (Abu Tabikh 2001: 232). While very anxious to have the treaty ratified at any cost, the British were not interested in repeating the catastrophic events of 1920 in the Middle Euphrates by risking another showdown with the religious and tribal establishment. The words of Gertrude Bell illustrate how British officials were by the effort to block the treaty:

This afternoon the treaty will be laid before the Ministers. I am not sure they want to do something silly — put in a rider about their non-acceptance of the mandate, which will let the king down and make the whole thing exceedingly difficult. Sir Percy has done his best to persuade the Naqib not to wander off into that line of country. Three of the newspapers have been publishing petitions against the mandate [...] one of the papers has been suspended by the Ministry of the Interior — I expect they are all in the pay of that wicked old hobgoblin, Shaykh Mahdi al-Khalisi, one of the turbaned lot I want to seal into a bottle.

(Burgoyne 1958, vol. 2: 275)

King Faysal, acting on behalf of Sir Percy Cox, was involved in mediation efforts to persuade the Shaykhs of the Middle Euphrates to support the treaty. In return for their support, he promised them a variety of benefits ranging from political appointments to financial grants and tax relief. It was also made clear that failure to comply would be met with harsh measures. Nevertheless, the Mujahids' influence over their allies was insuperable. Abu Tabikh explained to the king:

I as an Imani, cannot act contrary to the scholars of religion (the Mujahids) for whom I am a follower, no matter what punishment Your Majesty will impose upon me. I do express my regret to that I have to disagree with you in this regard.

(Abu Tabikh 2001: 247)

Of no less significance than their cohesion, the other main factor for the initial triumph of the anti-treaty coalition was the reluctance of Faysal and his prime minister, al-Naqib, to enter into a confrontation with the Mujahids. Sensing the prime minister's weakness, the British promoted a strong replacement, 'Abd al-Muhsin al-Sa'dun, who previously resigned in protest of the failure to use force in dealing with those who opposed the elections. He initially added the Ministry of Justice to his position as prime minister, but later exchanged it with Najib al-Sawayd for the latter's Ministry of Interior. This way al-Sa'dun was able to control the election process, and use coercion where necessary. But British cabinet's resignation in November 1922, and its replacement with a conservative one that lacked the same enthusiasm for the passage of the Anglo-Iraqi Treaty, caused al-Sa'dun to postpone the election process until more support for the treaty could be established in London. Meanwhile, he adopted a more tolerant policy (al-Hasani 1953, vol. 1: 102-03; al-Wardi 1969-1979, vol. 6, part 1: 210-11).

For their part, the British attempted to provide more incentives to the opponents of the treaty by reducing the term of the treaty from twenty years to four years, and also reduce its burden on the British taxpayer. This shift, however, was only a temporary tactic, because there was a plan to extend the treaty following its passage. Once again, the British found the Mual question to be a useful card to play. The Iraqi Council of Ministers approved the additional protocol. To leave the door open for the intended extension, including the protocol, after the term reduction clause, a clause that stated, 'This protocol does not preclude making a new agreement to regulate any future relations between the two honorable signatories' (al-Hasani 1953, vol. 1: 102-10).
However, the rise of a Turkish threat to the northern region of Iraq revived the old question of the Iraqis' religious obligations should the Turks invade. It seems that the Mu'mahids issued a fatwa to the effect that Iraqis should not fight the 'Muslim' Turks in support of the non-Muslim British. As Gertrude Bell noted:

this morning a fatwah forbidding the defence of the Iraq against the Turks was posted up in the Kadhaimain mosque. We had heard rumours and denials about it for about a fortnight past. A copy was brought in to me early this morning and I think the Criminal Investigation Dept had it at the same time. I haven't any doubt that it's genuine. The question is now what should the Iraq Govt do? I've just been talking to Mr. Cornwallis about it. He thinks they ought to deport the Mu'mahids who are signatory to the fatwah to Persia – they are all Persian subjects. On the whole I'm inclined to believe that they will have to take this step or go under, but it's a very serious decision.

(Bell 1927, Letter on 12 April 1923)

These developments constituted the last straw for al-Sālih and the British. After securing the approval of King Faysal, who was on a trip to southern Iraq to distance himself from the affair, the government arrested al-Khalīsī and some of his associates on 26 June 1923, accusing him of responsibility for posting the fatwā at the Kadhaimain shrine. This move was preceded by a previous decla-
ration against posting fatwas on the walls of the shrine, 'which desecrates the sanctity of the holy shrines and makes them an exhibition for misleading goals'. The declaration, issued by the Ministry of Interior, did not forego the opportunity to underscore that the perpetrators were 'eccentric foreigners' (al-Hasani 1953, vol. 1: 116-17). In another effort to determine popular sentiment, the government deported al-Khalīsī's son and other associates. When the arrest failed to cause any significant reaction, al-Khalīsī and his close aides were arrested and sent to Baṣra, ultimately to arrive in Iraq. Here the Ayatollah remained until his death of a heart attack on 5 April 1925 (al-Wardi 1969-1979, vol. 6, part 1: 251).

The other Mu'mahids, after their welcome in Iran had expired, began to contact the Iraqi government to arrange for their return. Having spent a difficult period in Iran, where they enjoyed considerably less influence than in Iraq, they realized the magnitude of the loss caused by their departure from the Shi'Ite holy cities. Against al-Khalīsī's advice, they began to negotiate the terms of their return, which included, inter alia, the issuing of new fatwas legitimat-
ing the elections, which they had previously banned, and an emphatic promise never to interfere in Iraqi politics again. al-Khalīsī, correctly, predicted that 'submitting to the British and their Faysal' would have catastrophic consequences for Iraq, declared that 'doing so is one of the greatest religious violations and something not done by anyone with dignity and intellect' (al-Wardi 1969-1979, vol. 6, part 1: 246-47). Acting against this sound advice, the Mu'mahids – Sayyid Abu al-Hasan al-Isfahānī, Mirza Husayn al-Nā'īnī, Sayyid 'Abd al-Husayn al-Tabataba'i and Sayyid Hasan al-Tabataba'i – struck a deal with Faysal, who predictably used the affair to his advantage in bargaining with the British. They issued statements promising not to interfere in Iraqi politics. To quote al-Isfahānī:

We have pledged not to meddle in the political affairs and decided to stay away from all of the Iraqi demands, holding ourselves not responsible for that. The one responsible for the people's affairs and their governance is your Majesty.

(al-Wardi 1969-1979, vol. 6, part 1: 261)

Meanwhile, elections were held in Iraq with no significant opposition, after the departure of al-Khalīsī and the other Mu'mahids. The only negative con-
sequences of this drama was that Najaf and other Shi'a centres adhered to the fatwas of their Mu'mahids and, with few exceptions, refrained from particip-
ing in domestic politics. The lack of Shi'a political participation enforced the already existing trend of excluding the Shi'a from any meaningful participation in power for the decades to come. With the Mu'mahids' bizarre conduct, their Shi'a constituents had no one to blame for their political demise but themselves.

By contrast, the minority government that was established by the British, and happily accepted by the Sunni beneficiaries, created an inherently flawed Iraqi polity that paved the way for subsequent political instability. Especially notable was exclusive control by Sunni officers of the Iraqi military, which represented the worst form of Sunni monopoly of monarchical Iraq's political institutions.

The first unit of the Iraqi army was established on 6 January 1921 and was emblazoned by the name 'Saudi Musa al-Kadhaim', after the seventh Shi'ite Imam whose tomb is situated under the golden shrine in Baghdad. This is perhaps the first paradox pertaining to this army, which was controlled by the Sunni Arab officers and served Sunni interests. To be sure, the number of Shi'is recruits increased in later decades, mainly because of the 1934 conscription law that drafted the Shi'a into the army in large numbers. But this increase in numbers did not increase the Shi'a's power, because the officer corps remained predominantly Sunni.

As stated earlier, when he became king, Faysal appointed a legion of former Ottoman officers who served with him in the short-lived Syrian monarchy that he established and ruled between 1918 and 1920, all of whom were Sunnis. These officers, known as the Sharifians, continued to dominate the ranks of the military and civilian bureaucracy throughout the monarchy. To ensure the triumph of Faysal and his officers, the British manipulated the August 1921 referendum, supported the deportation of the Shi'a Mu'mahids who opposed their policies and, worst of all, established Sunni minority rule in Iraq. These policies laid to rest any hopes for establishing a free and democratic society in the country for the next eight decades.

When Faysal was enthroned in 1921, Iraqi defense was the responsibility of Great Britain according to the Mandate granted to it by the League of Nations at San Remo in April of the previous year. The original philosophy of having an Iraqi army involved no more than ensuring the security of the central Sunni government against any possible uprising by the excluded Shi'a majority. In the words of King Faysal,

I do not ask of the army to keep the external security at this time, as this will be asked after we call for the general draft. What I ask of it now is
to be ready to defeat two revolts that may take place (God forbid) at the same time, in two places far from one another.

(al-Hasani 1953, vol. 3: 290)

It is obvious that Faysal was interested in an army that was capable of crushing the anticipated revolt of the predominantly Kurdish north and the Shia south, the only two places far from one another that might have resisted his predominantly Sunni government.

In spite of being selected by the most prominent clergy and the Shia political elite, the new king was not well connected to the populace at large. Furthermore, British meddling in every detail of his rule undermined Faysal's legitimacy. A national army loyal to the monarchy would be a way to enhance its legitimacy and ensure cohesion among the diverse elements of Iraq's population. However, this was easier to propose than to actually achieve. First, the Ottoman Shiafani officers were not a monolithic group. While some of them were monarchy loyalists (less than 200 officers joined Faysal in the 1916-18 Arab Revolt), the majority of returning officers espoused nationalist views and were offended by continued British occupation of Iraq. Additionally, many officers maintained former loyalty to Turkey. Second, the recruitment effort did not meet the government's hopes despite the propaganda and appeals for cooperation by the king and his close associates to tribal Shi'is and religious scholars.

One of the main reasons for the shortage in recruits was the low pay of soldiers compared with the pay in other professions. However, this problem was solved quickly when the British decided in 1922 to raise military pay, encouraging young men from all groups to join the army. This measure helped raise the size of the army from just over 3000 in 1921 to 12,000 by 1922. However, other problems such as the sectarian mistrust of the state remained unsolved. Tribal Shi'is in the Shia areas did not want to offer their young men to strengthen the central government at the expense of their own territorial power. The same can be said about the way the Shia clerical and social establishment felt, especially in light of the policies of Faysal and the British in giving preferential treatment to Sunni for political and military positions, thereby violating their initial agreements with them. Not only were the Shiafani officers favored in receiving government positions, but their service in the Arab Revolt was rewarded handsomely. According to the British Intelligence Report of 1 February 1922, the Iraqi Council of Ministers instructed the Ministry of Defense to count, for the purposes of pension and seniority, the period of service in the Arab Army of the Hijaz as double its actual length for the officers who enlisted before the collapse of Faysal's kingdom in Syria. Of course, Ja'far al-'Askari and Nuri al-Sa'id conveniently became among the first beneficiaries of this decision. The first, already in the position of the minister of defense, was promoted to the rank of colonel and the second became a lieutenant colonel (Jaman 1998, vol. 2: 5).

The founding of the Royal Military College, whose first graduates assumed their duties in 1927, injected new blood into the Iraqi army. The new graduates were trained under the tutelage of British officers, unlike their seniors who came from the Ottoman Military Academy, which was dependent on German military expertise. However, British policy makers placed a limit on the size of the Iraqi army, against the wishes of King Faysal and his Shiafani associates, especially Ja'far al-'Askari who occupied the position of defense minister from the beginning of Faysal's reign. To circumvent this restriction, the proponents of a larger military began advocating military conscription. This proposal, however, was wrapped in other claims, most appealing of which was the purported role of conscription in achieving national cohesion by making the army more inclusive of all components of the Iraqi society, especially the Shia's majority whose representation was distressingly low given their demographic proportion of the population.

It was naïve for Faysal and his advisors, if not disingenuous, to claim that the systemic problem of Shia underrepresentation would be overcome by the establishment of conscription. The essence of the challenge was the distribution of power within the state at large and the military was no exception. Sunni control of the top political and administrative positions created an aberrant environment with consequences adverse for national cohesion.

Similarly, the problem of representation within the army was essentially specific to the officer corps. As such, the establishment of conscription could not possibly have any effect on the officer corps, because officers were not conscripted. As stated previously, the Shi'a had no deficit in their representation within the ranks of the conscripts, their underrepresentation was only in the officer corps. Indeed, the anti-conscription movement created strange bedfellows when both the British and the Shi'a joined cause against the first bill following its introduction in the Iraqi parliament in 1926 and ultimately managed to defeat it in 1929. The British lacked the desire to strengthen the Iraqi government, and the Shi'a tribes did not want a strong central government at all. However, the bill was ultimately reintroduced and passed in 1933 when the nationalist support for the army was at the highest level following the Assyrian massacre, as it will be discussed shortly.

It would be misleading to argue that military influence in Iraqi politics began with the rise in influence of the generals following the successful defeat of the Assyrian rebellion at the end of Faysal's reign in 1933. Indeed, the Iraqi state was dominated by a military mindset from its inception. King Faysal and his Shiafani loyalists — all former Ottoman officers — divided both civil and military positions among themselves in what could be described as a British-sponsored military coup against the leading social groups in Iraq. In 1921, the first year of the monarchy, the cabinet was formed by a civilian prime minister, Abd al-Rahman al-Naqi, with Shiafani officers controlling the ministries of Defense, Justice and Interior. In the following seven years, from November 1922 to April 1929, all prime ministers were Shiafani officers, with these ministries and others continuing to be controlled by the Shiafani. This paradigm of Iraqi politics continued — a few exceptions notwithstanding — until the fall of the monarchy in 1958.

CONCLUSION

Shi'a-Sunni rapprochement in the months leading to, and during, the 1920 Revolution was not 'an aberration' in Iraqi history or in the history of sectarian relations within Islam. In the period that preceded the British invasion of Iraq, Sunnis enjoyed relatively better treatment by the Ottomans due to their shared religious confession. However, this treatment was often disturbed by Ottoman contempt towards Iraqis no matter what their ethnic background. The Shi'a took refuge in the honorary Iranian status that had been given to them after the final settlement between the Ottomans and the Safawids. The Treaty of
2 After 1921, the Iraqi state established a new nationally law that considered Ottoman subjects – mostly the Sunnis – to be automatically Iraqi citizens, while the Iraqis who carried the Persian afflication (taba'lliya) were required to apply for Iraqi citizenship. Even those who were pure Arabs and never had any ties with Iran or any other foreign state, those who failed to acquire Iraqi citizenship became second-class citizens and in due time they, and their progeny, were not granted such citizenship. Their deportation in individuals or groups was very frequent, as it happened in the beginning of addam Hussein's rule, when he ordered the deportation of Iraqi Shi'a by the hundreds of thousands, after confiscating their properties and houses. Also, tens of thousands of young men were detained and vanished later in the regime's death camps.

Iraqis held less than 4% of the important positions in the British administration. See Nidami, al-Sha'b al-Durri al-Siqayy and the Shi'a in Iraq, pp. 203-11.

Zubah, concluded in 1639, considered Iraq's Shi'a Safavid subjects, and therefore allowed them some protection against Ottoman oppression, albeit at the expense of their identity and legitimate claim to their native land. As a result of this imperfect protection, they became 'the other' in the Ottoman controlled Iraq.

The British occupation of Iraq placed the country under an alien administration that was not religiously affiliated with either the Shi'a or Sunnis and, as time passed, was oppressive to both sides. The vast majority of Iraqis from both sects were crushed under the burden of a colonial occupation whose oppressive taxation policies promoted poverty and which treated them with utter contempt, while appointing significant numbers of foreigners to important administrative positions. All of Iraq's ethno-confessional backgrounds set their sectarian differences aside and fought for a common cause during the June to October 1920 Revolution, while their compatriots, who enjoyed British patronage or hoped for a better future under Britain's occupation of Iraq, dissociated themselves from this rapprochement, questioned the motives and wisdom of its proponents and criticized their acts.

When the predominantly Shi'a revolution was crushed and a new Sunni-dominated government was established under British tutelage, the 'sleeping giant' of sectarian rivalry was awakened. The short-lived pragmatic rapprochement came to an end after serving its purpose or, perhaps, after the end of its raison d'être: the British were no longer a common enemy.

That said, the cooperation between Shi'a and Sunnis did not cease to exist after the 1920 Revolution, either for the sake of personal or political interests among the elite, or whenever a common cause came into being. This cooperation, however, has not been enough to prevent sectarian conflict in Iraq nor prevent the many eruptions of sectarian conflict that plagued the country since the founding of the state.

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The territorial aspect of sectarianism in Iraq

ABSTRACT
This article examines the territorial aspect of sectarian relations in Iraq. The main argument is that such a territorial component is largely missing in Iraq and that historically, there have been very few attempts to connect sectarian identity in Iraq to specific, more restricted territories of the country. The article reviews the limited attempts in such a direction, both historically and in the post-2003 atmosphere. Today, federal options exist for governorsates to merge into sectarian regions if they prefer to do so. So far, however, neither Sunnis nor Shi‘ites have demonstrated any great interest in the creation of such sectarian regions, which can be explained with the historical durability of the Iraq concept as a protostate in late Ottoman times and the concomitant need to revise the near-omnipresent chilcot of Iraq as a completely "artificial" product lumped together solely thanks to the actions of industrious British imperialists.

In the Balkans in the 1990s, a striking factor in the conversion of ethno-religious complexity to full-blown civil war was the idea of sectarian homelands. In a setting where the Serbo-Croatian language was once a unifying factor among different religious groups, visions of separate territories for Croats, Serbs and Bosniaks would eventually add fuel to flames of conflict that ended with the partition of Yugoslavia.

By way of contrast, in the Middle East, the tendency to equate ethno-religious sects with particular territories is generally weaker. The examples
that do exist are marginal in the overall picture and often limited to certain periods of history: Jews in Israel, Maronites in ‘Lesser Lebanon’, Assyrians in the Nineveh plains in northern Iraq and, according to at least some scholars, the Allawites and the Druze of Syria (Khuri 1990). But the overall picture is that Sunnis, mainline Shi’ites and most Christian communities have generally refrained from attempts at converting their areas of residence to ethno-sectarian enclaves aspiring to separate statehood. Symptomatically, terms like ‘Sunniism’ and ‘Shi’ism’ are western concoctions rather than something which refers to indigenous attempts at creating separate homelands for the Sunnis and Shi’ites of the Middle East.

This article deals with the territorial aspect of sectarianism in Iraq, with an emphasis on the post-2003 situation. Attempts to territorialize sect are discussed with reference to both Sunni and Shi’ite contexts. In conclusion, the absence of a strong territorial component in Iraqi sectarianism is highlighted, with challenges to the existing territorial framework of the Iraqi state emanating instead from two different sources ethnolinguistic (in the case of the Kurds) and regional ones (which in some areas have created intra-Sunni and intra-Shi’ite disagreements over federalism). Overall, although, it seems the idea of a unified Iraqi homeland remains strong among Sunnis and Shi’ites alike.

SECT AND TERRITORY BEFORE 2003

In historical perspective, territory and sect were never closely linked in Iraq. Rather, the outstanding feature as far as the historical record goes is the remarkable contrast between a near-universal assumption about ethno-territorial linkages in secondary-source western literature about Iraq and the stubborn refusal of these linkages to materialize in the empirical world. Many of the fallacious western assumptions about territory and sect in Iraq are rooted in the equally fallacious and now widely refuted ‘artificiality thesis’ about Iraq’s origins as a modern state: the combination of Basra, Baghdad and Mosul into a single kingdom in 1921 was supposedly an ‘accidental’ play by industrious British imperialists. The most imaginative writers within the ‘artificiality thesis’ tradition go on to designate ethno-sectarian colours to each Ottoman vilayet, with Basra supposedly being the ‘most Shi’ite’ one and Baghdad, ‘more Sunni’ and Mosul somehow ‘Kurdish’. In fact, studies of the late Ottoman era show clearly that the concept of ‘Iraq’ was a widely used category of identity in the nineteenth area, and often corresponded to administrative entities largely coterminous with the modern state of Iraq, such as the larger Baghdad vilayet of the mid-nineteenth century. And as far as the idea of sectarian distinctiveness for each territorial entity is concerned, even a brief look at the administrative map of late Ottoman Iraq reveals that even when the three subdivisions existed between 1884 and 1914, Baghdad stretched all the way southwards to today’s Muthanna governorate, thereby making it easily the ‘most Shi’ite’ governorate with both Najaf and Karbala and their holy sites within its borders (Visser 1999).

Perhaps the best window on the absence of strong links between sect and territory in Iraq is the historical record of what happened when after 500 years of Ottoman rule a completely new political order was instituted in Iraq by the British in the 1920s. During this tumultuous period numerous changes of borders in the region took place, and any dreams of establishing sectarian homelands would have enjoyed excellent prospects at the time. In fact, however, no such ethno-separation materialized in the 1920s. Only one enduring separatist enterprise materialized south of the Kurdish areas during the British mandate: it was based in Basra. However this project had no connection with Shi’ism. Rather it was a scheme founded by mercurial entrepreneurs of mainly Sunni, Shi’ite and Christian backgrounds, with some Persian Shi’ite support. On the other hand, the large majority of the population of Basra – both Sunni and Shi’ite Arabs – rejected the scheme, and favoured instead close links with Baghdad. Those few projects that can be described as truly sectarian during the British mandate were even more marginal: an attempt by some merchants and tribal leaders to obtain the support of the Shi’ite clergy for a separate Shi’ite state in 1927 (the support of the clergy failed to materialize and the scheme went nowhere), and a micro-separatist project in the name of Hanbali Islam headed by Shakhbuz Ibrahim of Zubayr, a Najdi enclave outside Basra, in 1921, which similarly proved abortive (Visser 2005a). Later in the century not even the violent upheaval of 1958 prompted any resurgence of separatism of a sectarian kind; later, during the Ba’ath, Shi’ite separatism never moved beyond the level of poorly sourced and speculative reports in British intelligence sources (Bayati 1997).

This is not to suggest that sectarian identity has absolutely no relationship to sect in the case of Iraq. The example of the Assyrians in the north has already been referred to: what should always be kept in mind is that the Assyrians in Iraq is, however, firstly the very recent arrival of the small branch of the community originally called the Nestorians and the subsequent tension between it and the more well-established Chaldeans who were less ready to call themselves Assyrians and start a search for a separate homeland (Joseph 1983), and, secondly, the overall dominance of the exiled community of Assyrians and their pressure groups in the United States. Another interesting aspect – and one which is more relevant locally – relates to the Shakhbuz Shi’ite sub-sector of the Basra governorate. The interesting feature of the early history of this community in the nineteenth century in Basra is that every single known prominent member shared a particular regional background: they were migrants from al-Ahsa in present-day Saudi Arabia (Shakhs 2004). The pattern is striking, and what has been argued in the case of the Maronites of Lebanon (and indeed the Assyrians of Iraq) one senses a parallel whereby sectarian identity at one point may have become a vehicle for the articulation of dying sentiments related to common ancestry and ethnic distinctiveness. However, despite a degree of territorial concentration at least in some areas of southern Iraq near Basra in the case of the Hasawiah migrants, this regional identity has not transformed itself to a full-blown modern-day ethno-nationalism or a call for territorial autonomy (for example on the pattern of the Najdi/Hanbali precedent in Zubayr). Also, as is often the rule in Iraq, the sectarian-regional correlation is far from perfect: again other migrants from al-Ahsa and Bahrain have gone on to become leading Iraqi scholars within the orthodox branch of alShi’ism.

SHI’ITE ATTEMPTS AT CHALLENGING THE UNITARY STATE STRUCTURE OF IRAQ SINCE 2003

In discussing attempts at challenging the territorial framework of Iraq in the post-2003 period, it may be useful to concentrate on schemes that have aimed at exploiting the numerous changes of borders in the region took place, and any dreams of establishing sectarian homelands would have enjoyed excellent prospects at the time. In fact, however, no such ethno-separation materialized in the 1920s. Only one enduring
October 2006. In this respect, two projects stand out on the Shi‘ite side in the post-2003 period.

The first one, related to Basra and the far south, is not really a Shi‘ite one, since its ideology has been mostly non-sectarian (and at times even anti-sectarian), and since its alternative territorial framework creates intra-sectarian divisions among the Shi‘ites instead of unifying the community in a single sectarian entity. Nevertheless this is a project that has been driven forward by people who are themselves mainly Shi‘ites, and several Shi‘ite Islamist parties at times offered their support.

Since late 2003, various politicians of Basra have promoted the idea of the oil-rich Basra governorate becoming a standalone federal entity in its own right, the ‘Region of Basra’, separate from the rest of the Shi‘ite territories to the north (Visser 2005b: 173). In 2004 this project was supported also by the local branch of the Supreme Council for the Islamic Revolution in Iraq (SCIRI); since 2005 its main protagonist was the Fadila party, an offshoot from the Sadrist movement. The basic idea of the project was to evoke Basra’s status as the main oil-producing governorate of Iraq and to contrast this with the extremely dilapidated conditions of its infrastructure, even by Iraqi standards. For a short while this project existed with a slightly more expansive scheme called the ‘Region of the South’, which also involved the neighbouring governorates of Dhū‘ al-Kharaz and Maysan; this too was based on the oil-under-development theme.

In December 2008 and January 2009, voters in Basra had a chance to express their opinion on the ‘Region of Basra’ scheme as its backers formally launched an initiative to create a federal region pursuant to the federalization legislation passed by the Iraqi parliament in October 2006. However, the enterprise failed miserably: not more than 30,000 Basarwis signed the petition calling for a referendum, out of an electorate of more than a million (around 140,000 or a tenth of the electorate was the required threshold to call a referendum).

Additionally, an even less developed variant of Basra federalism exists in a scheme to parcel out the oil-rich Qurna area, in the northern part of the Basra governorate, as a separate governorate eligible for status as a federal region (UR news agency 26 February 2010). It is noteworthy that this project – which has been backed by some SCIRI-affiliated politicians locally such as Wathab al-Ammad – faces legal obstacles since no procedure for changing governorate borders by way of popular referendum has been adopted by the Iraqi parliament. By way of contrast, the Basra-governorate scheme has refused to go away entirely. Later in 2009, the relatively centrist Prime Minister Nuri al-Maliki agreed to a per-barrel fee for oil exported from Basra in what was seen as a nod to regionalist sentiment there. Later, in February and again in August 2010 there was talk about Maliki supporters in Basra preparing for another go at the Basra governorate federal initiative, this time via the ‘easy’ and more cli- nical route involving one-third of the provincial council membership (instead of the tenth of the electorate, as attempted in January 2009) to call a referendum (Aswat al-Iraq 30 March 2010, 5 September 2010).

The second scheme under the heading of Shi‘ite-led federalism is more explicitly sectarian. It emerged in July 2005 and was formally launched by the Supreme Council for the Islamic Revolution in Iraq (SCIRI) in August 2005, when Abd al-Aziz al-Hakim announced the ‘holy goal’ of creating a single federal entity that would combine all the nine governorates south of Baghdad on the basis of the ‘commonalities of its inhabitants’. Since the governorates of Basra and the far south are Shi‘ite-majority ones, it was fairly easy to understand what those ‘commonalities’ referred to.

The idea of a single Shi‘ite entity was promoted quite heavily by SCIRI in 2006 and the first part of 2007, but later on the propaganda in its favour receded. Scattered references to the single Shi‘ite region could be found throughout 2008, but by the time of the local elections in January 2009 its proponents (now renamed the Islamic Supreme Council of Iraq or ISCI) had switched to advocating greater powers for the existing governorates throughout Iraq instead of any particular federal scheme, and since September 2009, Ammar al-Hakim – ISCI’s new leader and probably the single SCIRI politician with the strongest association with the Shi‘ite region scheme – said it was up to the Iraqi people to decide the size of any future federal region. Thus, in contrast to the Basra initiative, ISCI’s project appears to have faded out by itself and so far has not been tested in a petition movement. Nevertheless, several indicators point to its slowness and lack of public support. In the first place, the supporters of the Shi‘ite federal region had obvious problems in finding a suitable name for their proposed new polity. Back in 2005 and 2006 they mostly referred to the ‘Region of the Centre and the South’ (partially reflecting the need to differentiate themselves from the Basra-based Region of the South), but in 2007, Ammar al-Hakim abruptly changed the name of the projected region to the ‘South of Baghdad Region’, perhaps first and foremost an indication of the project’s complete lack of historical precedents (Visser 2007). Also, ISCI’s electoral fortunes are thought to have been negatively influenced by their attempt to sponsor the project; in the last local elections in January 2009 the party was reduced to an average of around 10 per cent of the vote throughout the Shi‘ite governorates and in the March 2010 parliamentary elections, it lost more than a third of its seats in the Iraqi national assembly. Today, the scheme is seen as largely irrelevant in Iraq, although its brief existence continues to nurture the imagination of journalists and conspiracy theorists. Ironically, perhaps the most enduring remnant of the efforts of the authors of the Shi‘ite region is an ongoing conflict about a piece of territory called Nukhayb, which is disputed between the three governorates of Karbala and Anbar due to administrative changes to the Ba‘th regime (Buratha news agency 25 April 2008). Some say Karbala wants to annex the area to better control the approaches to the governorate from Saudi Arabia; others maintain the area possesses energy resources. No one, however, is suggesting a sectarian rationale, since the area sought for annexation by the mainly Shi‘ite Karbala is Sunni-dominated in terms of its population.

Finally, it is important to stress that the apparent reluctance among Iraqi Shi‘ite politicians to tamper with the existing state structures and the governorates in particular should not be translated as an attitude of general timidity as far as relations with the centre is concerned. Quite the contrary, the experience of recent years shows clearly that Shi‘ite politicians are prepared to press very hard for the rights of the existing governorates, as exemplified by the demands that came to the fore during the debate on the budget in the Iraqi parliament in early 2010. After the idea about a per-barrel fee for oil-producing governorates had been introduced mainly with reference to Basra, the mid-Baladat governorates soon followed up with demands for remuneration for visits by foreign tourists to the holy Shi‘ite sites in these areas – a demand that was eventually incorporated into the final budget. Another area of interesting experiments in quite radical forms of decentralization within the framework of the existing governorate concerns Islamic morals. Here, certain governorates have gone further than others in outlawing alcohol (Basra, Najaf and Wasit) and in Wasit the local authorities have even imposed full-time guards for the female members of the local assembly, ostensibly to ‘prevent’
them from un-Islamic situations when they go about doing their work as elected representatives (Al-Iltihad 14 November 2009).

**SUNNI ATTEMPTS AT CHALLENGING THE UNITARY STATE STRUCTURE OF IRAQ SINCE 2003**

In general, Sunni attempts at presenting radical alternatives to the centralized Iraqi state have received lesser attention than the Shi'ite ones (which were generally hyped in the international media, not infrequently in relation to discussions about the ‘Shi’ite crescent’ and its alleged projection of Iranian influence throughout the region). To some extent this may reflect the even greater marginality of these schemes in the community they were supposed to appeal to nonetheless they form part of the wider picture of failed attempts to challenge the concept of a unified Iraqi state.

Also, these schemes are older than is often realized. Already in August 2005, prior to the formal launch of the Shi'ite region scheme by SCIRI, an ‘Islamic Emirate of al-Qu‘im’ came into existence in the upper Euphrates region towards the Syrian border, supposedly under the leadership of al-Qaida sympathizers in the town of al-Qu‘im. Whilst its degree of actual influence on the ground is disputed, it is significant that the idea of an emirate based in al-Qu‘im and covering larger parts of western Iraq made its way into al-Qaida propaganda during 2006. By June that year, a map circulated in which the al-Qu‘im emirate extended southwards to Karbala and eastwards to Mosul, leaving outside Kurdistani as well as Dawlat Bani ‘Alqim’ in the Shi‘ite areas, the latter a reference to the supposed role of Ibn al-Alqim in handing Baghdad to the Mongols in 1258 as well as his alleged Shi‘ite loyalties.

This projection of Sunni sectarian identity on a map of Iraq was unprecedented and might perhaps be brushed off as a cyberpunk fantasy had it not re-emerged in a slightly different (and also slightly more material) variant in October 2006, when the foundation of the Islamic State of Iraq (ISI) was declared by supporters of the ‘Mesopotamian’ branch of al-Qaida (Fishman 2007). This creation, too, was limited mostly to Sunni areas of Iraq, although the aim of forcing the rest of Iraq to submit was soon indicated on other propaganda maps, and a long-term goal of re-establishing the caliphate in Baghdad was declared. In the names of the ministers appointed to the somewhat imaginary government of this new polity in 2007 one might still read a certain lip service to the idea of a unified Iraq, since several ministers had tribal names definitely associated with areas south of Baghdad (like Janabi) - or referred to tribes with well-known bi-sectarian structures (such as Aaraj, Jibouri and Bani Turkman). However in a video published for the two-year anniversary of ISI in 2008 another propaganda map strictly limited to the Sunni areas and with references to the adjacent lands as the country of the ‘Persians’ seemed to signify a complete rupture with the Iraqi concept.

Of course, the main point here is the overall marginality of ISI and its proponents, certainly in the wake of the Anbar uprisings in 2007. And while certain pundits in the United States optimistically interpreted the emergence of the ISI as a sign that Sunnis were finally embracing the concept of federalism, a more representative expression of dominant Sunni views are probably found in the stance of electorally successful Sunni-dominated parties such as al-Hadba, the local list that did well in Mosul in the provincial elections in January 2009. These politicians were conscious about Sunni demands but expressed them within an Iraqi nationalist framework, criticizing Kurdish militias for encroachments in the Nineveh governorate while at the same time calling for more troops from the (Shi‘ite-led) central government and appealing to their own interpretation of the principles of the 2005 constitution. Similarly, despite rather fervent overtures from both Ammar al-Hakim and then-Senator Joe Biden in 2007, the tribal leaders of Anbar failed to produce any statement that could be construed as being supportive of the soft partition scheme for Iraq. In fact the only mainstream Sunni party that has ever engaged with the concept of federalism in the Iraqi political process is the Islamist Iraqi Islamic Party, which tentatively offered ideas for certain limitations to the procedures for forming new federal regions during the constitutional review process in the first half of 2007 (but never went as far as actually proposing a Sunni equivalent to the Region of the Centre and the South). Like ISI, that party, too, was punished quite severely by voters in the January 2009 local elections and again in the March 2010 parliamentary ones.

Instead, as in the case of the Shi‘ites, it is non-sectarian variants of federalism that seem to garner what limited interest there is within the Sunni community. For example, in Anbar, there has been loose talk about using the possibilities for single-governorate formation as a way of exploiting what is thought to be a substantial future gas potential within the borders of the governorate. Also, in a parallel to the Qurna sub-separatism project reported within Basra as a Shi‘ite-led project, the traditional Sunni bastion of Zubayr has been referred to in discussions of other possible subdivisions within the Basra governorate, again with reference to local oil resources (al-Sabah al-Jadid 25 November 2009: 4). On the whole, though, despite the existence since April 2008 of opportunities for Iraqi governorates to seek a federal status (this is when the moratorium on region-formation adopted as part of the federalism legislation in October 2006 expired), the rush of would-be federals has been limited. More importantly, in this context, it has almost invariably been non-sectarian. In fact, it should not be excluded that the first Sunni involvement in federalism in Iraq could be on a regionalist-nationalist basis: in the disputed city of Kirkuk - claimed by the Kurds - Iraqis nationalists of various ethnic and sectarian backgrounds (Arabs, Turkmen and Kurds, Shi‘ites, Sunnis and Christians) are considering emulating the call made in oil-rich Basra for a single-governorate federal status.

**REASONS FOR THE MARGINAL NATURE OF THE CHALLENGES TO THE IRAQ CONCEPT**

One can speculate as to the reasons for the remarkable persistence of Iraq as the predominant category of territorial identification in the general chaos of post-2003 Iraq.

One striking difference between the alternative territorial frameworks that briefly did emerge in Shi‘ite and Sunni circles is that the Shi‘ite ones appeared to have an ad hoc character mostly without any attempt to seek legitimacy in Islamic political thought, whereas the Sunni ones were littered with references to supposed precedents that could serve as justifications. For example, on the Shi‘ite side, SCIRI/ISCI rarely developed their federalism agitation beyond the axiom of a federal region as a ‘holy goal’. Those arguments that were employed to back up the demands were utterly pragmatic, calling for a ‘balance’ in Iraq that could only be secured through the creation of a counterweight to the
Islamic emirates and other quasi-states in the Sunni world from the Caucasus to Afghanistan. Symptomatically, when it comes to Shi'ite separatism, there has been an almost universal absence of support from the leading orthodox clergy.

However, despite the presence of certain ideological differences when it comes to theories of state formation, the marginality of the challenge to the territorial framework of Iraq is after all common to both Sunnis and Shi'ites. This suggests the presence of other underlying variables that may account for the endurance of the Iraq concept. The most obvious explanation seems to be simply that Iraqi nationalism became established in the Iraqi intellectual elite of all sectarian backgrounds at such an early point that developments in twentieth-century Islamic political thought may in themselves be insufficient to reverse the Iraqi nationalist trend. Examples of this are legion once the unempirical idea of Iraq as an "artificial" state "cobbled together" from "disparate" Ottoman provinces is abandoned. In fact, Iraqi literature from the nineteenth century and the Young Turk period is rife with references to Iraq as a territorial frame of identity, as seen for example in the writings of authors like Abû al-Jalîl al-Tabatabâ'î, Kazîm al-Dusjâ'il, 'Abdallah Bashâyîn and 'Abûsâs al-Karmâlî. It is a wonderful irony that even Muhammad Bâdir al-Hakîm - perhaps the Shi'ite writer that has made the most systematic attempt at articulating a theory of federalism within the Wilayah al-faqih framework - should refer to Iraq as a potential abutment in that kind of system in his pamphlet 'Agidatuwa whilst never even mentioning the nine-governorate Shi'ite region preferred by later SCIRI leaders. What we are seeing today is probably better described as politicians of different sectarian orientations striving to achieve hegemony within a shared territorial framework (Haddad 2011).

CONCLUSION

There is certainly a sectarian dimension to Iraqi politics, but sectarian identities among Sunnis and Shi'ites do not correspond to any deeply rooted sense of territorial homeland that is different from the concept of the modern state of Iraq. This absence of a territorial component in Shi'ite and Sunni sub-identities in turn means that the dynamics of sectarian problems in Iraq - and the most promising mechanisms for solving them - are likely to differ from those of countries where sectarian and territorial sub-identities go more easily hand in hand, as seen above all in the Balkans in the 1990s.

These findings matter in terms of how we think about Sunni-Shi'ite relations with respect to state-building in Iraq and regional security more broadly. The western policy-making debate on Iraq in the post-2003 period has been overwhelmingly dominated by concepts like federalism, power-sharing and consociational forms of democracy more broadly as recipes for achieving national reconciliation in Iraq. In particular, the search for some kind of magic formula to "divide the cake" has been central to the debate for several years. However, given the sacrosanctity of the territorial unity of Iraq in both Sunni and Shi'ite discourse, there is much to suggest that policy prescriptions for the country need to be adjusted to better fit the local realities. If less resources are devoted to solving non-existent territorial issues between the sects, it will be possible to give more attention to those real and pressing questions that still remain,
ORIT BASHKIN
University of Chicago

‘Religious hatred shall disappear from the land’ – Iraqi Jews as Ottoman Subjects, 1864–1913

ABSTRACT
The essay discusses the ways in which Jewish-Iraqi cultural production of the late nineteenth century and early twentieth century responded to processes initiated by the Ottoman state. Iraqi Jews, I argue, wished to integrate into both the Ottoman state and Iraqi society. Thus, Iraqi Jewish intellectuals gradually drifted from writing in Judeo-Arabic into writing in Arabic and Ottoman-Turkish, and this shift signified their commitments to both the Ottoman state and the Iraqi community. The publications of leading Jewish Baghdadi Rabbis, the accounts of Jewish travellers to Iraq and publications of Iraqi Jews in the Hebrew, Arabic and Turkish press during the Ottoman reform and the constitutional revolution (1908) reveal how these Ottoman Jewish subjects advanced secular, non-sectarian politics in modern Iraq. The types of relationships that they hoped to maintain with the state and the cultural choices they adopted in order to integrate into it changed their self-perceptions and their perceptions of their Muslim and Christian neighbours. In the years following the 1908 revolution, in particular, Jewish intellectual production put forth the notion that the political community included more than the members of a particular religious community. The fact that the Jewish community was a small religious group did not engender a sense of cultural isolation, but rather generated processes of modification of certain imperial and local discourses into the Jewish community. This anti-sectarian

KEYWORDS
sect
Iraqi Jews
Tanzimat
Ottoman Iraq
Alliance Isrelite Universelle
Abdallah Somekh
Midhat Pasha
Abdulhamid II
Ottoman Constitutional Revolution (1908)
the Arab national congress (1912)
Zionism
Arab nationalism
approach further suggests that the Iraqi Hashemite kingdom had roots dating back to the Tanẓimat and the Young Turk periods, and that state-building and nation-building efforts aimed at constructing non-religious civil affiliations predate the Hashemite monarchy.

When we think of Iraq's ethnic-religious makeup we often focus on the divisions between the Sunnis and the Shi'ites, on the one hand, and Arabs and Kurds, on the other. Special attention, however, should be placed on other religious communities. In this essay, I consider the cultural history of the Iraqi Jewish community during the years 1864–1913 as a way of thinking about the meaning of sectarian and sectarian identities in the modern Iraqi state. What we call 'sectarianism,' namely, the division of the state into separate communities based on their ethnic and/or religious affiliations, is a modern phenomenon, and not a mere manifestation of medieval religious rivalries. In modern Iraq, as elsewhere in the Middle East, the relationships between individuals belonging to different religious communities were determined by the state (Ottoman, Hashemite and Republican) and by the British colonial powers. Moreover, Iraqis belonging to the same religious community (Jews, Shi'ites, Christian, Orthodox and so on) did not subscribe to a singular sociopolitical vision that was solely determined by their religious identity, since class, education, place of dwelling and gender played a prominent role in shaping one's identity and political affiliations as well. Nevertheless, modern Iraqi politics (in both their Ottoman and Arab incarnations) were founded on a sectarian logic aimed at preserving the hegemony of the ruling Sunni elites. To ignore this built-in sectarian structure and its repercussions on state and society is as grave a mistake as it is to assume that members of the same religious or ethnic community collectively subscribe to a uniform mindset and pattern of political behaviour.

Judging from the Jewish case-study, the dynamics shaping the identities of religious communities in modern Iraq relate to three interconnected spheres. The first is the sphere of the religious community itself, where the meanings associated with being a Jew in a modern Muslim society were constantly debated. The second sphere is that of the state and its society, where Muslims and Christians suggested various significations to describe Jewish identity (like 'Ottoman subject,' 'dhimmī' and 'citizen'). The state, moreover, had the power to change the nature of the social hierarchies within the religious community. For example, through the incorporation of educated Jews into the Ottoman state, the state contributed to the secularization of Jewish society and increased the social status of secular Jews over that of the community's religious leadership. The third sphere included trans-regional and colonial players who were interested in the status of different religious communities in Iraq and in the Ottoman Empire.

In the following pages, I investigate how Jewish-Iraqi cultural production of the late nineteenth century and early twentieth century responded to processes initiated by the Ottoman state. I show that, although Jews reacted to the challenges posed by the state in different ways, they wished to integrate into both the Ottoman state and Iraqi society. In their opinion, the Sunni-Ottoman state was the power that could ensure their citizenship rights, and the agency through which they could improve their social status. Moreover, this positive and anti-sectarian approach to the state remained firm in the Hashemite period. I likewise illustrate how local and transregional currents influenced the community's identity. The constant dialogue between the Jewish, Ottoman and Iraqi spheres, and the coexistence between these spheres of identity, demonstrate the diversity of the political challenges that the Jewish community faced in the modern age, and the complicated ways in which it coped with them. Furthermore, the Jewish experience confirms that the Iraqi Hashemite Kingdom had roots dating back to the Tanẓimat and the Young Turk periods, and that state-building and nation-building efforts aimed at constructing non-religious civil affiliations predate the Hashemite monarchy.

A virtuous Sultan, whose heart is good with respect to the people of Israel.

(Iraqi Jews and the Ottoman State. 1839–76)

During the nineteenth century, Iraqi Jews became significant players in the global economy and the European world of empires, and consequently integrated themselves more effectively into the socio-economic life of both the Ottoman Empire and the provinces of Basra, Baghdad and Mosul. Although Iraqi Jews figured in the provinces' sociopolitical life as early as the eighteenth century, and occupied prominent positions under local governors (ṭarāṭ ḥaṣbī) most frequently, the changes that occurred during the Tanzimat era (1839–76) improved their status considerably. The Tanzimat were a series of Ottoman reforms aimed at preserving the power of the Ottoman state through modernization and centralization and at the creation of a new imperial civic identity. In 1849, the Jewish Iraqi community was placed under the leadership of a Chief Rabbi (Hakham-bashi, Ḥaham-boṣṣiq) who was appointed by the state and went on to take the leading role in all religious matters pertaining to the community (with the help of local committees). During the first three decades of the nineteenth century, Jewish leaders were subjected to extortion attempts by various local governors. They lived in a separate quarter in Baghdad and suffered from the instability typifying the Iraqi political system prior to 1831, but the Ottoman state regained its control over the province. Yet even under these conditions, foreign travellers to the city noted their economic success and integration into Baghdad's trade and commerce.

Although the majority of the Jewish Iraqi community was poor at the time, the Jewish elite took advantage of the Tanzimat reforms occurring in the Ottoman Empire. They were appointed to official posts in the newly established administrative councils and represented Iraq in the Ottoman parliament (founded 1876). In the nineteenth century Jews became a much more visible group in Baghdad because of the migration of Jews to the major cities in Iraq. Their numbers rose from 3 per cent of Baghdad's population at the beginning of the century to 35 per cent by the end. As Daphna Simhon notes, Iraqi Jews (unlike Iraq's Christians) were a rather homogeneous group and not divided into religious subgroups, a factor that solidified the community's power vis-à-vis other minority communities. Iraqi Jews likewise involved themselves in British-Indian trade networks, especially after 1869, and subsequently established British-Iranian trade communities in Bombay, Calcutta, Shanghai, Rangoon and Hong Kong. Affluent Jewish-Iraqi families from these satellite communities supported various synagogues and schools in Baghdad and addressed religious questions to Iraqi rabbis relating to modern technologies that were not present in Baghdad but rather in India.

Nineteenth-century Jewish-Iraqi culture was multilingual. Educated Iraqi Jews spoke a local dialect of Arabic, used Hebrew and Arabic as liturgical languages and towards the end of the century, wrote in Arabic and Ottoman...
Turkish as well. Judeo-Arabic (Arabic written in Hebrew characters) was used by rabbis and other Jewish authors in written works, and Jewish children were taught to read and write in this language. With the introduction of new communication media, however, a new cultural dynamic arose within the community. Hebrew ceased to be solely a liturgical and religious language and evolved into a transregional language used by Iraqi Jews to communicate with Jews elsewhere in the world regarding a variety of phenomena relating to modernity in general and the nature of the Ottoman state in particular. Iraqi Jews thus read Hebrew newspapers and journals produced in Europe and in Ottoman Palestine, and sent letters and articles about their lives in Baghdad to such journals. Concurrently, Arabic and Ottoman Turkish were taught in Jewish schools. After the 1980 Constitutional Revolution in the Ottoman Empire, Jews began publishing in Arabic and Ottoman Turkish as part of an attempt to integrate more effectively into the life of Iraq and the Ottoman Empire. Their writing in these languages meant to signify their loyalty to the state. For Iraqi Ottoman Jews, then, the knowledge of many languages (Arabic, Ottoman Turkish and Hebrew) was a key marker of being loyal Iraqi-Ottoman subjects who were committed to a non-sectarian agenda. Regardless of the discriminatory practices prevailing in the Empire itself against the state’s non-Sunni populations, the state was perceived by many Jewish intellectuals as engaging in projects of reform that would eliminate religious and sectarian differences. These languages, moreover, were not always seen as being in competition with one another, as Hebrew was employed as a means of communication with fellow Jews, while Arabic and Ottoman were seen as enabling a conversation with other subjects of the empire. Over time Arabic and Ottoman Turkish became more dominant languages for written expression in the public sphere, a process that took time to fully unfold under the Hashemite regime.

The expansion of foreign education in the Ottoman Empire during the Tanzimat era created a major change in the Jewish community’s life. Jewish children normally studied in the sefaah, a Jewish equivalent of the Muslim khatib (the state’s primary educational institution). In such religious schools, children learned the Hebrew alphabet, reading, writing and biblical exegesis. More organized religious instruction was provided in the religious school, the Mishnah Talmud Torah (established 1832) and in the Yeshiva of Baghdad (established 1840). In 1861, a branch of the society ‘All Israel Are Brothers’ was formed in Baghdad by Iraqi Jews Da’ud Somekh, Yusuif Shem-Tov and two immigrants, Isaac Luria (a clockmaker from Russia) and Herman Tavi Rosenfeld (a tailor from Germany). They addressed the leadership of the organization in Paris and asked for assistance in establishing a school. This school, The Alliance Israélite Universelle, was opened on 10 December 1864. Initially it was met with resistance by the local Jewish community, but it became a popular institution in the years that followed.

In January 1865 the student body included 43 boys, which by June had risen to 75. Although the language of instruction was French, the school also taught Hebrew, Arabic, Turkish and English. By the late nineteenth century classes in math, history, geography, physics, biology and chemistry were being offered. Because of the trade of Iraqi Jews with England, the school, although committed to the expansion of French culture, provided much more training in English than any other Jewish school, with the encouragement of the British consul. Initially, students came from poor families that could not afford religious instruction for their children, but the elite quickly came to grasp the benefits of an Alliance education as well. The Alliance expanded: a school for girls was opened in 1893 and additional schools for boys were established in Basra, Mosul, Hilla and ‘Amara. Moreover, as the school’s reputation grew, Christians and Muslims sent their children to it. The school, then, did not serve to enhance the sectarian identity of Iraqi Jews, but rather offered a vision of modern education to all members of the Iraqi community. The Christian intellectual Yusuf Zikallah: Gharama (1885) recalled his experience as a student there:

The Israélite Alliance opened its doors to non-Jews also and some Christians and Muslims studied there. I was among the Christians who studied in this school for five years from 1898-1902. [...] It is necessary to set the record straight and thank the principals of the school for the way in which they represented themselves and the dedication of the teachers whom I remember for the love that they showed me and my fellow students.

One of the first books that Gharama published following the birth of the Iraqi state was Nazihat al-muqtabin fi tariikh yahud al-Iraq: A Nostalgic Trip into the History of the Jews of Iraq (1924), which recontextualized the history of the Iraqi Jewish community.

Iraqi Jews, however, benefited not only from French-Jewish but also from Ottoman educational institutions. The historian Mir Barzilai listed the biographies of several dozen Jews who became prominent leaders of the Jewish community in 1908 and subsequently assumed important positions in the Hashemite regime. Significantly, all knew both Arabic and Ottoman Turkish and had studied in various government schools. Some attended schools in Baghdad, while others, unlike their Sunni Arab peers, attended Ottoman schools in Istanbul (although their Sunni peers attended military academies for the most part, while Iraqi Jews primarily studied law). In 1909, however, Jews were obliged to serve in the military like any other subject of the empire. During the last nineteenth century, the Iraqi-Ottoman school system was divided into primary schools, middle schools and high-schools (idadiyy), which Jewish students attended. Saauin Fasek (1860), who would represent Iraq in the Ottoman parliament after 1908, attended the Madrasa al-Sultaniyya in Istanbul. Judges Da’ud Samara (b.1877) and Sa’id Zilksaah (b.1879) studied law in Istanbul, after studying in Baghdad’s Alliance school and in the city’s al-Madrasa al-Tidaiyya al-Multiyya, while judge Ruben Battit (b.1888), who attended the law school in Istanbul (1909), travelled to Istanbul for further legal training. Abram Kazem (b.1886), who grew to be an influential lawyer in the Hashemite period, wished to study in Alliance but encountered financial difficulties, and therefore attended the al-Madrasa al-Tidaiyya al-Multiyya. Similarly, politicians Ibrahim Haim (b.1867), who would represent the community in the Iraqi parliament under the Hashemite Kingdom, and Ibrahim Salih al-Kahir (b.1888) both attended the al-Madrasa al-Tidaiyya al-Multiyya. Intellectuals and journalists such as Sulayman ‘Abar (b.1875) and Yusuif Ilyaa (b.1877) studied in the same school and they later studied law in Istanbul. The Jewish doctors of the community during this period were all trained in Istanbul. The Jewish French training also benefited the state: Salih Benjamin Ezra Schayek (b.1862) taught French in the governmental schools in Baghdad until World War I.

The comfortable socio-economic conditions of the Jewish elite encouraged the rise of a rich rabbinical literature, as articulated in the writings of Rabbi Yosef Haim (1834–1902), Abdallah Sowkhi (1813–89) and Shelomo Behkor...
Kedourie, 'The Jews of Baghdad', pp. 305, 399; On Jewish education in Iraq, see Yisrael Mer (1989), Bibliaelduth be-israel shel yisrael ‘Iraq me’iez 1850 ra’ayyamuma' Cultural and Social Developments Amongst Jewish Society in Iraq Since 1850 until the Present, Tel Aviv: Nubariano, see also Jonathan Silverman’s (2009) Importrant essay ‘Unfulfilled promises: Orientalism, the 1918 revolution and Baghdadi Jewry, International Journal of Contemporary Jewish Studies, 3, 2, pp. 153-68.


Hosin (1843-92). These rabbis were enthusiastic about the reforms occurring in the Ottoman Empire and welcomed the adoption of modern technologies and scientific innovations within both Jewish and Jewish-Iraqi society. Rabbi Solomon, for example, sent his own grandson to the Alliance school because he was convinced of the virtues of modern education. To illustrate the effects of changes brought about by the Ottoman state, I wish to examine in some detail the writings of two of these rabbis, Abulal-abdallah and Shemel Bekhor Hosin, to highlight their acute understanding of what it meant to be an Iraqi Jewish subject of the Ottoman Empire.

The responses of Rabbi Abulal-abdallah to queries from Indian-Jewish rabbis reflect a transnational conversation between Indian, Iraq, India, China and Hong Kong. Through these questions, Rabbi Solomon learned about the new realities of the modern colonial world and offered ways to meet these challenges. Like Muslim reformers at the time (and in contrast to Europe, where an opposition between rabbis and secular Jewish reformers was often evoked), he saw no contradiction between reason and revelation and showed great openness to new scientific innovations. Rabbi Solomon, for example, allowed travel by trains, trams and rickshaws within the city-boundaries of the Sabbath permitted Jewish public baths (milazes) to use water woven via modern plumbing (rather than natural fountain waters); and approved the Indian Jewish custom of inspecting the bedroom after the wedding night in order to determine whether the bride was a virgin (inspection of the bedroom was customary in Iraq). Modern technology, in this respect, did not present a threat to the Jewish way of life, but rather was seen as easing the daily lives of Jewish believers.1

Rabbi Solomon’s writing reflected a trust in, and respect for, the Ottoman state and its religious institutions. One of the questions asked related to the rabbis asked whether information about the death of a person that arrived via telegram could be considered reliable. Rabbi Solomon confirmed that Jews could consider the information transmitted by telegram as trustworthy, primarily because the Ottoman state (and its post office) invested a great deal of effort in the prevention of cases of forgery and corruption and assured the transmission of accurate information. The clerk working in the telegraph bureau was appointed by the governor in the same province and city had no power over him. If a telegraph is found to be a forgery, ‘the above mentioned clerk will be subjected to unjustifiable punishments’.12

Another case, from 1885, had to do with the use of gas lamps in synagogues during the Sabbath. The Rabbi allowed them to remain lit during the Sabbath, provided they were lit before the Sabbath began. He felt that gaslighting was safe enough and would not lead to fires. Rabbi Solomon, however, was asked what would happen if a fire was to break out and whether Jews would be blamed for having purposely set it and harmed by the non-Jewish majority population as a result. In response, Rabbi Solomon argued that the state has become blind to religious discrimination. In a letter addressed to his nephew, he explained that the Ottoman Empire had changed. The Jewish exile, he wrote, ‘became pleasant’, since Jews and gentiles ‘had practically become one people’. For this reason, even if a fire was to break out, the non-Jews would not tell lies about the Jews and blame them for the fire.13

These two rulings conveyed a new attitude towards the state, in which the latter was seen as a reliable institution in which Jews could place their trust. The first ruling marked a sense of assurance in the authenticity of the information that it was provided. Indirectly, Rabbi Solomon also confirmed his belief in the state’s mechanisms for supervising the bureaucracy and in its battle against corruption. The second ruling affirmed the reliability of a new institution, the fire department and most importantly, the integration of Jews into the majority community, affirming that they were no longer subject to the labels of lie and false rumors spread by their non-Jewish neighbours. Whilst the fear of anti-Jewish rebuff in a case of fire suggests a hesitation regarding true integration into the community, the Rabbi’s response affirms that the state, following the Tanzimat reforms, has managed to change the relationship between Jews and gentiles within the Islamic community itself, and promote equality and safety.

Rabbi Shemel Bekhor Hosin (1843-92), one of Rabbi Abulal-abdallah’s students, published many articles and studies in the Jewish press of Europe, as well as in the Judeo-Arabic press that emerged in India. He traded in books, as well as manuscripts and owned a printing house (opened in 1887) that printed over seventy books. One of his publications in Judeo-Arabic was Jafaar al-Taqi’s al-Ashkariyya, which named some two thousand Jews and the sums they needed to pay to avoid military service.14

Rabbi Hosin’s articles and letters printed in European Jewish journals are an important source for the lives of Jews in late Ottoman Iraq and their approaches to the Ottoman state and Iraqi society. Like his teacher, Hosin confirmed that science and revelation could coexist. In a letter written to the Jewish journal Ha-Magid/The Speaker (printed in Prusa), Rabbi Hosin mentioned that ‘presently the light of knowledge and reason shine in remote parts of the land, scaring off the reflections of ignorance and stupidity’, and predicted that all superstitions would be bound to disappear in this new universe.15 He expressed his excitement about scientific innovations, like the new steamboats, affirming the efficiency of this mode of transportation.16 Committed to a modern agenda, Rabbi Hosin supported fellow rabbis who wanted to place limits on the marriage of girls under the age of 14 and forbade the marriages of girls who were 9 or 10 years old, based on the rulings of a medical doctor. He reported that Baghdad rabbis refused to marry girls under the age of 14 and to allow their grooves to enter the synagogues and pray.17

Rabbi Hosin was proud of the political changes that occurred in the Ottoman Empire and called upon Jews to take an active part in the new institutions created by the Ottoman state. He made clear his perception of the state as the political framework that could grant equality to its Jewish subjects, and his expectation that it would do so continually, in a variety of writings. An example is an 1866 letter depicting the sufferings of the Jews of Irbil, who were tortured, according to Hosin, by the constant abuse inflicted upon them by their Kurdish neighbours. Comparing the sufferings of the Jews in Irbil to those of the Jews in Iran, he wrote:

One should not wonder about the people of Persia, for everybody knows that the people of Persia are like the people of Sodom, wicked and sinful to God and to men, and their people dwell in the darkness, as they have not seen the light of knowledge and education, and reason does not spread its light in their country. However [one should wonder about the state of] the people of Kurdistan, who dwell in a righteous and merciful state, where the light of knowledge and reason began shining in the darkness of the hearts of those who live[d] in the state, and the burning torch of civilization and enlightenment began burning amongst the leaders of its government. […] Furthermore, our righteous, virtuous King [Sultan],


15 Ha-Magid (Prusa), 10 October 1877, 217: 39, 36.

16 Ha-Magid, 21 October 1863, 767: 342.

17 Ha-Magid, 29 January 1869, 125: 35.
whose heart is good with respect to the [people of] Israel and does not differ-
entiate between people and people and nation and nation. […] has written
an important decree to all the ministers of his government saying that
all adherents of different religions who live under his government shall
live in peace, ease and tranquility – the Muslim not harming the Jew, and
the Jew not harming the Muslim, but rather all will live in calm and safety,
and religious hatred shall disappear from the land. Even if we seek to settle
this wonderment, and say that the people of Kurdistan are the exception,
and are not people at all, as a layman’s proverb says, ‘A Kurd is a don-
key,’ and another says about a person of limited understanding that he
is a Kurd, and therefore they are not among the people of the [Ottoman]
community, and thus the letter of the King does not apply to them […].
we can reply that according to common sense, whoever has a donkey that
harms humans should get rid of this donkey.”

Rabbi Hossin’s racism aside, his emphasis on the fact that ‘our mighty, exalted
King who dwells in Istanbul, is a merciful king [melekh rahamim]’ and is responsible
for his flock (thus expressing in Hebrew the relationship between the
sultan and the jew) underlined his expectation of justice from this Sultan
with respect to the empire’s Jews, especially in a city like Tblisi ‘which is located
in the heart of Turkey and is close to Baghdad’. Nonetheless, he also asked that
the French and English consuls intervene on behalf of the poor Jews of Tblisi
who were being badly tortured by their Kurdish neighbours. This piece, then,
illustrates that, while the Iranian state was not to be trusted, the Ottoman state
was undergoing important changes, and thus the mistreatment of its subjects
based on religious grounds should be treated with surprise and amazement
and rejected by its subjects. The very same ideas were expressed during a cel-
bration at the Alliance school, in the presence of European dignitaries, when
the painter [blessed] one other than ‘our King, the elevated Sultan ‘Abdulaziz’
and Isaac Luria delivered a speech in Arabic in honour of the Ottoman state.

Other writings of Rabbi Hossin describe the growth of Baghdad in the 1870s
and 1880s, and the migration of Jews from Iran to Iraq. To Hossin, the years
when Midhat Pasha served as wali (wali, governor) of the province of Baghdad
(1869–72) were a golden age for Iraqi Jewry. Midhat Pasha was one of the great
Tanẓimām reformers in the Empire, and his governorship of the province of
Baghdad was marked by his attempts to transform it into a modern and central-
ized political entity. Under his leadership, the city of Baghdad expanded, with a
public park, a tramway, a modern hospital, a savings bank and a water-supply
system built in the city, and now means of communication, like the Arabic-
Ottoman newspaper al-Zawār, were marketed to the province’s bureaucrats
and educated elites. Jewish-Iraqi writers praised the wali for his reforms and
especially for his ideas about equality and justice between all subjects of the
province (regardless of their religion). They even referred to him as ‘the father
of peace’ (aṭr ha-shalom). Rabbi Hossin described Midhat Pasha as ‘an educated,
enlightened man, who marches forward boldly […] to spread in our country
the light of knowledge and reason’ (Emphasis added). He depicted the warm wel-
coming of the pasha by the leaders of all communities in Iraq and took great
pride in Midhat’s visit to the Alliance school, where the Pasha was greeted by
a speech in French by one of the students. The wali spoke to the people of the
province and his speech was ‘pleasant to the human race in general, and to the
people of Israel, in particular’. According to Hossin,
Acclamations of joy and happiness.
(The constitutional revolution and Jewish culture, 1908-14)

On 23 July 1908, a new era began in the Ottoman Empire, as a constitutional revolution forced the reinstatement of the constitution of 1876 (which was suspended by Sultan Abdulhamid II). As historian Hasan Kayali notes, the period following 1908 was marked by extraordinary social and political transformation since the Revolution introduced parliamentary rule and granted liberties that were abolished under Sultan Abdulhamid II’s reign. The 1908 revolution also marked a change in the cultural practices of Jewish Iraq, in the sense that it accelerated the integration processes that had begun during the era of Midhat Pasha.

The 1908 constitutional revolution led by the Committee on Union and Progress inspired much enthusiasm among Iraqi Jewish minorities, as was the case elsewhere in the empire. Shi’ite poets at the time, for example, praised the passing of the era of darkness and tyranny and the onset of the light of constitutionalism and progress brought about by the Ottoman revolutionaries. Shi’ite poet Ali al-Shangir (1890-1963) praised the wrongs committed under the tyrannical regime of Sultan Abdulhamid II and announced the end of the days of darkness, as the light of truth would shine over the joyous East. Shi’ite poet Abd al-Mutallib al-Hilli (1865-1920) similarly delighted at the virtues of the new era, namely, equality, justice (al-adl) and truth, whose source was the lions of Thessalonica. Their patriotic call (al-dar al-mutatirijah) for equality, the poet assured readers, was answered by all, and Allah himself bestowed his guidance upon them (an’am alayhim bi’i tawd). More generally, the Arabic vocabulary evoked by Shi’ite and Sunni writers at the time, in which the binaries darkness/light, Hamidian despotism/modern constitutionalism, slavery/freedom, oppression/justice played a dominant role, appeared in the Arab and Ottoman print markets; and affected Iraqi Jews as well.

At the beginning of the revolution, Jews across the empire (including Zionists) hoped that a new era of progress and enlightenment was dawning, and that this era was bound to change their lives. Items in the Palestinian Hebraic journal Ha-Hatozelet related the following:

Constantinople: 28 of July: signs of joy and happiness are seen in every corner. Calm and peace is prevalent in all parts of the city… Censorship of journals was lifted.

Constantinople: 28 of July: The city is joyful and delighted. The sellers of newspapers, who seek the best for the country, are doing good business. Preachers who love their country deliver speeches in the markets and the streets."

Iraqi Jews joined these celebrations. Yusuf Ghanima describes how the revolution encouraged the adoption of a non-sectarian identity amongst Iraqi Jews and greater secularization:

The Jews accepted the announcement of the constitutional government in the Ottoman state in 1908 with exclamations of joy and happiness and they arranged demonstrations of gratification [...]. The new Ottoman government and the privilege of freedom influenced the Jews of Iraq and
They became independent toward their rabbis concerning everyday issues facing them.  

Another indicator of this non-sectarian spirit is found in an "Account on the Jewish community in Baghdad" written by J. G. Lorimer, published in 1909, and is seemd to have been written by Harun Da’ud Shohet, a Jewish dragnam at the British consulate. Depicting the Chief Rabbi in Baghdad, the account noted that the Chief Rabbi exercised no real influence over the members of his own community. The new spirit from Istanbul likewise encouraged Jews to engage in secular themes in their writings. One of the first texts dealing with secular themes published by an Iraqi Jew in Judeo-Arabic was Hayyim al-Zamani’s Current Events. The text, describing the events that led to the Ottoman constitutional revolution, appeared only a year after the revolution, and was written by Jewish intellectual Salim Isiq (1877–1948).  

This new mindset was also reflected in Iraqi Jews joining non-sectarian political organizations. Although the Jewish community had had a representative in the short-lived Ottoman parliament and in the provincial municipal council before 1908, the degree of its integration into the state expanded after 1908. Nuri Yacib Nahum (b.1867) was appointed the head of the Baghdad Chamber of Commerce, which was established in 1910, and many other Jews joined the chamber, among them Elyahu al-Anti (b.1889), Shaul Hesgol (b.1858), Yehuda Zaluf (b.1858), Ibrahim Haim Mu’allam Isiq (b.1859) and Khudri Murad Shur (b.1890). Jews also found positions in the Ottoman Bank and the Ottoman Post Office. Most importantly, Sasan Hesgol was elected (as one of six representatives) to represent Iraq in the Ottoman parliament. When Sasan ran for government office, local Iraqi Muslims waged a propaganda campaign against him, making people pledge, in the name of the Holy Quran, that they would not vote for Jews. Nonetheless, he was re-elected in 1912 and 1914.  

He also served as a representative of the Ottoman government in several posts and traveled on its behalf to London. These activities granted him the name ‘Abu al-barraran’.  

In the educational realm, Jews championed the creation of a non-sectarian, Ottoman education system. Consequently, seven Jews sought to establish a school similar to the Ottoman military academies to prepare Jews to serve as officers in the Ottoman army. Such an idea (namely to encourage Jewish participation in the Ottoman army) would have seemed judicious only a year before:  

Seven Jews of the rising generation have lately formed a committee and started a school for Turkish instruction. The subjects are the same as in the Government Military School. The idea is (1) to diffuse Turkish among the young, and (2) to qualify them for superior military service, thus enabling them to obtain positions as officers and not merely to serve as rank and file. This ‘Mutual Help School’ (ฤษועים מתנדבים) is partly supported by the community and partly by voluntary contributions […] It has been open for a month and promises very well.  

The venture was successful and this high school, al-‘Ar’awwun, offered instruction in several languages, including Turkish and Arabic. The school was active in Hashemite Iraq as well.  

As noted, the Revolution, with its promise of equality and freedom, stirred excitement among Muslims, Christians and Jews in Iraq. At the same time, however, it generated tensions and disputes between Jews, Muslims and Christians. The main political division in the three Iraqi provinces was between those who supported the revolutionaries, and were organized around the Iraqi branch of the revolutionary party, the Committee of Union and Progress (CUP), and those who opposed the new constitutional regime. The supporters of the CUP, moreover, included representatives from different religious communities, like the Sunni poet Ma’ruf al-Rusiî (1875–1945) and the Shi’ite poet Muhammad Rida al-Shabrî (b.1880). Nonetheless, non-sectarian civic identity was not welcomed by all Iraqis. On 15 October 1908 Baghdad Jews were threatened with an attack by a local mob that was prevented by the joint intervention of Jewish and Muslim notables. A report in Ha-Ha’azelet read:

A branch of the CUP was established in Baghdad, and about a hundred young Jews joined it. This branch demanded that the local government fire some well-known clerks from the old regime […] These people, seeing their weak condition, established a reactionary society to fight the constitution and its upholders. On the first Sabbath of the holiday of Sukkoth, all the young Turks, and amongst them their Jewish friends, went on foot, accompanied by military leaders, to welcome three members of the CUP from Thessalonica who had just arrived in Baghdad. The reactionaries grew angry and wanted to vent their rage upon the Jews. They acted on this desire on Wednesday, and had been beating Jews and robbing them of their property for fifteen consecutive hours before the military intervened and put an end to this outrageous scandal. Twenty of the rioters were jailed but the wall set them free after two days. Many complained about the wall and demanded that the central government in the capital dismiss him.  

Furthermore, other reports about this event indicate that some Muslim supporters of the CUP resisted the membership of Iraqi Jews within its local branch. Sasan Hesgol reported that the Jews fought back and as a result of the riot 40 Jews and Muslims were wounded. These reports convey that the Jews who joined the CUP felt sure enough of their social position to publicly express their support for the revolution by marching in the city, demanding that officials be dismissed and complaining about the wall. Although their political actions generated anger amongst the population, they also opened a space for the minorities’ participation in state’s political organizations. Furthermore while some supporters of the CUP felt threatened by the presence of Jews in their party, other Iraqi members of the CUP welcomed them.  

An event that occurred shortly after the announcement of the constitution reveals the assurance felt by the local Jewish community. The noted Syrian poet Ma’ruf al-Rusiî, journalist ‘Abd al-Latif Thaynî, who was the editor of the pro-CUP newspaper al-Raqqî, and a few Christians and Jews entered the mosque of al-Wazir during the Friday sermon. Al-Rusiî went on stage, took the place of the khatib and called on the people to support the CUP and its efforts on behalf of equality, justice and equal rights. A conservative group was so shocked by these actions that it demanded that al-Rusiî be executed. Jews, moreover, were blamed for supporting the CUP’s secularist agenda, and we were attacked by a local mob as a result. While al-Rusiî, Muhammad Shukri al-Alusi and others were punished for stirring the public up to such a degree, the Jewish community in particular was singled out as responsible for this public
display of secularism. Nonetheless, the fact that Jews felt bold enough to enter the mosque and declare a new era attests to the changing spirit of the time.\footnote{Linguistically, the revolution marks the shift into writing in Arabic and Turkish and the abandonment of Judeo-Arabic. In this period, Iraqi Jews continued to study Arabic and Turkish in the Alliance School and in Turaqrawn and read journals published in Istanbul. The desire to be a part of the modern wave, to speak its language, and to be a people that all subjects of the empire shared the same cultural, political, and social concerns was manifested in the domain of the press, in which Judeo-Arabic was abandoned in favour of Ottoman Turkish and Arabic. Iraqi Jew Nissim Yusef Somelik (1888-1927) established, together with a Muslim partner Rashid 'Ani al-Saffar, the newspaper al-Zulfiqar (1900), which was printed in both Arabic and Turkish. Jewish writer Sulayman 'Inbar (1875-1941) published the journal Tulyar (1912), a publication committed to the CUP ideology, in Arabic and Ottoman French. A new wave of intellectuals including Nissim Yusef Somelik, and Isaq Hasqal (1884-1927) established the newspaper Baqwa al-Nahrawan/Between the Two Rivers (i.e. the Tigris and the Euphrates). These journals were short-lived, and this was true of many other journals published during this period whose publishing licenses were later cancelled by the Ottoman government. Publishing in both Arabic and Turkish was quite common in this period. Even journals dedicated to the spread of Arabic and the Arab cultural renaissance (al-Nalad) had Ottoman Turkish sections in them. As has been mentioned above, Jews were free to publish in Hebrew. Their choice of Arabic, often with a Muslim partner, marks an important ideological transformation.\footnote{The change from Hebrew as the language of written expression to Arabic and Ottoman Turkish was not surprising. As we have seen, the late nineteenth century Jews were being encouraged by the Ottoman state to do so. After 1908, the shift towards Arabic became more noticeable. The fact that Arabic was already a spoken language among Iraqi Jews facilitated the transformation from Judeo-Arabic to Ottoman Turkish. To illustrate this, we consider the teaching of Hebrew in Iraqi Jewish religious schools as described in the travel account of a Jewish-Indian British traveller David (David) Sassoon: London: R. V. Sassoon (1898), who visited Baghdad in 1910. He provided a table that explicated how the Hebrew alphabet was taught in Jewish religious schools in the early grades. What follows is a portion of that table:}

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Letter</th>
<th>Arabic description</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>алф</td>
<td>أَلْف</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>гимал</td>
<td>غَيْمَال</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ха</td>
<td>حَاء</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>лам</td>
<td>لَام</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>сам</td>
<td>سَمِح</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>сам</td>
<td>سَمِح</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>коф</td>
<td>كُف</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>шин</td>
<td>شَين</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Notes: (1) Grammatical errors are in the original; (2) Sassoon provides a partial vocalization of the Arabic that leads me to believe that the Arabic was pronounced in the colloquial form; (3) The vocalization of the Hebrew letters is based on Sassoon's vocalization. Some letters are pronounced in a different way from both standard Arabic and Hebrew pronunciations.|

The table provides a description in Arabic for the Hebrew characters. It indicates, moreover, that Iraqi Jews spoke and thought in Arabic, even when they were writing in Hebrew, and that Hebrew characters were a mere vessel to convey thoughts and notions in Arabic.\footnote{The shift from Judeo-Arabic to Arabic despite being written in different forms, to Arabic was easier in many ways than the transition from Judeo-Arabic to Hebrew. The shift from Judeo-Arabic to Arabic was also in contrast to other linguistic and ethnic minorities in Ottoman Iraq whose spoken language, despite adopting many words from the language in which the majority community spoke, was still different from the majority language (Kurdish-Arab, Kurdish-Turkish, Turkish-Arabic). This linguistic reality was yet another medium that enabled the integration of Jews into a broader cultural fabric that shared much in common with other ethnic-confessional groups in Ottoman Iraq. Thus, the command of Arabic was a very effective means to integrate more into the life of Iraq, and the command of Ottoman Turkish was useful as a way of becoming a part of the Ottoman State.}\footnote{Iraqi Jews, like their Muslim and Christian colleagues, would later be divided on the question on whether to support or oppose the CUP. Some, like Ibrahim Haim, would later be exiled by the state for a short period of time because of their political activities. But in these processes, they shared much in common with other Iraqis and Arabs during this period. In two cases, Iraqi Jews took ideological positions that were of immense importance after the Ottoman Empire's collapse. One key figure was the editor of the pro-revolutionary journal Tulyar/Philosophy, Sulayman 'Inbar, who was born to a family of landholders in Ba'quba. A graduate of al-Madras al-Tadaiyya al-Mukhya, he spoke Arabic, Turkish, French, and English. After the publication of Tulyar, 'Inbar left for Istanbul and then Paris, and eventually returned to Baghdad to work in the Post Office. While in Paris, 'Inbar accompanied his Iraqi Muslim friend (and later a prime minister under the Hashemite Kingdom) Jawfik al-Suwaydi to the Arab national congress of 1913. 'Inbar was, to the best of my knowledge, the only Jew who participated in this landmark event related to Arab nationalism. During the war, the Ottoman authorities exiled him first to Mosul and then to Anatolia along with other Muslim Iraqi journalists such as Ibrahim Shish Shukri and Ibrahim Hilmi al-'Umur. The embarking of Arab nationalism by Iraq's Jews would become much more pronounced during the inter-war period, but we can make out the very first articulations of national Arab sentiment in the events of 1913. Again, this trajectory, in which intellectuals initially supported the CUP and engaged in cultural activities immediately following the constitution of the revolution (e.g. the publishing of newspapers and pamphlets and the organizing of salons), and then turn to emphasize Arab cultural identity, was not by any means, unique to Iraqi Jews, and shows them to have had much in common with their Arab peers.\footnote{Another important reaction that was the direct result of the closer ties between Iraqi Jews and the Ottoman state was a rejection of Zionism ideology. An unambiguous attestation of this ideological reality appeared in an interview given by Sassoon: Hasqal to a reporter for the Zionist newspaper Ha-Olam/The World in 1909. The reporter came to interview the Jewish delegate in parliament, an event deemed sensational by many at that time. To prepare the setting for the interview, the reporter informed his Zionist readers about the nature of Baghdadi Jews:}}
CONCLUSIONS

The texts produced by Iraqi Jews during the nineteenth century reveal how these Ottoman Jewish subjects developed new ideas about Iraq and the Ottoman Empire, and advanced secular, non-sectarian politics in modern Iraq. The types of relationships that these Jews hoped to maintain with the state and the cultural choices they adopted in order to integrate into the state changed their self-perceptions and their perceptions of their Muslim and Christian neighbours. In the years following the 1908 revolution, in particular, Jewish intellectual production put forth the notion that the political community included more than the members of a particular religious community. Thus the fact that the Jewish community was a small religious group did not endanger a sense of cultural isolation, but rather generated processes of modification and hybridization of certain imperial and local discourses within the Jewish community. Sadly, a comparison of the status of Jews to the status of non-Jews in nineteenth-century Iraq is rarely evoked. There has not been a sufficient attempt, for example, to consider the effects of the print media on the Christian Iraqi communities, following the establishment of the Dominican printing press in the late nineteenth century, with the very similar results that had occurred in the Jewish context; to compare the enthusiastic reaction of Shi‘ite Iraqi writers to the 1908 revolution with that of the Jews; or to reflect on the similarities between various Iraqi diasporic communities in India, Jewish, Shi‘ite, Armenian and so on. The ways in which the Iraqi Jews reacted to the Tzetzmat era and its various challenges have not been discussed in a comparative framework, although such a framework could be extremely useful. The hope that the Ottoman state would engage in projects to ensure equality for all minorities, and the understanding that the state should ignore religious differences and seek new and modern notions of citizenship, was shared by members of a variety of sects in Iraq (and by many other minorities in the empire). Engaging in comparative study of different sectarian politics within the same Ottoman province might expose the domains in which the state was actually successful in appealing to the needs of various religious communities. Moreover, it could serve as a methodological guiding light in our quest to write a post-Orientalist history of religious and ethnic communities in Iraq that do not speak of 'Jews', 'Christians', 'Shi‘ites' or any other religious community as essentialized monoliths in the grip of a Sunni Ottoman government.

Appendix: Iraqi Newspapers Published in Iraq 1908-14

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Name of newspaper</th>
<th>Language</th>
<th>First issue appeared in</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>بياض</td>
<td>Arabic/English</td>
<td>August 1908, Baghdad</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>العراق</td>
<td>Arabic</td>
<td>January 1909, Baghdad</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>الرقيب</td>
<td>Arabic</td>
<td>January 1909, Baghdad</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>الآمل</td>
<td>Arabic/English</td>
<td>February 1909, Baghdad</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Name of newspaper</td>
<td>Language</td>
<td>First issue appeared in</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>-------------------</td>
<td>----------</td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>الجريدة العساكرية</td>
<td>Arabic/Turkish</td>
<td>March 1909, Baghdad</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>الرائد</td>
<td>Arabic/Turkish</td>
<td>April 1909, Baghdad</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>الكاظن</td>
<td>Arabic/Turkish</td>
<td>March 1909, Basra</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>المدارس على أصالة</td>
<td>Arabic/Turkish</td>
<td>June 1909, Basra</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>التهذيب</td>
<td>Arabic/Turkish</td>
<td>June 1909, Bagdad</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>الروضية الفكرية</td>
<td>Arabic/Turkish</td>
<td>July 1909, Bagdad</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>جريدة الجهاد الإسلامي</td>
<td>Arabic</td>
<td>July 1909, Mosul</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>صدى الفجر</td>
<td>Arabic/Turkish</td>
<td>August 1909, Bagdad</td>
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<tr>
<td>صدى البار</td>
<td>Arabic/Turkish</td>
<td>August 1909, Bagdad</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>الزهراء</td>
<td>Arabic/Turkish</td>
<td>November 1909, Bagdad</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>بين النجوم</td>
<td>Arabic/Turkish</td>
<td>November 1909, Baghdad</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>فلسطين</td>
<td>Arabic/Turkish</td>
<td>November 1909, Baghdad</td>
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<tr>
<td>الأدب</td>
<td>Arabic/Turkish</td>
<td>January 1910, Bagdad</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>الطرابلس</td>
<td>Arabic/Turkish</td>
<td>January 1910, Bagdad</td>
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<tr>
<td>أخebra</td>
<td>Arabic/Persian</td>
<td>April 1910, Bagdad</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>النجم</td>
<td>Arabic</td>
<td>April 1910, Najaf</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>القياس</td>
<td>Arabic/Turkish</td>
<td>May 1910, Basra</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>الرسالة</td>
<td>Arabic</td>
<td>June 1910, Bagdad</td>
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<tr>
<td>مساجد الشرق</td>
<td>Arabic</td>
<td>August 1910, Bagdad</td>
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<tr>
<td>مساجد الفجر</td>
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<td>August 1910, Basra</td>
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<td>مصباح الراشد</td>
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<td>سبيل الرضوان</td>
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<td>الجريدة</td>
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<td>November 1910, Mosul</td>
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<td>المصاحف</td>
<td>Arabic/Turkish</td>
<td>December 1910, Baghdad</td>
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<td>المصاحف</td>
<td>Arabic</td>
<td>June 1911, Mosul</td>
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<td>المصاحف</td>
<td>Arabic</td>
<td>July 1911, Basra</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>المصاحف</td>
<td>Arabic</td>
<td>October 1911, Basra</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Notes:** The number of newspapers in Arabic and Turkish was almost equal to that in Arabic. In most large cities the first papers appeared in Arabic and Turkish and then newspapers solely in Arabic began to appear. In the years 1908-10 most papers were bilingual, yet from August 1910 on the dominance of Arabic newspapers is clear.

**SUGGESTED CITATION**


**CONTRIBUTOR DETAILS**

Ort Baskin is an assistant professor at the Department of Near Eastern Languages and Civilizations at the University of Chicago (associate professor as of July 2012). Her Ph.D. dissertation (Princeton, 2004) looks at the construction of the Iraqi public sphere and the emergence of democratic discourses in Iraq during the inter-war period. Her research interests include Arab intellectual history, modern Iraqi history, Arabic literature and the history of Arab-Jews in Iraq and Israel. Her book *The Other Iraq: Pluralism and Culture in Hashemite Iraq* was published in 2009 by Stanford University Press (Paperback, November 2010). She has recently finished writing a manuscript on Iraqi Jews and the Iraqi state during the monarchical period.

E-mail: ortb@chicago.edu
The security state and the practice and rhetoric of sectarianism in Iraq

ABSTRACT
I make two propositions in this brief essay on sectarianism in Iraq; the first is that sectarianism as a category of analysis of identity formation conceals as much as it reveals. Its use by political actors as well as producers of knowledge needs to be at all times analyzed within specific contexts; the second is that the sectarianism of post-2003 Iraq cannot be understood by excogitating its historical origins in late Ottoman, monarchical or early Ba’athist Iraq. Nor can it be solely attributed to the political arrangements made by the US-British occupation and its allies. It can only be understood by locating it in the specific kinds of violence, physical, bureaucratic and rhetorical, perpetrated by the Ba’athist regime and its opponents during the Iran–Iraq war and the 1991 intifada and its aftermaths. The violence of the regime was not sectarian in nature, but informed above all by the logic of security. Nevertheless, the state and the party targeted populations, particularly in the south, that were perceived as a potential threat because of their communal affiliation. While the intifada was largely non-sectarian popular rebellion, both the regime and the opposition portrayed it in sectarian terms.

KEYWORDS
sectarianism
security
violence
Ba’ath Party
bureaucracy
Iran–Iraq war
1991 intifada

I make these propositions to draw attention to the pitfalls of using sect as a natural category of knowledge. One of the persistent problems in most writings on post-2003 sectarian politics in Iraq is their lack of grounding in an analysis of the specific and complex ways in which the notion of sect is used to make claims to social and political rights by its proponents as well as to exclude those...
of other sects from such rights in the name of secular nationalism. In both cases, the category of sect often speaks for and about large segments within the community whose political, social and cultural allegiances cannot be easily subsumed under the categories of Shi’i or Sunni. Thus my assertion that the sectarian politics of present-day Iraq are rooted in last 23 years of Ba’athist rule is meant to highlight the contingency and fluidity of sectarian identities. At the same time, my focus on war and the 1991 uprising is an attempt to bring into the discussion the centrality of violence in the formation of sectarian identities. The dynamics of violence, as Gynendra Pandey has argued in his analysis of Hindu-Muslim riots in India, is as important to our understanding of sectarianism and communalism as are explanations that draw on an analysis of social, economic and political factors. These factors do not explain the intensity of violence, or the reasons that communities that have coexisted for some time are capable of perpetuating violence against each other (Pandey 1991). One has to turn to less tangible factors to understand sectarian violence, in particular to the manner in which categories of ‘enemy’ and ‘friend’ are used by the perpetrators and victims of violence. To what extent are these categories products of the construction of the ‘other’ that had been ingrained by the institutions, bureaucracies and cultural practices of the nation state? Does violence reshape and create new notions of community?

Critical examination of sectarianism or communalism in postcolonial states is, more often than not, the product of eruptions of violence. The study of sectarianism in Iraq is no different. Iraqi intellectuals and scholars who write on Iraq began to raise the problem of sectarianism in Iraq in the aftermath of the 1991 intifada and its brutal suppression by the regime. Iraqi exiles wrote openly of the sectarian politics of the Ba’athist regime and its antecedents (al-Azri 1991; Makiya 1993; Matar 2003; al-Nahl 2001; al-Zaydi 1990, 1993). Scholars began to write on Shi’i politics and history and link it to the development of the dominant brands of nationalism in Iraq: Arab nationalism and Iraqi patriotism (Jabar 2002, 2003; Nakash 1994; Trapp 2002; Zubaida 2002). Furthermore, the current interest in sectarian identities in Iraq developed in the wake of the resurgence of ethnic and communal politics, much of it violent, in societies that experienced a failed national secular state. A great deal of the scholarship about Iraq in the 1990s focused on the neo-tribal policies of the regime and its impact on Iraqi society (Burrur 1997; Jabar 2003; Jabar and Dawood 2003). Yet, with few notable exceptions, scholars who use the term tribalism and sectarianism do so with a great attention to their deployment by the political elite, but little concern for their historically specific meaning. While tribalism has a long historiography in Iraq, one cannot say the same about sectarianism. The lack of serious analysis of sectarianism is in large part the result of the paucity of work based on research into sectarian politics in Iraqi history.

However, there is a rich literature on communalism and sectarianism in India and Lebanon that can illuminate our study of sectarian politics in Iraq. For India, which has the longest tradition of writing on communalism, the latest revisionist assessment of communalism came in the aftermath of the violence of the Hindu-Muslim riots of the late 1980s. In Lebanon, another country with a history of writing on sectarianism, the civil war led to a serious reassessment of our understanding of sectarianism. Whereas, nationalist as well as Marxist historians had viewed communalism and sectarianism as by-products of colonial policies that sought to divide and rule, the new scholarship posits sectarianism and communalism as bound to the advent of modernity, the development of nationalism and the creation of the nation state. Recent studies of communalism in India and sectarianism in Lebanon have pointed to the constructed character of categories of sect and community. Communalism and sectarianism do not mark aberrations in the otherwise peaceful development of the nation state. On the contrary, they constitute part of the workings of the nation state. They are embedded in the manner in which state institutions, laws and public culture construct categories of difference (Chatterjee 1993; Makdisi 1996, 2000; Pandey 1999). In Lebanon, studies by Makdisi and Giban have demonstrated how the sect was part of the nation. The Lebanese state is a construct of different sects. The political and social rights that accrue to citizens are inseparable from the individual’s sect. The twinning of sect and nation is clear. The sectarian violence of the Lebanese civil war, far from being an irrational outbreak of ancient hatreds, becomes an extreme form of practicing politics (Gibran 1996; Makdisi 1996).

The Lebanese example of sectarian politics provides a template for those studying the sectarianism of post-invasion Iraq. It might be, however, more illuminating for our study of sectarian identities in Iraq to examine the relationship of Indian nationalism to communalism. According to Pandey, communalism in India is the product of a specific articulation of Indian nationalism and the institutionalization of that nationalism through the practices of the postcolonial state. Leaders and intellectuals of Indian nationalism articulated a bifurcated view of the Indian nation. On the one hand, the core of Indian nationalism was secular, implicitly Hindu and modern. On the other, minorities, particularly Muslims and others with communal loyalties, were excluded from the narrative of this nationalism because they possessed unchanging cultural essences that stood in the way of their integration into the modern secular nation state. The modern Indian state has transformed this division of a secular national core and a communal fragment into political arrangements of majority and minority. Violence perpetrated in the name of communal identities becomes, in this rendition of Indian nationhood, an irrational refusal on the part of minority communities to become part of the modern secular state. Against this notion of viable and explosive violence, Pandey argues for the kind of everyday violence that comes with the creation of a national community that marginalizes others who do not accept its notions of secular national self. ‘Routine violence’, as Pandey calls it, is the product of two processes: the particular institutions of state, legal, cultural and educational, that create and recreate what he calls majorities and minorities, and the translation of these divisions into ‘our daily-life behavior, the way we construct and respond to neighbors as well as strangers, in the books and magazines we read’. Communal explosive violence is the product of the intersection of these two processes (Pandey 2000: 8).

Pandey assigns equal importance to the everyday workings of state bureaucracies and to public culture in creating and perpetuating communal and sectarian difference. It is to these two aspects of Ba’athist rule during the Iran–Iraq war that I would like to turn in order to assess the impact of war on the formation of sectarian identities in Iraq. In doing so, I attempt to avoid an analysis of sectarianism in terms of the policies of Ba’athist leadership or the pronouncements of Saddam Hussein, although these are no doubt important to take into consideration. I draw in my analysis on the archives of the Iraq Memory Foundation, now at the Hoover Institute, and on oral interviews I conducted in Amman and Syria with veterans of the Iran–Iraq war and the First Gulf War.

An analysis of the functioning of the Ba’ath party bureaucracy during the wars shows that the exigencies of armed conflict pushed the regime and the
In this article on the social rights of citizenship, the party to modify and create new categories of exclusion and inclusion regarding the social rights of citizenship. These were not informed by sectarian logic but by the logic of security. The overriding concern of the local party cadres was to ensure that the population did not threaten the regime, did not succumb to Iranian propaganda, continued to provide men to the war effort and bore the social and private costs of the war without rebelling. Nevertheless, it was precisely this concern with security that defined the southern province, as well as its Kurdish north, as areas of threat and hence requiring surveillance (Fischermann 1994). The south was at the front lines of the battle against Iran; it was predominantly Shi'a and the scene of intense Iranian propaganda. The party bureaucracy in the south, like its counterpart in the Kurdish areas in the north, was engaged in a form of counter-insurgency in addition to its strictly political and organizational activities. It is important, however, not to read this concern with security in sectarian terms. Most of the upper echelons of the local party cadres were drawn from long-time residents. At the same time, there were differences in political allegiances, in social standing and in loyalty to the regime among cities and between urban and rural areas. Nevertheless, it is the logic of security, the treatment by the regime and the Ba'ath party of the southern areas as a perpetual threat, that lay the groundwork for the violence of the 1991 uprising and the development of Shi'a sectarian identity in the 1990s. The bureaucratisation of the Ba'ath party had been well under way before the Iran–Iraq war (Maljaia 1998). During the Iran–Iraq war, local Ba'ath party offices developed into bureaucracies that monitored, surveyed and registered populations within their jurisdiction. The process of surveying and registering populations was carried out in cooperation with the local offices of the Department of General Security (mudiriyat al-an-nis-i'am), the head of the local neighborhood or village (mukhtar), and local branches of institutions from the Office of Military Recruitment to the administration of institutions. This was part of a conscious policy instituted in the wake of the suppression of the Da'wa party in late 1979 to involve Ba'ath party cadres in security operations against the regime's enemies and to ensure the free flow of information between both the party and security apparatus. During the war, the process of record keeping involved creating knowledge about political enemies, but more importantly, about potential male conscripts in schools and about the families of deserters, martyrs and prisoners of war (POWs). I will draw on different sets of Ba'ath party records from the southern provinces of Basra and Maysan, provinces that were at the centre of the 1991 intifada, to provide a window into the categories the regime devised to exclude citizens from social rights.

In the first half of the 1980s, the generalsecretariat of the Ba'ath Party in cooperation with the general directorate of security began to systematically collect information on male secondary school students in the terminal classes in all eighteen provinces of Iraq. The information culled from these registers was used to exclude students who had family members guilty of crimes against the regime from colleges and institutions of state that were deemed essential to the maintenance of a Ba'athist nation. A dual system of distinction was used for each student: the first listed the students' party affiliation and ethnicity; the second, under the fluid heading of 'comments' (mukha'at), listed information about family members: outlawed political party affiliation, deserters, POWs and those executed because of their 'criminal activity'. The first distinction marked the categories of inclusion in a Ba'athist nation state: one's political rights were confined to being either a Ba'athist or an independent, and citizenship rights were granted, in principle if not in practice, to all ethnicities in Iraq unless one belonged to the ill-defined ethnicity of 'Persian affiliation'. The second distinction was not fully articulated under a formal and generalised category. It listed those who were to be excluded from full social and citizenship rights. The range of exclusions was expansive and at times arbitrary. The rationale, however, was at times that of security. In Basra and Maysan provinces in 1987–88, these included having relatives who belonged to the Da'wa or Communist parties, relatives who had deserted from the army, relatives who had been executed, relatives who were POWs and whose loyalties were questionable, relatives who had insulted others or relatives who had criticized the armed forces and a myriad other reasons.

Two aspects of the kind of knowledge produced by these registers are significant for our understanding of the routine manner in which exclusions could serve to highlight communal differences. The first is that the individual's rights were always connected to that of his family. Family was defined as those related to the individual in the first degree, that is to say parents, spouses, children and siblings, and the second degree, maternal and paternal uncles and their descendants. The link of the individual citizen to his extended family was used by the Ba'athist state as a technique of control, punishment and surveillance meant to penetrate the private domain of the family and transform it into a means of regulating the behaviour of its members. In southern areas, with a history of opposition to the regime and where the loyalty of the population was made suspect by the war with Iran, the form of collective 'guilt' created a sense of grievance and exacerbated regional and sectarian differences. The second significant aspect of the registers was that the categories of exclusions, although never defined in communal terms, could affect populations that were deemed 'problematic' by the regime more than others. During the war, Shi'a deserters and POWs were punished by the regime by joining the opposition in Iran or the Kurdish north. Their families were put under scrutiny, and local branches of the Ba'ath Party as well as by the general security apparatus.

Basra and Maysan provinces were at the front lines of the war with Iran. Not only did they serve as centres for the mobilisation and deployment of troops to the southern front, their population suffered from Iranian bombardment and a number of villages had to be emptied of their residents to avoid casualties. In addition, the southern marshes of Maysan province as well as the agricultural areas around Basra were cleared of vegetation to allow for the movement of troops and ensure that these border areas do not serve as hideouts for Iranian troops or Iraqi deserters. The conquest of Basra and control of Amara were viewed by the Iranian regime as essential to dissolving the Ba'ath and installing a pro-Iranian government in Iraq.

Both provinces were scenes of intense propaganda on the part of the Iranian and the Iraqi regimes. The Iranian regime made no secret of its intentions, particularly after 1982, of taking Basra in the hope that its Shi'i population would rebel against the regime. It used Da'wa party members, exiled in Iran, to recruit supporters from sectors of the population who had had family members executed by the Ba'ath or who were sympathetic to the party. They were asked to spread rumours about the weakness of the regime and the Iraqi army and prepare the population for the imminent conquest of the region by the Iranian army. The Iranian regime was well aware of these attempts by Iran to appeal to the sectarian affiliation of its Shi'i population, and openly called the Iranian regime and the Da'wa party sectarian. In practical terms, however, the regime and the party singled the areas south of Baghdad, particularly Basra, Maysan,
These categories were not conceived in sectarian terms. They did, however, affect the populations of the Shi‘i south more than other areas of Arab Iraq and thus had the unintended consequence of promoting sectarian identities.

While the routine practices of the bureaucracy of party and state contributed to creating a sense of communal grievance by the population of southern Iraq, it is to the institutions of public culture one needs to turn to understand the vehemence of the rhetoric of sectarian difference that emerged during and immediately after the 1991 insurad.l Much has been written on the role of the propaganda unleashed by the state during the Iran–Iraq war against the Iranian regime. Its racial underpinnings and its deployment of the language of hate have also been well documented (Davis 2002; Makly 1998). In this respect, Ba‘athist propaganda during the war did not differ much from propaganda unleashed by other nations at war. It had a great deal in common with Soviet propaganda during World War II. More significant for our understanding of the war’s impact on sectarian identities is a set of distinctions made by party cadres and by the popular press, distinctions that played a role in the narratives of violence that emerged during and in the aftermath of the insurad.

The Iraqi regime was aware of the Iranian leadership’s attempts to export its brand of revolutionary Islam to Iraq and beyond. Under the auspices of the Ministry of Awqaf and Religious Affairs, it trained religious scholars and sent them to areas in the south as well as to the front to explain the differences between Arab and Persian Islam.11 Party cadres in the south organized education sessions for members and supporters that focused on spelling out these differences. Ali was an Arab, and his Islam was the true Islam distinguished by the Persians. Khomeini spread extremism and sectarianism and desrgated Arab Islam. He falsely laid claim to leadership of the Shi‘i community and was seeking to establish an empire under the guise of religion.12 The distinction between Arab and Persian Islam, while framed in ethnic terms, singled out the Shi‘i population. The distinction between secular and modern, on the one hand, and religious and medieval, on the other, played a significant role in mobilizing support for the war, particularly among the urban middle-class populations in the southern cities such as Basra and Nasiriyah where the communists and secular nationalists had a strong presence in the 1970s. The war was re-informed by the popular press in cartoons that showed bearded Iranian soldiers, with green headbands and keys to heaven tied around their necks. Against such images, the Iraqi soldiers stood as masculine, mustachioed, secular and modern (Rohde 2010).

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I explore some of these distinctions in my forthcoming book on war, citizenship and memory in Iraq.

Al-Qadisiyya, 7 November 1991, 5 for the information on Basra Maliki and M.F. RCSC, Birth party reports on the uprising: 3420-0002-0827 for the information on Qadisiyya and the other clan.

drew on the rhetoric of the Ba'athist state as a modernizing regime that had uplifted the 'backward' areas of Iraq from poverty and ignorance. Despite their non-sectarian nature, these distinctions were deployed by the regime during and after the intifada as implicit designations of the Shi'a population of the south. Witnesses associated the Islamism banners that were raised in cities like Najaf, Karbala and Amara with the advent of an Iranian brand of Shi'i Islam.

The intifada was a catalytic event in the history of Iraq under Ba'athist rule. The scale and chaotic nature of the rebellion, its violence and the brutal suppression by the regime continue to be part of the politics of memory that pervades public culture in Iraq. The current regime has attempted to portray it as the heroic resistance of the Shi'a population of the south against the regime. It has implicitly sought to associate it with Shi'a Iraq (Khoury 2011). In the immediate aftermath of the intifada, the Ba'athist regime sought to present it as a conspiracy of Iraq and its agents but also singled out the southern Shi'a population as ungrateful recipients of the largesse of the regime and its development projects (Makiya 1993; al-Salhi 1998). For the regime and the party the default view of the Shi'a south was that of culpability. Those who had cooperated with the regime in the region were rewarded for their loyalty by various grants and medals that were portrayed in the press as acts of charity by the ruler grateful for the obedience of his subjects. At the same time, the Iraqi opposition in Damascus was careful to paint the intifada as a national uprising with a coherent leadership (Joint Committee of Iraqi Opposition Forces 1991). However, the daily reports issued from the office of Ayyadallah al-Sayyid Muhammad Taqi al-Dina Mudaraseh, the head of the opposition party Islamic Action Front, during and in the immediate aftermath of the intifada, stressed the sectarian nature of the regime and its singling out of the Shi'a population (Khoury 2011; al-Majidi 1991).

Yet reports issued by party members on the scene and sent to the Baghdad office of the party, then under the leadership of Sa'da Mahdi al-Salih, as well as to the general secretariat, point to a more complex picture of the intifada. The causes of the intifada are attributed to the disintegration of the army as it withdrew from Kuwait and to the chaos that ensued in the south. The intifada was a localized event with no unified leadership. In areas like Najaf, Karbala and Maysan, the rebels openly espoused a sectarian agenda calling for the establishment of an Islamic state and carried pictures of al-Hadkim and Khominei. In other areas such as Dhi Qar and Qadisiyya provinces, the uprising was led by an alliance of army officers and tribal leaders with no political agenda beyond dislodging the regime. More significant is the manner by which the mobilization of the intifada took place. The rebels drew on kin and clan networks to take over control of the cities of the south. Certain Shi'a clans such as al-Yasiyya in Qadisiyya played a crucial role, while others such as the Banu Malik of Basra and a clan from the area of Hamza of Qadisiyya offered their services to the regime in suppressing the intifada. Clearly, there were large sectors of the Shi'a population of the south who stood on the sidelines of the uprising or worked actively with the regime to suppress it. Immediately after the intifada, the regime undertook a mapping of the Shi'a population of the south establishing a hierarchy of guilt and criminal behaviour that linked 'culprits' to their kin and rewarded those who stood against the rebels (Khoury 2011).

A close examination of party documents issued during and immediately after the intifada for the provinces of Basra and Maysan gives us a glimpse into the ways in which the kinds of knowledge created by the bureaucratic and rhetorical practices of the Ba'ath during the Iran-Iraq war factored into the reports on the intifada and the punishments meted out by the regime against its perpetrators. The reports demonstrate the extent to which the populations targeted by the regime during the 1980s, that is to say, families of the executed and martyred, deserters and returning POWs, played a role in the leadership of the uprising. According to popular narrative of the uprising, it began in Sa'd square in Basra, a hub for the movement of troops during the Iran-Iraq war and the Iran-Iraq war. It has now become part of the mythology of the intifada that the uprising was spurred by an iconic gesture on the part of a soldier who shot at the picture of Saddam Hussein. True or false, the narrative of a beginning of the intifada gives a coherence to what was in fact an uprising that took place simultaneously and independently in many parts of southern Iraq. However, the myth captures what is an essential component of the uprising in Basra as in other parts of the south: it was fuelled by returning soldiers who were hungry, bedraggled and tired of being at war.

Three aspects of the documents by Ba'ath party cadre are important to highlight: the first is the loss of territorial sovereignty over the southern border regions of Iraq. As the populations of the south fled to the violence from Saudi Arabia and to Iran, one of the functions of the local security and party offices was to keep record of those who fled and returned and those who remained outside Iraq. Increasingly in the 1990s, one of the primary security concerns of local party offices in the south was the reporting on two new categories of people: escapees and returnees from Iran and Saudi Arabia who had come back and were classified as 'repentant'. Rights to employment, benefits and a number of other entitlements were now denied to families of escapees and circumscribed for 'repentant' returnees. The second significant aspect of these reports is the information they provided on the targets of the rebels' anger and looting. Official buildings, particularly buildings of the local general security, the Ba'ath, the Directorate of Censorship and the directorate of military recruitment wereanaganched and at times burned. Those who wrote the reports sought to portray the looting and violence as non-political acts of destruction by mobs that had gone wild. The regime's propaganda after the war portrayed the population of the south as barbaric, engaged in the destruction of all institutions and structures of a modern state. Yet, the target of the rebels was more often than not those institutions of state that had surveyed, monitored and excluded many of them during the Iran-Iraq war (Khoury 2011). Finally, the party documents point to centrality of the system of record keeping to the security of the state. As the rebels had destroyed much of the records kept at the local offices of institutions of state and party, it became necessary soon after the intifada to conduct surveys to allocate the guilt and innocence of different sectors of the population. Local branches of the Ba'ath party conducted the first survey of matriculating secondary school students in 1991. Under the section of 'comments', the level of participation of student and his family in the intifada was recorded. Not only was it important to report on the intifada, but also to place its participants under categories of exclusion (deceased, executed, POW) that had developed during the Iran-Iraq war. Participants were again located in a grid of kin and neighbourhood and their new 'crime' classified within specific definitions of levels of participation. Thus, in Basra province, the areas of Talha, Zuhair and Suwana, the levels of participation were high, culprits were listed according to a hierarchy of criminal activity ranging from running trucks that helped rebels, the looting of silos and leading of a 'gang' of 'criminals'. Punishments of individuals and families were meted out according to this hierarchy.
By 15 March 1991, the uprising had been effectively suppressed in Basra. In Maysan, control of the province remained tenuous throughout the 1990s and the borders with Iran porous despite the massive effort by the government to drain the marshlands. A member of the General Federation of Iraqi Women submitted the most detailed account of the uprising in April of 1991. Amara, another center for the movement of troops during the Iran-Iraq war and the first Gulf wars, was flooded with soldiers trying to find transportation to take them home. Many had come from Kuwait to Amara on foot, changed into civilian clothes and sold their arms to buy their way home. The attacks on government buildings were carried out by four categories of people: the families of those executed for belonging to the Da'wa party, the families who had been arrested, the families who had been killed in the first Gulf war, and the families who had been killed in the second Gulf war. The leaders of the uprising ran their day-to-day operations from mosques and espoused an openly Shi'ite Islamic agenda. In the school registers issued a few months after the uprising, the link between the human losses caused by war and violence and the rebellion became clearer. For instance, that of Qasim al-Salman, the 11th matriculating students of one secondary school who had been between them: a brother killed in Qadsiyah, a brother killed in Umm al-Ma'arik (the first Gulf war), an uncle killed in Qadsiyah, and a brother executed for belonging to the Da'wa party; and an uncle who was a member of the Communist Party. The party used the same hierarchy of 'criminal activity' as the one employed for Basra to punish participants in the intifada. It differentiated between those who had fled to Iran to escape the violence and returned and those who remained in Iran, those who merely participated in the uprising and those who engaged in acts of looting and destruction.

The categories of exclusion espoused by the regime in the aftermath of the uprising were not openly sectarian. Rather, they were informed by the logic of counterinsurgency against a population that had sought to overthrow it. In the wake of the intifada, the Office of the Affairs of the South (mukhtar tambim al-junub) retained the same secretariat that the Ba'ath acquired in Maysan, with the offices of the Affairs of the North (mukhtar tambim al-shamali) established in the 1970s to manage the Kurdish insurgency. As in the Kurdish north, the techniques of counterinsurgency were premised on the control of the Shi'ite population because of its communal affiliation. As the list of 'crimes' against the state grew to include participants in the uprising and escapers, the Shi'ite population of the south was increasingly targeted by the regime.

No less important than the categories developed by the party and state bureaucracies to assign guilt during the uprising was the rhetoric used by the regime and its opponents as well as some of my interviewees. In some respects, the rhetoric picked up on the on the designations of 'self' and 'other' that had emerged in public culture during the Iran-Iraq war, in others it echoed the apocalyptic and millenarian rhetoric that had pervaded the Iraqi press during the first Gulf war and the uprising and began to spread among sectors of the Shi'ite population in its aftermath (Khoury 2011). Two sets of distinctions that appeared in the press of the 1980s were reiterated by some of my interviewees. The first is the distinction between 'modern', urban, and secular, on the one hand; 'backward', rural, and religious, on the other. The second was the locus of rational civilized behaviour whereas the other was marked by irrationality and disorder. A number of my interviewees spoke of the chaos of the uprising and associated it with rural populations that had come to the city wearing traditional dress (dishdasha). Others described the rebels as bearded (muhtairah) and stated clearly that they did not want to live in an Iraq controlled by the 'turbaned ones' (mu'awaman) (Khoury 2011). Others viewed the uprising as a threat to the secular nature of Iraq by the Shi'ite populations of the south that had ties with Iran. This view was shared by both Shi'ites and Sunnis and seems to have been espoused by the urban secular middle class. Thus the rhetoric of difference that had developed during the Iran-Iraq war informed their understanding of the intifada. Underlying their narrative, however, was a view of the south as, at least certain sectors of the southern population, as more 'backward' than the other parts of the country and prone to religious allegiances coloured by links to Iran.

The second distinction, particularly among interviewees from the south, was that between an Iranian style theocratic regime and an Iraqi government that incorporated the communal demands of Shi'ites without succumbing to Iran. One of the participants of the uprising in Najaf withdrew into his home when he witnessed one of the rebel's tearing the Iraqi flag off of a building and installing a green flag. He pointed to the difference in dress between him, a modern man, and some of the leaders of the uprising in Najaf who were dressed in traditional garb. He also stated that, while as a Shi'ite he had grievances against the state, he was not wedded to a Shi'ite theocracy. Conscious or not he associated the latter with an irrational understanding of religion. A Ba'athist, a supporter of Muhammad Sadik al-Sad, sympathetic to Khomeni and adamantly opposed to the Ba'ath, made a clear distinction between an Iranian Shi'ism grounded in the southern landscape of Iraq and Iranian Shi'ism.

Perhaps the most potent factor in cementing sectarian differences within Iraq during and after the rebellion was the apocalyptic language used to describe the violence by the official Iraqi press, the opposition press and those who experienced it first hand. The use of this language began during the first Gulf war. The regime portrayed the war, which pitted an alliance of 50 states led by the United States and Britain against the Iraqi army, as a battle between the forces of good and evil. During the 45 days of the war, the intense bombing by advanced weaponry of much of Iraq's infrastructure, together with the fleeing of retreating soldiers coming back from Kuwait, created a narrative of war as a time of unfettered violence. The apocalyptic description of the violence of the intifada was portrayed by the press and narrated by its victims as the final stage in a period that stood outside ordinary time. The Iraqi press carried the accounts of Ba'athist witnesses and victims of the intifada whose accounts spoke of violence perpetrated by 'agents' of Iran. But the details of the narrative carried a kernel of truth. Editorials on the intifada portrayed it as a modern version of the war of apostasy waged against the early Islamic state after the death of the Prophet. The south came to represent in the official accounts of the intifada a space of chaos and disbelieve; its population represented by the actions of the participants of the uprising. Cenotaphing the sense of a past outside history was the policy of the regime of filming some of the spectacularly violent actions of its leaders in suppressing the intifada. In a widely circulated tape, for example, Major General Kamal al-Tikriti is filmed asking the security to tie the body of a young man to two trucks that will tear it apart. Rumours circulating in the southern provinces alluded to women who wore bags over their heads and pointed out the participants of the intifada to the security apparatus.

The opposition press described the sectarian nature of the violence perpetuated by the regime. The Republican Guard in Basra are said to have poisoned bread and oranges and given them to children. The bodies of the martyrs of
uprising were stuffed in the mouths of tanks and shot at villages as the Republican Guard advanced (al-Majid 1991: 20-22). The opposition also circulated a video of the storming of Karbala by the Republican Guard. It and other videos of the violence are widely circulated in electronic sites that seek to memorialize the uprising (Khoury 2011).

So disruptive was the intifada’s violence, that rumors began circulating among certain mosques in Basra of the imminent return of the Mahdi to southern Iraq. The extent to which this view was widely held is difficult to ascertain. But the view gained currency among populations of the south in the 1990s, and the regime had to battle the proliferation of videos and videos that openly preached the coming of the millennium and disseminated the ideas of the Shi’ite cleric Ahmad al-Waili. Underlying the belief in the millennium’s was the need on the part of sectors of the Shi’ite population in the south to explain the cataclysmic violence that had engulfed their region.

**CONCLUSION**

The preamble to the 2005 Iraqi Constitution describes the Bau’thi regime as sectarian, a designation that the fallen regime used against Shi’ite political formations during the 1980s and 1990s. Was the Bau’thi regime sectarian or is sectarian politics a new phenomenon in Iraq brought on by the post-2003 political arrangements between the United States and the United States in 2003? The Bau’thi regime was not sectarian in the same way as the post-2003 political arrangements between the United States and the United States in 2003. Power was not allocated on the basis of sectarian lines, nor was it a factor in the categories developed by the state to provide entitlements and other social rights. The regime’s main concern was with obedience and security. It was, to put it somewhat facetiously, an equal opportunity oppressor.

Having said that, however, it is important to distinguish between the explicit politics of sectarianism and the everyday and often hidden practices of state and party bureaucracies in their dealings with populations perceived as a security threat because of their communal or ethnic affiliation. During the Iran-Iraq War and especially after the uprising, local institutions of state as well as the party engaged in forms of counterinsurgency. The practices of surveillance, counting, monitoring, indoctrinating and educating targeted the southern population in ways that re-inforced a sense of difference from other parts of Iraq. This difference was not always articulated explicitly in communal terms, but rather in regional terms. The violence of the uprising and its suppression only exacerbated these communal and regional differences. It is essential for our understanding of the current political climate in Iraq to ground our analysis in an understanding not only of a particular form of sectarian politics practiced by the current government but in a deeper understanding of its roots in the last 23 years of Bau’thi rule. Sectarianism in its current form is new to Iraq, but the practices of the current regime built on those of its predecessor in ways that need to be explored further.

**REFERENCES**


The sectarian state in Iraq
and the new political class

ABSTRACT
This article serves as a critical examination of sectarianism in Iraqi society and politics, considering both its historical origins and its contemporary manifestations. The article thus evaluates the sectarian question in two parts: (1) its historical context in the Iraqi milieu and (2) the uses of social sectarianism for political purposes in modern Iraq. This provides the framework for a critical evaluation of the assorted actors, both Iraqi and foreign, who have used sectarianism to advance their parochial interests in occupied Iraq.

The historical survey of sectarianism examines the social and folkloric bases of social sectarianism in modern Iraq. We argue that the manifestation of sectarianism in contemporary Iraq was transformed from a social phenomenon into a political programme under the Anglo-American military occupation. Even before the occupation, a primary theme of global discourse on Iraq (1990–2002) was the attempt by external actors to embed political sectarianism into the political dynamics of Iraq.

This essay argues that the violent and highly politicized form of sectarianism that currently characterizes Iraq is the result of a deliberate manipulation of social differences that had been largely transcended in Iraq’s major urban centres through decades of national state-building. The processes of this ‘new sectarianism’ are evaluated in terms of the political and legal mechanisms that have been institutionalized in occupied Iraq. The primary instigators of this new sectarianism are identified as Anglo-American occupation authorities; regional actors; and, critically, a class of...

KEYWORDS
sectarianism
Iraqi politics
United States (US) in Iraq
US policy in Iraq
Iranian foreign/ regional policy
fundamentalism
‘Carpathoggers’ originated as a term in the 1920s to describe the influx of political refugees, particularly Polish and Ukrainian, who migrated to Iraq in the aftermath of World War I. Similarly, in the 1990s, the term ‘carpathoggers’ was applied to Iraqi expatriates who were parachuted into power by occupation forces and have since developed narrow sectarian constituencies in the pursuit of their parochial interests. The development of this expatriate political class is examined in terms of the patronage it receives from foreign forces, particularly American and British, and in its ongoing dependence on external actors.

INTRODUCTION

The Anglo-American invasion of Iraq in 2003 represented the crescendo of a western policy that had left Iraq economically crippled, militarily weak and in an ever-present humanitarian crisis. Through comprehensive economic sanctions that were applied by the UN following the 1991 Gulf War, the foundations of Iraq’s social infrastructure were crippled, destroying the country’s once-esteemed education and health services, and creating a state of desperation among the populace. In hindsight, the goal of the sanctions regime appears to have been to shake the socio-economic foundation of Iraq, and thus, the social cohesion of the Iraqi national project that had developed progressively since 1920.

Given the desperate conditions imposed by the sanctions regime, Iraq was singularly unprepared for the military onslaught of Anglo-American forces in 2003, and in the successive years of occupation, Iraq has been dominated by forces of sectarian violence, national disarray and factionalism. The violent sectarianism that had since characterized Iraqi politics and society is, however, a modern development. Social sectarianism — represented by competing historical narratives and beliefs, chauvinistic attitudes and social/political resentments — has been variably present in Iraqi and Islamic history, but sectarianism as an explicit and violent political ideology has never been the norm in Iraq history. The violent sectarianism that now dominates Iraqi society is a political phenomenon, the outcome of a series of deliberately chosen policies undertaken by western occupation authorities and its Iraqi allies.

The Iraqi national project, constructed over decades of uneven, often oppressive state-building, had nevertheless in large measure suppressed communal factionalism and sectarianism. Resting upon accumulated beliefs and legends of Iraqi nationhood, Islamic and Arab heritage and a historic pride in one’s country representing a ‘cradle of civilization’, Iraqi nationalism had been established as the primary credo, even when the country descended into various forms of dictatorial rule. The rapid collapse of Iraq into internecine warfare and political sectarianism is thus shocking in its intensity. This article surveys the social conditions and political decisions that gave rise to this state of affairs.

SOCIAL SECTARIANISM

As used here, the concept of social sectarianism connotes the rigid adherence to a social doctrine of religious, cultural, ethnic or tribal superiority and intolerance towards others. Sectarianism is the generation of animus and feelings of exclusion between individuals and groups on the basis of attaching negative meaning to group traits. Social sectarianism has been observable throughout history. In the case of modern Iraq, forms of social sectarian tension often manifested themselves in conflicts between a secularizing state and religious and tribal and ethnic communities suspicious of secular and nationalist state-building projects. After the emergence of modern Iraq following World War I and the dissolution of the Ottoman Empire, these sectarian tensions were evident in the relations and negotiations between the secular Iraqi state and the Iraqi tribes. In the development of the Iraqi state in the early twentieth century, the structural tension between state and society, on the one hand, and between urban-based and rural-based elites, on the other, shaped two interacting though distinct Iraqi spheres. One sphere comprised the segmented tribal-rural sectarian oriented social systems that were cut off from each other and from the main flow of world history; while the other encompassed the urban-based secular-oriented social systems populated with a heterogeneous mix of disaffected old-guard elites, an emerging middle class of state functionaries, professionals, military staff and a budding working class largely composed of marginalized peasantry immigrating into the urban centres for work (Hajj, 1963; Isma‘il, 1970: 100–21). These two spheres of Iraqi society increasingly intersected with one another, embodied in population migration, casting competing visions of society and politics against one another. Now caught in the main currents of world history following World War I — the collapse of the Ottoman Empire and the retreatment of western imperialism — Baghdad, Basra and Mosul became centres where the ideas of modernity, independence, sovereignty, development, tradition, imperialism and exploitation were all juxtaposed against one another. It was in this tumultuous environment of ideas that the secular principles of social equity took root in the popular political culture of urban Iraqi society.

With the establishment of the modern Iraqi state in 1920, a general trend emerged that led the country towards secular development, chiefly through the vehicles of education, the state bureaucracy and the military. The expansion of the bureaucratic state and urbanization, along with the state’s role as an architect of re-engineering society through promoting progressive development goals, coalesced to make both religion and tribe less influential as determinants of an individual’s life chances, especially in the urban centres. This phenomenon gained much prominence with the establishment of the republican regime in 1958 and the influx of petro-dollars. Religious fervour subsided in the urban centres and was replaced by the pursuit of secular ambitions, thus, gradually closing the gap between Shi‘i and Sunni politico-religious ideologies (al-Wardi 1995: 259–60). However, this erosion of sectarian feeling was a largely urban phenomenon. Rural and village social sectarianism fostered, even while the power and authority of village tribal and religious elite were on the decline. And while the intensity of this rural-based social sectarianism was ameliorated through state-building projects, sectarian sentiments persisted in the local political cultures. Nevertheless, while sectarianism persisted in its social forms, sectarianism as a political project was rare in contemporary Iraqi history, ephemeral rather than systematic in nature.

MODERN IRAQI POLITICS AND THE DEVELOPMENT OF IRAQ’S POLITICAL DIASPORA

Iraqi politics in the second half of the twentieth century was characterized, on the one hand, by a vast state-engineered project to incateuate national feeling through the construction of an elaborate public sector and Iraqi political vision, and, on the other, by varying levels of political oppression and social
reconstruction. Under the Ba'athist regime, particularly with the ascension of Saddam Hussein to power in 1979, the Ba'ath party and the state became synonymous and engaged in campaigns of mass repression, with the goal of destroying all organized opposition. These policies created the conditions for the rise of a support class of political elites that tended to represent narrow parochial interests and become vulnerable to the influence of external actors. Of the Shi'i opposition groups, one of the more significant that developed during the exile period was the Supreme Council for the Islamic Revolution in Iraq (SCIRI). Founded in Iran by Baqir al-Hakim in November 1982, its paramilitary Badr Brigade was trained and financed by Tehran, to fight alongside Iranian troops during the Iran-Iraq war (1980-88). SCIRI included mainly Shi'i Islamists and aimed to take over Iraq once Saddam Hussein was ousted. During this same period, Britain attempted to engineer an anti-Khomeini Shi'i bloc that could be deployed should one of the warring parties - Iraq or Iran - be vanquished. This bloc was composed of a pro-West religious Marj'iyas, without Khomeini's jurisprudence custodianship, which was prepared to fill an anticipated power vacuum. Many such dissident expatriates flocked to London during this period. Prominent on the list were Ibrahim al-Jafari and Muwafaq al-Rubai'i from the Da'wa party and al-Seyyid Muhammad Bahr al-Ulum and Hussein al-Shami from Iran, all of whom went to London in the mid-1980s and obtained British passports (see Allawi 2007: 78-82, al-'Alawi 2006: 218-19).

Along with the SCIRI, the most significant exile movement to develop in the pre-invasion period was the Da'wa party. The Da'wa fragmented into four splinter groups located, respectively, in London, Syria, Iran and Iraq. In the 1980s, Britain's attempt to build a surrogate Shi'i religious Marj'iyaa in London that could replace Shi'i loyalty ultimately failed. This led Britain to enlist the support of an anti-Khomeini religious luminary, Grand Ayatollah Murtada al-Akshar, who quickly rejected Britain's overtures (al-'Alawi 2009: 70). Nevertheless, an ambitious group of religious activists remained in Britain, with visions of seizing power in Iraq.

With the end of the Iran-Iraq war in 1988, and in spite of Iraq having accrued an insurmountable national debt, Saddam Hussein attempted to project an image as the defender of Arab nationalism and as the last line of defense against Iran and radical Shi'ism. The invasion of oil-rich Kuwait in August 1990 brought Hussein into direct conflict with US regional interests. A US-led military coalition resulted in the expulsion of Iraq's army from Kuwait in January 1991 and widespread destruction of the Iraqi military and the country's infrastructure. The US-led coalition vanquished Iraq's military forces, effectively rendering it an impotent regional power, and subsequently imposed, through the UN, a costly sanctions regime that impoverished the Iraqi population. The ultimate aim of the sanctions regime was to punish the Iraqi population as a prelude to toppling Saddam Hussein's regime. In the words of Robert Gates, then deputy national security advisor – and later secretary of defense under presidents Bush and Obama: 'Saddam is discredited and cannot be redeemed. His leadership will never be accepted by the world community. Therefore [...] Iraqis will pay the price while he remains in power. All possible sanctions will be maintained until he is gone' (Coobkum 2013a). Hence, according to US strategy, mere Iraqi compliance with the disarmament regime was insufficient since the policy of regime change was a fait accompli.

In anticipation of the Ba'athist regime's demise, the 1990s saw intense regional and international attempts to form opposition blocs or groups of Iraqi exiles to fill the vacuum of a post-Saddam Hussein Iraq. A common denominator among all such groups was their exile from Iraq for three to four decades, which left them without an indigenous base of support, and thus dependent on the support of foreign actors who could install them in power as a new political class of carpetbaggers.

Throughout the 1990s, Iraqi exile movements increasingly coordinated their activities with foreign and regional powers. In 1990, Damascus was, which ideologically opposed to Saddam Hussein's wing of the Ba'ath Party, formed an opposition front that comprised five irreconcilable factions, the Sa'adat al-'Arar al-Mushtaqar or Joint Action Committee (JAC), which consisted of the Arab Socialist Ba'ath Party-Syrian Branch, the Iraqi Communist Party, the Da'wa Party, SCIRI and the Kurdish Front. Except for the Kurdish Front, these opposition groups were subject to direct Syrian and Iranian influence. Likewise, Saudi Arabia attempted to develop an opposition front, though it never directly hosted Iraqi opposition exiles. A high-ranking Saudi intelligence figure, Brigadier Muhammad al-Utaibi, sought the help of a United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF) manager in Riyadh, Sabah Allawi, who was the brother of Iyad Allawi (a former Ba'athist and activist with ties to the CIA and MI-6). Iyad Allawi recruited Salih Umar al-'Ali, an ex-Iraqi minister, UN ambassador and former Ba'ath Party member, to join him in Saudi Arabia, thus heightening his stature (al-Zubaidi 2009). In November 1990, the two men were in Saudi Arabia where they received their first cheque from Saudi intelligence to found the 'Iraqi National Accord', which comprised both ex-Ba'athists and ex-military officers (al-Zubaidi 2009).

Between November 1990 and March 1991, a new and dangerous political principle was established by the five members of the JAC and the two Saudi-sponsored factions.7 The principle was called 'Al- 'Iftahar' or 'Al-Muhasa', which signifies, in English, consensus among political leaders as to the allotment of government positions among themselves (al-Zubaidi 2009). The principle of agreeing on the apportioning of political positions was a formula concocted by the Syrian- and Saudi-sponsored Iraqi exiles to distribute political power in a post-Saddam Hussein Iraq, gained strong support from regime change advocates in the United States. This support only emboldened the diaspora of political elites to further lobby the United States to help them implement their goal of taking power in Iraq.

The March-April 1991 uprising in Iraqi Kurdistan enjoyed the organizational leadership and battle-readiness of the Peshmerga paramilitaries, which allowed it to withstand Saddam Hussein's heavily armed military assault. The western imposition of the no-fly zone over Iraq's three Kurdish provinces forced the Iraqi military into retreat, and allowed the Kurdish leaders of the Kurdistan Democratic Party (KDP) and Patriotic Union of Kurdistan (PUK) to negotiate a cease-fire with Saddam Hussein's regime from a position of strength. Throughout the 1990s, the Kurds - who endured a fratricidal civil war between the PUK and KDP (1992-1998) - nevertheless enjoyed administrative autonomy and Iraqi Kurdistan served as a safe haven for other Iraqi opposition factions.

Unlike the success of Iraq's Kurds, the southern uprising in March 1991 was spontaneous, unorganized and without political or religious leadership, which hastened its bloody demise (Allawi 2007: 46-50). Nonetheless, during the Baghdad conference of March 1991, where Saudi Arabia paid $4 million to organize the 5+2, the Islamist groups under Iranian control stymied the conference with turgid propaganda extolling their leadership of the Shi'i uprising
in Iraq, thereby silencing other voices of opposition, including the two Saudi-sponsored organizations of Iyad Allawi (Iraqi National Accord) and Sa'ad Salih Jabr (Free Iraqi Council based in London). In this manner, the Iranian-sponsored Islamist groups, chiefly SCIRI, dominated the proceedings in an attempt to demonstrate their power within the Iraqi opposition movement. As a result, Saudi Arabia withdrew its funding of the JAC, and Iyad Allawi began to seek new foreign patrons, capitalizing on his links to MI-6, which he had cultivated after he fled Iraq for Britain in 1971. Between 1990 and 1992 about 100 opposition exile factions were established, though none could compete with the finances or external support of the IAC and develop an alternative opposition umbrella (Allawi 2007: 52; al-Zubaidi 2009).

Amidst this chaotic opposition political culture, Ahmad Chalabi (b.1944) emerged. A cousin of Iyad Allawi, Chalabi hails from a wealthy Shi'i family that left Iraq in 1959. In 1957, his family established the Petra Bank in Jordan, and entrusted its management to Chalabi, who enjoyed a prosperous career as manager. When the bank collapsed in 1989, Chalabi quickly left Jordan for London; later tried in absentia, he was charged, indicted and convicted for fraudulent practices and the embezzlement of $20 million, which had disappeared from the bank's balance sheet (Allawi 2007: 41–42, 51). Chalabi's activities between 1989 and 1992 are murky, especially his high-level connections within the U.S. government and policy-making circles (Allawi 2007: 66). Nevertheless, researchers have unearthed interesting details of this period. Israeli journalist Smadar Peri reported on 2 May 2003 that Chalabi was 'posted into the Americans' arms by Israeli intelligence' after they met with him in London in 1990. The head of the Israeli Defense Forces intelligence Research Branch, Major General Danany Rothschild, met Chalabi there, where they discussed Israeli efforts to collect information on the fate of Lieutenant-Colonel Ron Arad who had been captured in Lebanon by the Shi'i Amal militia in 1986. Chalabi promised to use his contacts in Tehran to investigate the issue. In later talks, Chalabi expressed hopes of transforming Iraq into a free and democratic society that would maintain warm ties with Israel and make northern Iraqi oil available through the defunct Haifa pipeline, all of which resonated well with Israel's desire to remove the rejectionist regime. Despite some reservations about Chalabi's character within Israeli intelligence circles, Israeli security officials recommended Chalabi to the American administration and connected him to senior advisers in the [Bush Sr.] White House, the Pentagon and the CIA (Peri 2003). Through its public relations arm, Rendon Company, the CIA was responsible for funding and funding the Iraqi National Congress (INC), which held its first meeting in Vienna in April 1992. Between 1992 and 1996, when the INC collapsed – as a result of irreconcilable personal rivalries among its major members – the CIA had already paid it $12 million. The United States found in Chalabi's ambitions a working façade for mobilizing Iraqi expatriates to replace the Hussein regime following its overthrow (Crosssowsky 2004; Dizard 2004; Peri 2003; Source Watch n.d.).

In 1992 the Clinton administration attempted to market Chalabi and the INC in the Arab world as a legitimate opposition to Saddam Hussein, while pressuring Saudi Arabia to officially host him and his two close associates, Layth Kubba and Muhammad Muhammad Ali. Although they were issued Saudi residency visas, no Saudi official met with them (al-Zubaidi 2009). In October 1992 an opposition meeting was held in Saludhuddin, Iraqi Kurdistan, under the tutelage of PUK leader Jalal Talabani and KDP leader Masoud Barzani. Both SCIRI and the Iraqi Da'wa Party attended the meeting and developed a leadership structure and executive council whose composition was based on an explicit principle of ethno-sectarianism (Allawi 2007: 53). Communications between Chalabi and powerful American officials, such as Richard Perle (chair of the Pentagon's Defense Policy Board Advisory Committee), appear to have allowed him to extract a written commitment from the Clinton administration to help overthrow Saddam Hussein, namely the Iraqi Liberation Act, which was signed in October 1998. The act included a reference to 'democratic parties', which included the KDP, PUK, SCIRI, INC, the Islamic Movement of Kurdistan (IMK) and the Constitutional Monarchy Movement (CMM). However, no Arab country recognized this umbrella organization (Allawi 2007: 67–68). Subsequently, in October 1999, the US organized the New York Conference, and invited about 300 delegates. Among the attendees were members of the INA, INC, PUK, KDP, and CMM. The conference was chaired by Shafii Alli bin Al-Hussein and resulted in the formation of a 65-member executive council and 7-person leadership council (Allawi 2007: 69).

The second round of voting provided an indicator of the future direction of ethno-sectarian politics in Iraq. Of the 65-member executive council, Iyad Allawi's INA won 21 seats, Chalabi's INC 15, the Kurdish parties 15, while 14 seats were left for future members among Iraq's Sunni Arabs and other ethnic/religious groups (al-Zubaidi 2009). Subsequently, SCIRI was integrated within the US-backed opposition bloc, with the stature of SCIRI leader, Baqir al-Hakim, overshadowing other prominent figures (Allawi 2007: 69–70, 73). An important stumbling block during this period was that Iraqi Islamists in Iraq, whether SCIRI or Da'wa, envisioned an Iranian-tinted political Islam. For these groups to be included, the United States set as a condition that they change their outward appearance, to which the two parties swiftly agreed. At the London conference held in December 2002, the leaders of Da'wa and SCIRI suitably presented themselves as 'English gentlemen' as opposed toubby jurists (al-'Allawi 2009: 184). Nevertheless, during the meeting the delegates declared the 'Ilan Sh'at al-'Iraq' or the declaration of the Shi'i of Iraq, which was written by Muwafaq al-Ruba'i, 'Alli Allawi and Sahib al-Hakim (Allawi 2007: 79). It was essentially based on the notion that Iraqi Shi'i had a special identity and collective consciousness that must be projected and embodied in the political sphere. The manifesto, which 122 delegates signed (and is in possession of the author of this article) is inherently sectarian despite its effort to camouflage this fact by resorting to the rhetoric of democracy, citizenship and human rights. Furthermore, the declaration encourages regionalism within Iraq, which would be subsequently incorporated in the 2005 Iraqi Constitution.

THE OCCUPATION OF IRAQ AND THE ENGINEERING OF POLITICAL SECTARIANISM

Though US designs in Iraq have not proceeded without significant opposition, the political environment engineered in Iraq is chaired by a political class of caretakers that had been nurtured in the West; for decades prior to the 2003 Anglo-American invasion and occupation of Iraq. Under conditions of occupation, two primary phenomena emerged within Iraq. First, occupation authorities deployed a series of legal/political, cultural and constitutional machinations designed to create a particular Iraqi state and society, one which is fragmented, weak and sectarian in composition. These developments have prevented the emergence of a strong nationalist form of Iraqi politics that is
able to resist American strategic objectives in Iraq, with access to oil resources figuring particularly prominently. Second, neighbouring Iran has emerged as the most significant regional power in shaping Iraqi affairs, and has used its influence to preclude the emergence of a strong Iraqi state, primarily through Shi'ite Islamist proxies in the political and paramilitary realms. Thus, contemporary Iraqi politics is dominated by a class of 'carpetbaggers' politicians who lack any strong indigenous base of support and depend, paradoxically, upon the simultaneous patronage of the United States and Iran. Although the United States' and Iran's objectives in Iraq differ greatly, they both share the goal of a fragmented and sectarian Iraqi government beholden to external support. These developments have played themselves out against a backdrop of sectarian violence, political paralysis and foreign military occupation.

From the onset of the occupation, Anglo-American authorities embodied sectarianism in the Coalition Provisional Authority (CPA), headed by proconsul, L. Paul Bremer. The CPA imposed a 25-member Iraqi Governing Council (IGC) on Iraq whose composition was explicitly sectarian, with a ratio of thirteen Shi'ite representatives, five Sunni Arabs, five Kurds, one Turkmen and one Assyrian. Not only was the distribution of seats premised on sectarian identification, the first time a governing body in Iraq had been formed along explicitly ethno-sectarian lines, but the IGC's members were drawn largely from exile groups, which lacked a natural constituency or firm grounding in Iraqi society. This forced the new class of politicians to build support through appeals to tribe or sect, rather than constructive visions of national reconstruction and/or Iraqi nationhood. This early configuration of Iraqi affairs presaged the emergence of sectarianism as the primary locus of post-2003 Iraqi politics.

Paralleling the creation of new political norms within Iraq was the imposition of a set of 'edicts' and legal mechanisms that redefined the nature of the Iraqi state, creating a vast culture of political corruption, on the one hand, and reinforcing sectarian tendencies on the other. This was embodied in the restructuring of state institutions through the veneer of 'de-Ba'thification'. First, the 400,000 man Iraqi army was dissolved, creating a mass of trained and unemployed combatants. Next came the large-scale dismissal of Iraq's civil servants. In both cases, the joint measures constrained the Iraqi state and its ability to provide social services, creating a security and welfare vacuum that was rapidly filled by paramilitary groups affiliated with the sectarian parties, chief among them SCIRI's Badr Brigade.

Under the conditions created by these political decisions by occupation authorities, Iraq was thrust into a climate of politicized sectarianism. The absence of a functioning Iraqi state facilitated the emergence of sectarian organizations as the central political units in post-invasion Iraqi society. Consequently, the Iraqi elections conducted in 2005 were organized around sectarian political blocs, the most significant of which was the National Iraqi Alliance, a Shi'ite super-bloc dominated by SCIRI and the Da'wa Party. Under these conditions, Iraqi politics operated not on the basis of pursuing national Iraqi objectives, but rather, on the advancement of narrow sectarian objectives of small groups of political actors. Iraq's security forces came to be staffed by the Shi'ite militias of the Badr Brigade, who engaged in a policy of wide-scale ethno-confessional cleansing, which in turn prompted the proliferation of competing paramilitary forces. Iraq thus became engulfed in a massive wave of communal violence.

Needless to say, the maelstrom of sectarian violence did not proceed without the notice of American occupation authorities. As a key element of occupation policy, the US exploited sectarian tensions through the use of Shi'ite and Kurdish paramilitary forces to subdue an anti-occupation insurgency. In 2004, US command dispatched 2000 Kurdish Peshmerga militiamen to Mosul, and five battalions of Shia troops, with a smattering of Kurds, to police the Sunni-majority town of Ramadi in Al-Anbar Province, subsequently expanding the presence of sectarian-motivated paramilitaries to Samarra and Fallujah as well (Porter 2010). The stimulation of sectarian tendencies and forces within Iraq took the country to extreme levels of violence, peaking in the months preceding the 2007 US military surge. The subsequent decline in violence, widely celebrated as a confirmation of the American troop surge of 2007, is revealed in recently leaked documents to have owed much to social exhaustion following years of intercommunal warfare, and hence, a temporary willingness to abide by a cease-fire and work within the political system (Tavernise 2010).

This strategy was particularly evident with the use of the 'Wolf Brigade', a police-commando unit formed by SCIRI official Abu Walid (nom de guerre). The 'Wolf Brigade', largely Shi'ite in composition and affiliated with the Badr Corps, was widely known to be involved in the torture of Sunni detainees. Recent leaks have demonstrated that this torture was treated, in large measure, with indifference by occupation authorities, with US 'FRAGO' (fragmentary order) 242 indicating that, 'provided the initial report [of torture] confirms US forces were not involved in the detainee abuse, no further investigation will be conducted unless directed by headquarters of the [US command] (Fisk 2010).

Worse than merely tolerating torture by sectarian forces, military cables from 2004 demonstrate that US forces in Iraq handed over detainees to the Wolf Brigade, purportedly on the basis that the US' paramilitary allies would be more 'effective' in their interrogations, i.e. not bound by the Uniform Code of Military Justice and prohibitions on torture. Interrogations by the US' Iraqi allies involved techniques, including whippings, burning by cigarettes, electrocution of feet and genitals, and rape (Davies 2010).

As sectarian violence reached its climax in 2006, the US maintained detailed logs on the extent and character of the violence, most dramatically in the aftermath of the bombing of a Shi'ite shrine in Samarra, with active US soldiers detailing the ongoing killings, including the discovery of 47 bodies in a mass grave in Baghdad on 23 February 2006. While the extent of sectarian violence following the Samarra incident is now reasonably documented, at the time, US Pentagon and occupation authorities denied its occurrence. General George W. Casey, then the commanding-general of US forces in Iraq, denied that Iraq was 'awash in sectarian violence', instead claiming to see 'a lot of bustle, a lot of economic activity'. US Secretary of Defense Donald Rumsfeld, for his part, criticized reports that an estimated 1300 (since determined to have been an under-estimation) had been killed in Baghdad in the days following the Samarra bombing, characterizing them as 'exaggerated reporting' (Knickmeyer 2010a).

The scope of sectarian violence in Iraq, actively denied during its worst period, has since been revealed by US military's own documents, highlighting the occupation authorities' simultaneous collaboration with sectarian forces as with the use of the Badr-dominated Wolf Brigade and an unwillingness to control, or even account for, their violence (Knickmeyer 2010).

The conditions created by the re-engineering of Iraqi state and society not only created an environment of mass violence but rewarded mass corruption and profiteering. Corruption encompassed all levels of Iraqi government as indicated in a 2007 report by Walter Pincus:
Central Bank employees who released $14.7 million despite an Agriculture Ministry letter opposing that action; Oil Ministry personnel who manipulated bids for $2.5 million in contracts for pumps and fuel equipment; and others at the Oil Ministry who stole 33 trucks loaded with petroleum. The Electricity Ministry also had bidding irregularities in a $5 million contract, the Youth and Sport Ministry had $3.5 million in contract irregularities, and the Supreme Electoral Commission was being investigated for a $5 million illegal advertising contract.

On 22 May 2007 the Special Inspector General for Iraq reconstruction (SIGIR), Stuart W. Bowden, testified at the House Foreign Affairs Committee that, ‘Corruption, fraud within the Iraqi system is rampant, and the power of the fraud-fighting entities to push back is weak’ (Pincus 2007). Iraq conducted parliamentary elections in March 2010, and remained in a state of political inertia for over eight months, as the major political parties—chiefly the Iraqiya list led by Iyad Allawi and Nuri al-Maliki’s State of Law coalition—maneuvered to ensnare their candidate as prime minister. By November 2010, a political resolution finally appeared, with the continuation of Shi’i Nuri al-Maliki as prime minister and, a Kurd, Jalal Talabani as president, with a Sunni Usama al-Nujaidi, newly appointed as Speaker of Parliament. As a meagre concession to Iyad Allawi, whose Iraqiya list won 91 parliamentary seats, the most of any list, he was designated as head of the newly created Council for Strategic Policy, a body with the nominal power to veto legislation. In practice, however, the body will require a vote of 80 per cent of the council’s members to exercise its veto power, a scenario unlikely given the fractiousness of Iraqi politics, Iyad Allawi’s political failure was, by all available reports, a US failure as well, as the Obama administration reportedly placed pressure on Masoud Barzani and Jalal Talabani to allow Allawi to be given the post of Iraqi president. Kurdistan officials, however, rejected Allawi asserting that he represented a Ba’thist Trojan horse (Coke 2010). In any case, the effect of the 2010 election was to perpetuate the Shi’i-Kurdish alliance that has held power since 2005, based on the tenuous support of smaller parties (Cookson 2010).

The emergence of a Lebanese-style confessional system that structures political authority on a sectarian quota basis sparked a dispute, with the Allawi-led Iraqiya bloc walking out of the initial parliamentary session that engaged in assigning political positions. Allawi characterized the power-sharing programme as ‘a joke’. According to a report in Asharq al-Awsat, Allawi had agreed to join the power-sharing programme, and accept his diminished role within it, on the condition that three Iraqiya members who had been disqualified by the Justice and Accountability Commission (i.e., De-Blacklist Committe) be reinstated, a condition the new government apparently initially ignored upon (Coke 2010). While the Iraqiya bloc subsequently retracted and accepted its fate, ongoing controversies do not bode well for the cohesion and functioning of the new Iraqi government (Fadel 2010). Indeed, the alliance between Shi’i and Kurdish parties that forms the basis of the newly formed Iraqi government is highly tenuous, the primary issues of contention being disputes over ‘power-sharing agreements in the Kirkuk region, the degree of federalism that should be allowed in the Iraqi state, the terms of a new oil law and territorial disputes’ (Gordon and Lehren 2010a). In 2009, leaked US diplomatic cables warned that ‘Without strong and fair influence, likely from a third party, these [Arab-Kurdish] tensions may quickly turn to violence after the U.S. Forces withdraw’ (Gordon and Lehren 2010a). When President Barack Obama declared the war officially over with the withdrawal of US combat troops on 31 August 2010, Simon Jenkins of the Guardian observed:

As his troops return home, Iraqis are marginally freer than in 2003, and considerably less secure. Two million remain abroad as refugees from seven years of anarchy, with another 2 million internally displaced. Ironically, almost all Iraqi Christians have had to flee. Under western rule, production of oil—Iraq’s staple product—is still below its pre-invasion level, and homes enjoy fewer hours of electricity. This is dreadful. Some 100,000 civilians are estimated to have lost their lives from occupation-related violence. The country has no stable government, minimal reconstruction, and daily deaths and kidnappings. Endemic corruption is fuelled by unaudited aid. Increasing Islamist rule leaves most women less, not more, liberated. All this is the result of a mind-boggling $751bn of US expenditure, surely the worst value for money in the history of modern diplomacy.

Under the control of Anglo-American occupation authorities, the Iraqi state and society have been reconfigured, which has empowered a class of exile politicians who depend on external patronage and lack a credible, indigenous basis of support. Thus, Iraq has become a dependent and compliant state within a highly strategic region with vast energy resources. Commenting on this reality, the former chair of the US Federal Reserve, Alan Greenspan, observed that he was ‘saddened that it is politically inconvenient to acknowledge what everyone knows: The Iraq war is largely about oil’ (Patterson 2007). Indeed, as American authorities have rejected any accusation that US policy was designed to secure and restructure Iraq’s oil sector, the American management firm Bearing Point was tasked to collaborate with the US State Department in the drafting of a then hypothetical Iraqi oil law that would legalize production sharing agreements (PSAs) (see Juhans 2006). In the aftermath of the US ‘surge’ of 2007, a series of ‘success benchmarks’ were proposed, included among them the passing of a hydrocarbon law, which was endorsed as a draft law on 27 February 2007 by Iraqi prime minister Nuri al-Maliki. It then became stalled in the Iraqi parliament as it exposed 80 per cent of Iraq’s proven reserves of 150 billion barrels of high-quality, cheap-to-extract oil to potential control by foreign oil giants (Petroleum Intelligence Weekly 2008). Not even a parliament divided by sectarian factions was willing to approve such a palpably exploitative and imperialist law.

In spite of parliamentary obstruction and vocal opposition from Iraq’s oil labour unions, Iraqi politicians managed to circumvent the parliament, and banned labour protests. In 2008, al-Shahristani removed the Director General of the South Oil Company (SOC), Jabbar al-Lubabi, who opposed the dis-privatization policies of the al-Maliki government. On 30 June 2008, the Iraqi Oil Ministry announced that foreign oil companies would be invited to bid for ‘technical service contracts’ for six of the largest existing oilfields. This was a disingenuous assertion because the contracts were about development and production, a violation of the constitution that clearly stipulates that operating oil fields must remain in Iraqi hands. Then, on 22 August 2008, the Federal Oil Ministry signed a sole-source (non-competitive) 25-year monopoly agreement with Shell Gas for the entire natural gas industry in southern Iraq, effectively privatizing it (Chalabi 2009; Mutiti 2008). Such an unprecedented
rush to grant energy concessions to international oil corporations appeared to fall short of the expectations of the Obama administration, leading the US secretary of state, Hillary Clinton, to declare on 20 October 2009 that

A comprehensive hydrocarbon law is vital for regulating the [Iraqi] oil sector. Parliament has delayed this vote until after January, but steps can be taken in the interim; for example, by holding transparent, credible auctions on oil and gas fields as we are seeing […] (Juhász 2009)

In November 2009, the six oil-producing fields were auctioned to international oil companies in a secretive, non-transparent process. The typical contract was twenty years in length and was up to 75 per cent foreign share, with about 20 per cent return on investment. The return on investment will be minimal as the fields already exist and a barrel costs between $7 and $15.00 (for example, see China National Petroleum Company 2010; Mika 2009). Although the precise details of these contracts have not yet been made public – particularly the financial details and decision-making mechanisms – it appears, from what was released, that the contracts will enable foreign oil companies to establish subsidiaries in Iraq to run their operations. This in turn allows the oil majors significant influence, if not a final say, in all levels of oil production. As a consequence, this will dissipate Iraqi oil expertise that has been accumulated over more than 70 years, and eliminate the power of both the south and north oil companies and the infrastructure if the Iraqi Oil Ministry (Chalabi 2009). For international firms, chiefly American, the terms of such contracts will produce substantial revenues. For Iraq, they represent an erosion of public control of the country’s economic lifeblood and the reversal of modern Iraq’s development trajectory based on the public oil sector.

IRANIAN STRATEGIC DEPTH AND SHI’I POLITICAL FORCES

A paradoxical consequence of the Anglo-American invasion of Iraq has been the emergence of Iran as a dominant player on the Iraqi political stage. In the pursuance of their aims within Iraq, occupation authorities seem to have underestimated the capacities of Iran within the country or perhaps felt confident that they could mitigate any Iranian adventures. Whatever the case, it is certain that occupation planners did not foresee the growth of Iranian power as an outcome; strangely, however, while the United States and Iran are betting for influence within Iraq, on various issues there is a congruence of perspective between the two countries. Like the United States, Iran views the emergence of a strong centralized Iraqi government as an obstacle, instead preferring a decentralized state whose Shi’i factions can be manipulated for purposes of Iranian strategic interests. A Shi’i regime beholden to Iran is, from an Iranian perspective, an attractive option (Porter 2008). As a policy, the Iranian message to its Iraqi clients (SCIC, which later changed its name to Islamic Supreme Council of Iraq, ISCII) Da’wa, and others), was not to provoke the invasion forces (Allawi 2007: 303).

Iran’s policy was premised on extending its calibrated support to all political entities across the political spectrum, including the Kurds, the Sadrist and secular Shi’is, like Iyad Allawi and Ahmad Chalabi. Through this Iran sought to ensure and maintain the political ascendency of its Shi’i allies, and achieve Iranian strategic depth, thereby balancing US influence in Iraq. In tandem with such support, Iran has signed many trade and economic agreements with Iraq, provided the latter with electricity and flooded the Iraqi market with inexpensive basic commodities. However, surreptitiously, Iran has established an all-encompassing intelligence network staffed by Iraqis to provide it with on-the-ground reports. In fact, in June 2006, the CIA reported that most Shi’i insurgents (militia) were being funded by Iranian intelligence, and that many of Iraq’s politicians and civil servants were affiliated with such insurgents, fuelling violence and sectarian strife (Allawi 2007: 306, 312–13; CIA Report 2006; Porter 2007; Shoamaneh 2010).

The unchallenged success of Iranian policy in Iraq became of critical concern to the United States in late March 2008. As a result, the US pressured the al-Maliki government to rein in the powerful Shi’i militias. Al-Maliki’s government, in preparation for provincial elections in Autumn 2008, focused on Muqtada al-Sadr’s militia, the Mahdi army, which controlled Iraq’s major port and outlet for Iraqi oil – the port of Basra. On 23 March 2008, al-Maliki ordered the Iraqi army to launch a campaign, ‘The Knights Assault’, against the Mahdi army. US Special Forces and the Air Force provided support for the attack, which, against all expectations, dragged on for a week, wreaking havoc on both sides. The attack led to such fierce resistance that it led the Bush Administration to deny taking any part in it. It became clear that the United States could not wield any power to end the military confrontation. At this point Iran intervened and, within 24 hours, the intra-Shi’i fighting ended on 29–30 March (Cole 2008; Porter 2008, 2009; Reuters 2008; Strobel and Fadel 2008).

In US diplomatic cables leaked in 2010, confidential American accounts and suspicions of Iranian activity in Iraq were laid bare. Diplomatic cables reported that Iran was providing weaponry, including rockets, magnetic bombs and explosively formed penetrators (EFP) to allied Shi’i militias in Iraq. In addition, cables discuss collaboration between Iran’s Quds force with Iraqi forces to ‘assassinate’ designated Iraqi officials, noting as well that Iranian intelligence officials working within the Ba’ath Corps were influencing attacks on ministry officials in Iraq. At the political level, leaked cables document concerns in 2005 that ‘Iran is gaining control of Iraq at many levels of the Iraqi government’ (Gordon and Lehner 2010b).

Indeed, the United States is right to be concerned, as the growth of Iranian influence in Iraq has coincided with the concomitant decline of US influence, a fact now publicly flaunted by Iraqi politicians. Sami al-Askari, an ally of Prime Minister Maliki, commented in October 2010 that ‘Iraqi politicians are not responding to the US. Like before, we don’t pay great attention to them […] The weak American role has given the region’s countries a greater sense of influence on Iraqi affairs.’ Mahmoud Othman, a prominent Kurdish lawmaker, responding to a visit by the US Vice-President in late October 2010, commented that the ‘Iranian ambassador has a bigger role than Biden’ and speculated that the Americans ‘will leave Iraq with its problems, thus their influence has become weak’ (Jakes and Abdul-Zahra 2010). Sunni lawmaker Osama al-Nujaijef (later to become Speaker of the Iraqi Parliament) commented that as the Americans ‘begin to withdraw their military, the Iranians are taking advantage of the empty space, and are ready to fill the vacuum’ (Jakes and Abdul-Zahra 2010).

After the elections on 7 March 2010, in which no electoral bloc won the necessary 163 parliamentary seats to form the government, al-Jazeera reported
that on 23 June 2010 al-Maliki claimed that foreign interference was the obstacle to the creation of a new government. Former Iraqi national security advisor Muwaqaq al-Rubā‘i, who belongs to the Iraqi National Alliance (INA) led by Ammar al-Hakim, made explicit reference to regional and international meddling in Iraqi affairs, particularly in the formation of the new Iraqi government. On 29 July 2010, Al-Sharp al-Issat newspaper quoted one of the backers of the INA saying, “Iran has relayed to us that we should accept al-Maliki (as prime minister) even though he might abuse us” (Al-fajrara 2010a, 2010b; al-Sharp al-Issat 2010a, 2010b). Al-Sharp al-Issat further reported that Iran had reduced its funding to the ISCI by 50 per cent in order to pressure it into supporting al-Maliki’s candidacy as Prime Minister (Al-fajrara 2010a, 2010b; al-Sharp al-Issat 2010a, 2010b). In November 2010, al-Maliki – and Iran by proxy – had triumphed, not merely with the continuation of al-Maliki as prime minister, but also with having undermined the Iraqiya bloc led by Iyad Allawi, the largest parliamentary bloc, who was denied the prime ministership or presidency, with his bloc having to settle for Speaker of Parliament and his role as president of the council for strategic policy.

The invasion and occupation of Iraq, aside from its immense human tragedy, has been deeply ironic. The United States, which invaded Iraq to recast the Middle East and to shore up their position within the region, inadvertently fed into the growth of Iranian regional power. In the final analysis, the United States failed to achieve many of its aims in Iraq; while they removed the Saddam Hussein regime and dramatically improved the position of western oil giants vis-à-vis Iraqi oil, the government that ultimately rose to power in Iraq is not the relucent pro-American regime occupation authorities might have wished, but a regime that is increasingly hostile to Iran. The engineering of a fragmented sectarian Iraqi state, while beneficial in the short term to the US in the realm of oil, has had peculiar consequences in terms of regional politics. This has very serious implications for the United States in the long term.

**CONCLUSION**

Sectarianism in Iraq, while long manifested in social habit and belief, had rarely acquired an explicitly political content. In the aftermath of the 2003 Anglo-American invasion and occupation of Iraq, the country degenerated into a frenzy of sectarian violence, with sectarian political parties and their militias emerging as the most powerful political units in contemporary Iraq. As a result, the Iraqi state has become fragmented and weak, leaving it dependent on the patronage of external forces, chiefly the United States and Iran. At the head of the new post-2003 political system is a class of political exiles, carpetbaggers, who willingly allowed themselves to be variously nurtured and co-opted by foreign patrons, in exchange for acquiring power in the ‘new’ Iraq. The negative consequences of these arrangements for Iraq are legion, and are evident in wide-scale violence, the progressive loss of national control over the country’s oil riches and the compromising of the nation’s political independence.

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SUGGESTED CITATION

The political economy of sectarianism in Iraq

ABSTRACT

Concentrating on the period since 1990, this article analyses the rise of sectarianism in Iraq with reference to the literature on the economics of conflict. The article posits that rising sectarianism cannot be viewed as the simple result of ongoing sectarian divisions, but is the consequence of the interaction of adverse initial conditions and of damaging policies and actions. Economic sanctions (1990–2003), I argue, laid the social and political basis for elevated sectarianism; post-occupation economic policies enabled this heightened sectarianism to be violently expressed. The article does not argue that sectarian sentiments or narratives are absent or irrelevant in Iraq, but rather presents a political-economic analysis of how and why such narratives have been ascendant.

INTRODUCTION

Iraq is often presented as endowed with exceptionally robust ethno-sectarian animosities. This has led some to contest the very legitimacy of this country of disparate ethnicities and sects, stitched together by imperial powers. But as Orii Bashkin notes in this volume, the rise of sectarianism (as opposed to religious rivalry) is a fairly recent phenomenon globally, its demographic basis in Iraq less than two centuries old.

Empirical research in the nascent field of the economics of conflict finds that ethno-sectarian diversity is not generally politically destabilizing. Rather,
it has a mostly stabilizing effect in ethnically and religiously fragmented societies, reducing the incidence of civil (including sectarian) conflict. However, low growth in income (or worse economic contraction) is associated with increased risk of civil conflict because low growth is thought to intensify the competition over resources. Likewise, high incidences of poverty increase the risk of internal conflict, as it is hypothesized that poorer people stand to lose less when they engage in conflict (or violence more generally); in the language of the literature on conflict, they have a lower opportunity cost of engaging in violence. 

Dependence on natural resources (such as oil) is found to increase the likelihood and duration of civil conflict, although larger amounts of natural resources (such as are present in Iraq) reduce this effect. The explanation for this finding is that natural resources are easily appropriable assets if state power is acquired (or even without in the case of 'lootable' resources such as diamonds). The existence of natural resources increases the incentive to engage in conflict to appropriate those resources. At the same time however, large amounts of natural resources also provide the state with increased resources to defeat rebellion, hence the above effect (Collier and Hoefler 1998). And, the finding that natural resources increase the risk of civil conflict is much stronger in the case of lootable resources rather than 'point-source' resources such as petroleum (Ross 2005).

On a conceptual level, the distinction between 'grievance' and 'greed' as a basis for conflict is an important contribution of this literature. The first refers to an injustice (real and/or exaggerated); the second represents the opportunity or the motivation to engage in conflict (Collier and Sambanis 2002). Grievance is not a sufficient condition for conflict: conflict requires an opportunity to be realized. Greed is a necessary condition for conflict. It may also be sufficient in some cases, as grievances are fluid and can be cultivated or magnified if there is a motive for individuals or groups to do so (Blattman and Miguel 2009: 23).

The article that follows attempts to understand the rise of sectarianism in Iraq with reference to the literature on conflict, concentrating on the period since 1990. The article investigates how events in Iraq's recent history have presented opportunities for brutality and promote a sectarian political identity, language and narrative. 'Historical origins' presents a backdrop: to the main period covered, 'Sanctions and sectarianism (1990–2003)' analyses the effect of sanctions (1990–2003) on sectarianism. The occupation of Iraq (2003 onwards) discusses the effects of policies implemented under US occupation. The material presented in the essay is necessarily selective if read as a history, but is helpful in understanding the material case for the rise of sectarianism in Iraq in the last quarter century. Given the subject matter and choice of methodology, one might suspect that we are engaging in an 'economic' mode of analysis, where economic reasons are presented as directly operative (when in fact they work only indirectly) and the effects of social and political factors are minimized. Indeed, deterministic thinking runs counter to our basic thesis: politico-historic reasons alone account only partially for Iraq's rising sectarianism (see Blattman and Miguel 2009: 21–23).

HISTORICAL ORIGINS

Although the religious roots of the Sunni-Shi'ite schism are deep, its politico-demographic dynamic in Iraq is more recent and related to the conversion of a previously Sunni, nomadic population to Shi'ism in the nineteenth century. Aiding this process was the rapid decline of the nomadic economy and the

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Year</th>
<th>Total population (per cent)</th>
<th>Urban (per cent)</th>
<th>Rural (per cent)</th>
<th>Nomadic (per cent)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1867</td>
<td>1.3</td>
<td>24</td>
<td>41</td>
<td>35</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1890</td>
<td>1.8</td>
<td>25</td>
<td>50</td>
<td>25</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1903</td>
<td>2.3</td>
<td>24</td>
<td>59</td>
<td>17</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1930</td>
<td>3.3</td>
<td>25</td>
<td>68</td>
<td>7</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>


Table 1: The population of Iraq, 1867–1930.

Ottoman policy of land settlements in the nineteenth century. Developments in international transport and communication (including the opening of the Suez Canal) reduced the demand for overland trade, on which the nomadic economy depended (see Aranf 1985: 14–113). This coincided with a new land settlement policy of the Ottoman state whereby land that was previously held in common was privatized. This aimed to settle the nomadic tribes in order to extend the geographic control of the Ottoman authorities in Iraq beyond the major cities and increase revenue from land (Nakash 1994). There was consequently a change in the demographic structure of Iraq's population, as shown in Table 1. Because Shi'ite leaders in the holy cities of Najaf and Karbala acted to convert this nomadic population to Shi'ism, and as many settled in the southern part of these cities, most of the nomadic Sunni population converted to Shi'tism. Consequently, the Shi'ite Arabs, who had been a minority before the nineteenth century, became the majority of the population of Iraq by the beginning of the twentieth century.

Yitzhak Nakash shows that the sectarian schism between Sunnis and the Shia is not primarily ethnic or cultural. Indeed, Hanna Batau (1978: 41–42) points out that Sunni and Shi'ite families have sometimes formed sections of the same tribe. However, since Ottoman rule and until very recently, there have existed varying degrees of institutional discrimination against the Shi'a. The Ottoman rulers of Iraq actively discriminated against the Shia, fearing that their loyalties were to the (Shi'ite) Persian state rather than to the Ottoman Empire. Shi'ites were practically barred from the bureaucracy and army, which offered the children of modest Sunni Muslim families a way for social mobility. These educated Sunni bureaucrats and officers later dominated the politics of the emerging Iraqi state after World War I, just as the majority of the population had become Shi'ite.

Compared with the Sunnis, the Shi'as have also tended to be economically disadvantaged. But the correspondence between sect and wealth is imperfect: there were many rich and politically influential Shi'ites and many more poor and politically powerless Sunnis. During Iraq's monarchy (1921–58), Shi'ite tribal chiefs, although at first in competition with the central government, became one of the pillars of the state. They controlled large areas of agricultural land and reflexively opposed any action that might have bettered the lot of Shi'ite peasants (see Batau 1978: 63–152). Later, in the 1940s and 1950s, Shi'ites were among the most prominent merchants in Iraq and also formed most of the urban poor.
Peter Sluglett notes in this volume that while ethno-sectarian divisions were in retreat until the late 1960s in Iraq, they have increased since. Eric Davis (2007) points out that the Ba’athist state started to deliberately promote sectarian identities following Saddam Hussein’s seizure of power in 1979. Whichever date for the contemporary decline in relation between Sunnis and Shi’ites one prefers, the politico-demographic dynamic of the Sunni–Shi’ite rivalry is fairly recent.

**SANCTIONS AND SECTARIANISM (1990–2003)**

Economic sanctions fuelled sectarianism in the 1990s. The period of economic sanction has been covered at length elsewhere (see Alnaasawi 2002; Gnham-Brown 1999; von Sponneck 2006). Of interest is the effects of sanctions on incomes, human deprivation and society, which paved the way for the emergence of sectarian politics and reinforced sectarian solidarities. Reduced incomes and increased human deprivation do not guarantee sectarian conflict, but they make it more likely.

Although later amended to allow for imports of food, medicine and essential supplies, the economic sanctions imposed by the United Nations on Iraq following its invasion of Kuwait in 1990 (and which remained until 2003) are unprecedented in terms of their duration and severity. The ensuing war ‘relegated’ Iraq to the pre-industrial age, but with all the disabilities of post-industrial dependency on an intensive use of energy and technology (Alnasawi 2002: 67). Sanctions restricted exports of oil (Iraq’s vital resource) and hence impeded rebuilding.

The extent of the economic collapse can be gleaned from GDP statistics presented below in Table 2. Iraq’s GDP data are imperfect, and different sources sometimes offer divergent numbers. Nevertheless, the data are illustrative and whatever the source, there is no doubt that the sanctions resulted in a collapse in output. Estimates derived from the United Nations’ Economic and Social Commission for Western Asia (UNESCA) show that real GDP per capita (evaluated at 1992 prices) declined by 72 per cent between 1990 and 1992 and by an additional 51 per cent between 1992 and 1996. This is consistent with the International Study Team’s finding that average real earnings in August 1991 were 5–7 per cent of their August 1990 levels, when sanctions took effect (Drezé and Gazdar 1992: 933).

Such a massive sanctions-induced collapse in incomes is extraordinary and exceeds by a multiple the 2 per cent decline in GDP that sanctions experts

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Period</th>
<th>Percentage change in GDP</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1990–92</td>
<td>–72</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1992–96</td>
<td>–51</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1996–2000</td>
<td>24</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1990–96</td>
<td>–86*</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1990–2000</td>
<td>–83*</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Evaluated at 1995 prices.

Table 2: Growth rates of per capita real GDP.

David Cortright and George Lopez (2000: 18) claim increases the likelihood of success of sanctions – that is, raises the odds of compliance. Accompanying the decline in incomes there was increased food insecurity and poor health outcomes. The state, particularly ubiquitous in the national economy, withdrew to concentrate on a largely efficient and equitable food rations programme (Gazdar and Husbain 2002). While it succeeded in averting famine, there was nonetheless a dramatic decline in caloric and nutrient consumption (see Garfield and Waldman 2003: 9, 17). This along with the virtual collapse of public health and sanitation systems (which was partly the result of emigration of trained personnel) increased morbidity and mortality, especially among the young. Child and infant mortality more than doubled between 1990 and 1998 (Pellet 2000: 161), and remained high after the implementation of the oil-for-food programme.

The trauma of sanctions occurred in the context of (and immediately following) Saddam’s violent suppression of the uprisings in the predominantly Shi’ite provinces in the south in 1991. Using thinly camouflaged sectarian categories, the regime worked to exploit the fears of many Sunnis and some Shi’a over the uncertainty and possible civil war that would result from its overthrow (see Ab al-Jabbar 1992). Sunnis worried that Shi’ite rule would result in their political and economic marginalization or even elimination, even though most Sunnis were powerless with respect to the regime as their Shi’ite countrymen. And some middle-class and well-to-do Shi’a feared the possible (and real as it turned out) wave of lawlessness that might ensue if the regime were overturned. Using sectarian categories to divide and rule, Saddam was able to isolate and easily crush the rebellion because the central region around Baghdad failed to join the uprising.

Given that Tikriti is Sunni and because the Ba’athist state had clearly played on the fears of sectarian strife to stay in power, both Shi’ite (and to a lesser extent Sunni) ‘sectarian entrepreneurs’ – interested in promoting a sectarian political identity and narrative – would make use of this grievance. To an unprecedented extent, Shi’ites came to view Tikriti as Sunni domination that actively discriminated against them. To the Sunni entrepreneurs, a change in the status quo might mean marginalization or liquidation. The reality was more nuanced. According to the International Crisis Group (ICG 2006: 6–7), Saddam’s Ba’ath was an ‘equal opportunity killer at most times, its principal criteria being Iraqis’ loyalty to the regime, not their ethnic or religious background’. The principal oppressor of Shi’ites who put down the 1991 uprisings, for example, was a Shi’ite: Muhammad Hamza al-Zubaidi. And while most Sunnis and Shi’ites were devastated by sanctions, an emerging class of ‘nouveaux riches’ (Marr 2000: 90) – composed of Sunnis and Shi’a, Arabs as well as Kurds – with ties to the ruling Tikriti benefited from sanctions, often through illicit means. Even so, the sectarian agendas of the entrepreneurs were advancing.

The penury and deprivation that the sanctions induced convinced substantial numbers of Iraqis, many of whom were middle-class professionals, to emigrate. The United Nations High Commission for Refugees (UNHCR 2007: paragraph 6) estimates that there were four million Iraqis living outside of Iraq by 2002, a process that has continued, and may have accelerated, since the occupation of Iraq in 2003. Not only has this emigration of skilled personnel retarded reconstruction, it denies Iraq the segment of the population that is most likely to demand a liberal, non-sectarian polity. Indeed, one of its mistakes that US planners made in 2003 was to assume that there still existed in
Iraq a large professional middle class that could be counted on to press for democracy.

The upshot of economic sanctions was an impoverished, "atomized" society where daily survival became a priority and where sectarian identity (but not yet action) was ascendant. Although we now know that Iraq destroyed its weapons of mass destruction during the sanctions period, it is difficult to characterize Iraq’s behaviour as one of open compliance. In part, this may be due to Tim Niblock’s observation that economic sanctions weakened the Iraqi regime but weakened society by even more (Niblock 2001). That is, the regime became more rather than less powerful with respect to its citizens.

Given that the Ba’ath had either co-opted or smashed civil society and independent nodes of power during the 1970s and 1980s, people under the distress and trauma of sanctions sought comfort from familial, tribal and communal sources to survive. Sami Zabadia (2003) notes the irony in those who have been calling for a new strongman to restore peace and stability in post-war Iraq: it is precisely state repression, which eliminated all alternative nodes of power that has facilitated heightened sectarianism and tension. This stands in contrast to the image that is often presented, that of a society returning to an original state of intractable animosities once dictatorial control is removed. This discussion explains how the social and political basis for heightened sectarianism was advanced in the 1990s, not why sectarianism has actually been expressed under US occupation. For that we need to examine the period since 2003.

THE OCCUPATION OF IRAQ (2003 ONWARDS)

The invasion and occupation of Iraq by the United States and the 'coalition of the willing' beginning in March 2003 ushered in a radical change in the country's political economy (Yousif 2007). It was in the context of a weakened society and a shattered economy that the Coalition Provisional Authority (CPA) put into effect its programme of shock therapy - the abrupt liberalization of markets and prices - which, according to Joseph Stiglitz (2004), was more radical than the shock therapy implemented in Eastern Europe.

Indeed, roughly half a million state employees (about 7 per cent of the labour force) were fired (Foote et al. 2004: 55), as a result of the dissolution of the Iraqi Army and 'de-Ba’athification'. However, most workers in the public sector were retained and received large pay increases: from March 2003 to September 2004, retained workers received roughly a 50 per cent increase in pay (ICG 2004: 1). Interestingly, the CPA retained the Ba’athist labour law of 1987, which restricted union activity and collective bargaining in the public sector. In addition, the CPA put into effect reforms in currency, foreign trade, corporate taxation and ownership as well as capital markets, the point being to attract foreign investment into the country. Finally, the CPA also planned to privatize public firms but, according to CPA officials, were prevented from doing so by the constraints of Iraqi politics (i.e. the public outcry that followed the announcement) and international law (as the Geneva Convention prevents occupying powers from potentially irreversible sale of assets that they do not own) (Foote et al. 2004: 58–59). The CPA’s response to the quandary of intent but inability to privatize the economy was to freeze the bank accounts of (and subsidies to) public firms, denying them working capital (Foote et al. 2004: 66), inserting a clause into Iraq’s interim constitution, mandating that CPA orders, including those concerning privatization, could be changed only by an elected government.

A detailed evaluation of the effects of these policies is beyond the scope of this article and has been done elsewhere (see Yousif 2007). Of interest here are the implications of policies on sectarianism. De-Ba’athification and the demobilization of the army increased unemployment, which in turn increased insecurity. According to data from Iraq’s Central Statistical Office, unemployment rate rose from 16.8 per cent in 1997 to 28.1 per cent in late 2003 and declined only marginally to 26.8 per cent in the first half of 2004 (Yousif 2007: 51). Even though it declined slightly in 2005, unemployment has remained elevated since (Business Monitor International 2010: 4).

The disbanding of the army made idle 400,000 young males who were trained to use weapons. With few alternative job prospects, this was precisely the demographic that was most likely to initiate unrest or join private bands or armies. Unable to find work, many of those who were fired from the army resorted to crime and violence to sustain themselves and their families. As Baghdadi Hajir Adnan (quoted in ICG 2004: 18) notes:

Unemployment is the main problem and main source of resentment. It’s a vicious circle: Lack of security leads to lack of reconstruction, which leads to lack of jobs, which leads back to lack of security.

The intent of market liberalization was to allow resources, including labour, to flow where it is most highly valued (and hence where it is most socially productive), improving the allocation of resources and increasing economic output. Ironically, in creating a poor section of the population that was willing to engage in violence for money, the dissolution of the army allowed two things to happen. It provided proficient workers to sectarian militias. And, it allowed these same militias to present themselves as defending the civilian population against criminality and disorder, although often they demanded money in return for this protection. Jean-Paul Azam (2006) has shown how it is rational for militia leaders to extort or 'loot' the civilian economy because, in addition to providing revenue to fund the militia's activities, it reduces the return to civilian labour, which in turn makes joining the militia more attractive to potential recruits. In the end, the problem was not that the labour market was defective but that it worked: labour was flowing to the highest bidder.

The effects of the demobilization of 400,000 soldiers are greater than first appears because the average household size in Iraq is six people (Phillips 2005: 155), which means that the demobilization affected a multiple of the 400,000 figure. In a country with universal male conscription, this helps explain why the dissolution of the army was opposed by most Sunni and Shi’ite Arabs (but not by the Shi’ite sectarian parties whose influence would be expected to rise as a result of the army’s dissolution) (ICG 2006: 9).

In contrast, de-Ba’athification fell mostly on the Sunni population, who were disproportionately employed in the Ba’athist security services and the bureaucracy. Between 30,000 and 120,000 Iraqis, some of whom were physicians and teachers, were fired as a result of de-Ba’athification.2 Being party membership was a requirement for entry into some professions and many of those fired were Ba’athists in name only. De-Ba’athification not only deprived the economy of skilled and technical personnel, it impoverished (the disproportionately Sunni Arab) former bureaucrats and officials and inflamed ethno-sectarian tensions. As Shi’ite and Kordish allies of the United States
filled many of the jobs vacated by the Ba'athists, many Sunni Arabs saw this as a deliberate attempt by sectarian Shi'ite and Kurdish parties (allied with the United States) to marginalize them and this was an impetus for them to join the insurgency (Baran 2005; Phillips 2005: 143–53).

Of course, not all those who joined armed groups in Iraq did so because they lacked remunerative employment. Some surely joined to resist foreign occupation or because of a commitment to sectarian ideologies. Yet, the apparent success of the ‘Sons of Iraq’ programme at reducing violence suggests that material incentives can be a very powerful motive to behaviour. Countervailingly, it is exceedingly unlikely that Iraq would have seen similar levels of violence had an economic strategy that placed greater emphasis on employment generation, rather than the drastic economic restructuring along neo-liberal lines, been favoured. As things turned out, however, armed groups and militias – the sectarian entrepreneurs – were the main beneficiaries of the idle labour.

The violence and instability that resulted from de-Ba'athification and the dissolution of the army retarded capital formation, delayed investment projects and increased costs. According to numerous sources (for example, Steele 2006), skilled and professional labour continued to leave Iraq, further complicating reconstruction and denying the country the social class that is most likely to demand democratic governance. The result has been the destruction of productive assets, restrained investment and the delayed and increased cost of rebuilding. Indeed, a major problem associated with the neo-liberal restructuring of Iraq has been that it has failed to generate adequate employment.

Moreover, it is not possible to view these policies of the CPA in Iraq as the result of ad hoc ignorance or the lack of planning, as they are often presented. Both US and expatriate Iraqi military experts warned of the dangers of disbanding the Iraqi army. Equally implausible are the handwringing proclamations about how the Iraqi army ‘essentially melted away during the [2003] war’ (Foose et al. 2004: 55). Even if this were true, Iraqi army soldiers were clamoring to be paid and most of the army could have been reconstituted reasonably easily. True, disbanding the Iraqi army may have suited the interests of some of the sectarian allies of the United States, allowing them to eliminate an important (and historically cross-sectarian) institution that could wield the instruments of violence. But it is not obvious that the United States would have agreed to the dissolution of the army, as the action would predictably elevate the standing of sectarian groups and increase their independence from the United States. The dénouement to the rising sectarian tide in Iraq was the sectarian cleansing and internal population transfer from 2005 to 2008. While some of the impetus for the violence came from Iraq’s neighbours, indigenous sectarian groups were active promoters of this violence.

**CONCLUSION**

The rise of sectarianism cannot be viewed as a continuation of old hatreds: it has been the result of the deliberate interaction of unfavourable first conditions and of harmful policies and actions. In a very real sense, Iraq has been the victim of extreme and uncompromising policy regimes – comprehensive economic sanctions, unprecedented in terms of rigour and duration and radical shock therapy – that have elevated sectarianism. There is consequently nothing inevitable or natural about this rising sectarianism. At the same time, ascendent sectarianism is not surprising, given the vacuum in power and security that was created after the invasion of Iraq in 2003. In fact, it would have been surprising if armed groups (whether or not they are sectarian) did not fill the gap created by the collapsed Iraqi state. Highlighting Iraq’s uniquely intractable animosities may be convenient politically: it diverts our attention from dreadful actions and policies. But it does little to record Iraq’s recent history with candour or clarity.

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CONTRIBUTOR DETAILS

Bassam Yousif is associate professor of economics at Indiana State University. He has written extensively on the economic development and political economy of Iraq. Recent publications include, with Eric Davis, ‘Iraq: Understanding Autocracy, Oil and Conflict in a Historical and Socio-Political Context’