

The Ground Truth in Iraq

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Sectarian Identity in Iraq - Interview with Dr. Eric Davis

As promised here is an excerpt from my interview with Rutgers professor, [Dr. Eric Davis](#). [Dr. Davis](#) is the author of *Memories of State: Politics, History and Collective Identity in Modern Iraq* and was part of a group of academics that advised Bush last summer. Sadly Bush did not heed much of his advice on economic development. The full interview which will be published by EPIC in mid-February focuses exclusively on the economic dimension of the conflict, while the following excerpts -which will be published only on here- focus more on his other expertise: sectarian identity.

Matteo: If our plan for victory right now is supporting the Maliki government, training the army and the police that are primarily Shia, and we achieve this victory -even with an economic angle- will Sunnis allow for this? Would they want this kind of victory?

Dr. Davis: That is why there has to be another strategy. I am not saying the strategy I am proposing will be a solution, but I think that you have to look at it from the point of the Maliki government. There is a lot of distrust. People do not realize that even under the Baath party, the first two original leaderships in 1961 and 1963 were Shia. They were not Sunnis, and the head of the intelligence network for the entire country in 1973 was a Shia. He saw that Saddam was trying to put his relatives in positions of power and tried a coup that was unsuccessful and was captured and executed. He was not doing it as a Shia, he did it because he saw what Saddam was trying to do, what Saddam did in 1979. After Saddam took power in 1979 he really turned the Baath party into what my colleague, Falah Hadijm Jabar calls the family party state. Baathism didn't mean anything anymore; rather, the importance was placed on his tribes' people and his family. He really promoted sectarian identities and corruption. Except for 1979, but especially after the Iran Iraq War started and even more so during the 90s, there have been sectarian leaders in Iraq, but sectarianism has not been characteristic of the populous at large.

When you read public opinion polls, the [World Values Survey](#) at the University of Michigan that was done in November 2005 and April 2006, the [IRI poll](#) that was done in June 2006, and the [PIPA poll](#) was done September 4th; you will still find that neither Iraqis nor Muslims subscribe to sectarian identities. They want strong government and they want militias suppressed. Even if a percentage of them are being dishonest because they are talking to a survey researcher, I think you see that the large percentage of people do not subscribe to sectarian identities. I believe the sectarian identities have to be seen in the context of a concept that is almost dropped out of both western social science, and out of the media, which is social class. The middle class is highly intermarried and you never see the upper class discussing sectarian issues. This is more a thing of the marginal segments of society that are fighting over resources and where certain sectarian entrepreneurs have promoted a kind of sectarian identity.

Given the fact that historically there is no tradition of sectarian politics or radical Islamism in Iraqi society, I do not think that these identities have a strong social base in Iraqi political culture. I think that if it can be addressed politically and socially, there could be more emphasis on a real national reconciliation. That oil revenues are not going to be distributed via the provinces is a very positive step forward with regard to the Sunnis. If they were, they would be taken over by the Hakim people, the [SCIRI](#) Badr people in the south and by the [KDP](#) in particular, and less recent the PUK in the north. I think that we are very lucky to have someone like Jalal Talabani as president. Not only is this a wonderful, symbolic good to have a Kurd as the president of an Arab country, but he is someone who has been pushing a national agenda even though he is Kurdish. I think there is some sectarianism. It would be as if someone were to say there is no racism or anti-Semitism, even though it still exists. But the question is whether or not it is the dominating political ideology.

In some parts of Baghdad and some of the provinces today it is. If you are a Shia or Sunni you are going to be very careful about where you go, what license plate is on your car, what your identity card looks like, and even what kind of music you have in your cell phone. All these things could give you away to somebody. They cannot tell visually who you are, but they can through these indicators and you might end up being tortured and killed. So, someone who is going to say sectarianism does not exist is not only being naive, but irresponsible. On the other hand, the real question is whether or not these types of

identities are long-term for the extent that they cannot be overcome. I believe that they are much more temporary, much more contextual and come out of a process. They come out of the 1990s when the incredible welfare state that the government set up between 1970 and the early 80s collapsed.

Along with the collapse of the education system into a kind of vacuum, came the emergence of sectarian entrepreneurs. These sectarian entrepreneurs took over the education function, which made it easier for Islamist organizations to use charitable works as a cover for their own political organizing. When Saddam saw that people were turning toward ethnicity and religion, he himself began to promote a kind of religious-sectarian identity that was completely hypocritical: amputating hands, taking away the rights that women had before, they could not travel without a male companion for example, and banning the sale of alcohol. An example of this is the Iraqi flag, which right before the Gulf War Saddam Hussein ended 'Allahu Akbar', 'God is great,' did not change at the UN mission until April 2002. What I am trying to point out is that this is all very superficial. What I think has to be done is to build up a level of trust, which means more dialogue. The Parliament is also very important. There are a lot of Iraqi Parliamentarians who insult one another, but it gives people the opportunity to interact in a way that they never had before and is forcing them to negotiate. They have to compromise, they have to talk to each other, and they have to put forward a platform. I do not think we realize the extent to which this has long-term positive consequences.

Matteo: So I take it you would be totally against the **soft-partitioning** of Iraq?

Dr. Davis:

That is a horrible idea. It is like saying let's divide up the United States and put all the Italian-Americans in one part, all the Jewish-Americans another part, and all the Irish-Americans in third part. Then this huge percentage of the population comes out and says, "Wait a second. We're Irish-Italian, we're Jewish-Irish." What do you do? Do you start cutting people down the middle? That is ridiculous. Why would we assume there would be less violence? I think this would lead to more violence. There is already violence between the Sadr organization and the Badr, and it was just seen in Amarah in the south a couple months ago. Once a central government is partitioned and weakened, the ability of a central, national army to come in and repress this violence is further compromised. Even if the partition was able to happen, it would add to the violence, not undermine it.

Matteo: As a result of the high level of violence many Iraqis are fleeing from their homes and settling in areas inside Iraq that are dominated by their respective sect. In other words, there seems to be a de facto partitioning occurring. How can we reverse this trend?

Dr. Davis: I think the capture of militia squad leaders and political criminals will have an effect like putting down crime in Chicago in the late 1920s and 1930s. Political stability will return and the economy will begin to function at some minimal level. At this point, many people will go back to their old neighborhoods because they had close ties with their neighbors and there will be no sectarian problems. It is really the militias that come into neighborhoods and start forcing people to leave. It is not the neighbors that go to a neighbor's house and put a sign up. It is the militias that come and realize what sect lives in the neighborhood and what families that they want to get rid of. First they will deliver a letter to the door, and then they will knock on the door telling them in various stages to leave or be killed, and of course, the people will leave.

I don't think we don't know enough about this process. I think that not enough emphasis is being placed on the fact that in many of these neighborhoods, the former neighbors are protecting each other, not trying to benefit from the misfortune of one another.